

5th SUNDAY OF EASTER, YEAR A, 2020

As a shameless attempt at teasing any students or graduates of the University of St Andrews, I confess that I had always found its motto, 'Ever to Excel', slightly perplexing. It comes from Homer's Iliad, of course. That much I already knew. But I had always found it somewhat, well, worldly. Ambitious, yes, to be sure. No harm in being ambitious – for the higher gifts, at least! But there was just something odd in a (possibly) worldly quotation from Homer being used by a medieval University of Christian foundation. So, I did a little research about it online (what else does one do on lockdown?) and, sure enough, I think it is the case that it is a later, 18th century addition to the crest (the crest itself having been adapted on several occasions).

The motto of my own *alma mater*, the University of Glasgow, is that which forms the very heart of today's Gospel: *Via, Veritas, Vita* – "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life". I am afraid I prefer it! I feel it is less focused in upon one's self and one's own achievements and more open to the transcendent. It is a humbler reminder to us that the way to happiness in this life, and especially eternal happiness in the life to come, is not, ultimately, founded upon my worldly success; it is, rather, founded upon a deep and personal relationship with 'my Lord and my God' who guides me on the way to the fullness of Truth and Life.

Cheeky, academic rivalry aside, we can often forget the startling nature of the Lord's claim here. For he is not claiming to be *a* Way, *a* Truth or *a* Life among the many religious and philosophical options available to us but, rather, *the* Way, *the* Truth, *the* Life. He is unequivocal: "No one can come to the Father except through me". No other religious teacher has ever made such claims; and the failure to wrestle with these claims is a failure to engage with who Jesus is claiming to be.

As ever, these words would have had an even greater resonance with the original Jewish listener. So, it's worth visiting each one in turn, a little.

The idea of the way or path of God was something that the Jewish scriptures often spoke of. We can think of Moses being told in Deuteronomy to 'not turn to the right or the left. You must follow exactly the path that the Lord your God has commanded you' (Dt 5:32-33); or Moses himself predicting that the people would indeed turn aside from the *way* that he had commanded them to after his death (cf Dt 31:29). Then there is the prophetic hope in Isaiah's vision of a renewed and triumphant Jerusalem, where he speaks of a 'highway which will be called the Sacred Way; the unclean will not be allowed to use it; He [Yahweh] will be the one to use this road' (Is 35:8). That is partly why the people are to say to the faint-hearted, 'Be strong! Do not be afraid. Here is your God ... he is coming to save you' (Is 35:4). The Psalmist too often begs, 'teach me your way, O Lord, and lead me on a level path' (Ps 27:11).

It would have been impossible for even the Greek-speaking Jew not to have understood the allusion to texts such as these. To a certain extent, the idea has passed over into Christian usage too with the Latin use of 'Via', which was the word for road (with a sense of destination). Above all, perhaps, the Spanish word for way, 'camino', still carries a fuller sense of purpose, destination and pilgrimage. We need only think of the 'way of St James'! In any case, Jesus is making a clear and definitive claim to be the divine way of salvation in his very person.

Then there is 'the truth'. The definitive, revealed truth of the Jewish faith was that 'the Lord your God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might'. (Dt 6:4 - the Shema). They had to repeat this divine truth on a daily basis in prayer, at morning and at night. But the truth of God's revelation also extended to the moral truth by which the Israelites were called to live and set themselves apart from other nations. We see it expressed when the psalmist exclaims, 'Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth' (Ps 86:11).

This double-dimension of 'truth' (doctrinal and moral – what we are to believe and how we are meant to live) is what Jesus is claiming to be. The former is theologically shocking; the latter morally outrageous - if it is not true. I suspect the Jews in their day probably found the first aspect more scandalous, because they understood more keenly what Jesus was saying. We probably find the second aspect more jaw-dropping; because there is a world of a difference between teaching a moral truth and saying you are the perfect embodiment of it. We live in a culture of such moral relativism that no one would dare point to themselves as the perfect embodiment of virtue. 'The tremendous thing about Jesus is not simply that the *statement* of moral perfection finds its peak in him; it is the *fact* of moral perfection finds its realisation in him' (William Barclay).

And then we have 'the life'. In a sense the entirety of Divine Revelation is about life: the life of creation, the life of God breathed into man at his beginning, the calling back to life in the covenants, the recognition that following God's commandments brings life (cf Proverbs 10:17), that 'you show me the path of life' (Ps 16:11). In the first and final analysis, what we are always seeking is life, because we are always seeking happiness, to love and be loved. No one is seeking to be miserable nor do they normally seek death. The reason why those who do seek their own death is such an awful tragedy is precisely because we know we are made for life. That is why it is here that Jesus says to them, "do not let your hearts be troubled...I am now going to prepare a place for you ... I shall return to take you with me". Jesus is answering in his very person the means to happiness in this life and eternal happiness with him in the life to come.

In all these things, those who first heard Jesus better understood the enormity of his claims. Perhaps it made it easier for them to reject him as a fraud. But for anyone who did choose to accept him – and for those who still do – one cannot escape the unequivocal nature of his claim: he alone is the way, the truth and life, and there is no other. But it is in accepting the Lord as such into our lives that we find the way to true excellence, because herein lies the foretaste of the Resurrection.

One final thing. To any students and graduates of St Andrews whom I was intentionally teasing, let me assure you that one of the greatest times of the year in St Andrews is, in fact, graduation week. It is full of unmitigated joy. What a privilege it is to watch people whom you have known over the course of the years come to the completion of their studies – in which they have invariably 'excelled' - and rightly celebrate their achievements in the company of their family and friends. I have only missed one graduation thus far, and I was saddened to do so. I am deeply saddened for those whom I have known who will not be able to graduate formally this year due to the present predicament. But when it does happen, when things are finally back to normal, I can also assure you of this: as at every other graduation I have attended, I will be wearing cuff links that day. And throughout the graduation ceremony, if you watch closely, you may see me fiddle with them from time to time. That's partly because I rarely wear cuff links. But the main reason is because they are emblazoned with the crest of the University of Glasgow and proudly bear the motto: *Via, Veritas, Vita*. And as I fiddle while you excel, be rest assured that I will be praying for you: 'Lord, may they always know that you are the Way, the Truth and the Life'.