Sticking to the truth **by Rev John Castle**

A sermon given on Sunday 27th September 2026
at St John the Baptist Church, Aldenham

Reading(s): 1 John 2:18-29

Introduction: What is truth?

Here's a quick quiz. Are the following statements true or false?

1. Andy Burnham is the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.
2. The sun goes round the earth.
3. Jesus Christ is the Son of God.
4. Donald Trump is the best president the US has ever had.

The first 2 statements were easy to answer. They are facts that hardly anyone would dispute. But it's worth mentioning that for both of these facts all of us rely on sources of information which we feel we can trust. We can only *know* these statements are true inasmuch as we trust the sources, and our own ability to process the information we've received.

The third statement is a matter of religious belief. Why do we believe that it is true? Again, we are trusting the Bible and the people who introduced us to this belief. But there's also potentially a question about what we mean by saying Jesus is the Son of God. In the first century, Greek religion had many stories of gods fathering human children, but the children

weren't necessarily of equal divine status as their father. And in the early stages of the development of Christianity, Christians were wrestling with what exactly it meant for Jesus to be the Son of God, and the question was only officially resolved in the Council of Nicaea in the year 325 AD.

As for the fourth statement about the current president of the US, the best that we could say is that whether this is true or not is entirely a matter of opinion.

The Letters of John and the early church

Over the next four weeks our New Testament readings at Evensong come from the first letter of John, so I thought it would be useful to give some general background about this.

The obvious questions that people might ask are, who wrote this letter, when was it written and for what purpose?

The simple answer is that we can't be sure of any of this. The language and content of the letter is very similar to that of the Gospel of John, which claims to be based on the eyewitness account of one of Jesus' disciples, referred to as "the disciple whom Jesus loved". He is not given a name in the gospel, but early church tradition believed it was the fisherman John, the brother of James. There is also evidence from the second century that there was another John, known as "John the Elder", who may have been a disciple of the apostle John. For the purposes of this sermon, we'll just call the writer of this letter John.

The language of this letter, and its subject matter, are very similar to the other two letters of John, which are sent by someone who calls himself "The Elder", and to the gospel of

John. You may already be aware that the language and content of the gospel of John is very different from the other three gospels.

One particular feature of John's gospel is the emphasis on the Son of God being with God the Father from before the creation of the universe – "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God."[1]

Another feature is the antagonism between the community of those who believe in Jesus and the wider Jewish community who do not. Following the destruction of Jerusalem AD70, Judaism regrouped under the leadership of the Pharisees, and Jewish Christians were no longer welcomed in synagogues. This helps to explain the use of the phrase "the Jews" in John's gospel, which usually represents leaders of the Jewish community who are opposed to Jesus and his followers, rather than all Jews. Jesus and all of his early followers were themselves Jews, and Christianity started as a Messianic sect within Judaism. By the time John's gospel was written, Christians, whether Jewish or Gentile, were clearly separated from mainstream Judaism. This is also reflected in the first letter of John.

Another feature we see in both the gospel of John and the letters is the distinction between Christian believers and "the world". On the one hand, we read that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son[2]"; but on the other hand, "the world" is used, both in the gospel and in the letters of John, as representing the non-Christian culture which does not obey

[1] John 1:1 NRSV
[2] John 3:16

God, and whose values conflict with Christian values. We see this earlier in chapter 2 of 1 John:

> Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world. And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live for ever.[3]

Different scholars have tried to reconstruct the development of what is known as "the Johannine community", i.e. the church or group of churches which were under the spiritual care of John, and where the gospel and letters of John are thought to have been written or circulated. There is no consensus about this, but it is clear from today's reading that there was a group within the church whose beliefs about Jesus differed from the mainstream teaching of the church, and at some point they separated from the church. Verse 19 reads:

> They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us.

This group were clearly seen by John as being a threat to the spiritual health of the church.

What are we to make of this? How important is it to hold the correct beliefs? There have been times in Christian history where Christians have killed each other over claims of heresy, most notably in the Reformation. This is clearly scandalous, and contrary to the spirit of our faith. But does that mean

[3] 1 John 2:15-17 NRSV

that we should let go of doctrine and tell people to believe whatever they want?

In John's Gospel Jesus says "to the Jews who had believe in him",

> "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."[4]

Jesus also describes himself as "the way, the truth and the life"[5]. The whole gospel message of salvation does depend on who Jesus is. Of course, Christians may have nuanced differences in how they understand all of this, and we can listen to and learn from each other. This has been the thrust of the ecumenical movement, which has seen the divisions between different denominations healed, even though we may still understand important things like baptism and the eucharist differently.

In his letter John exhorts his readers to follow the teaching that they were given when they first became Christians, rather than being led astray by new ideas and interpretations:

> Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father.[6]

And together with the basic teaching we have received about Christ, we also have God's Spirit to help us navigate all of this,

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[4] John 8:31-32 NRSV
[5] John 14:6
[6] 1 John 2:24 NRSV

which the writer refers to as “the anointing that you received from him”[7].

Truth and ethics

What we believe is important, but how we behave is equally important. This is the other main theme in the first letter of John, which we will be looking at next week, when the reading is taken from the first half of chapter 2. For a sneek preview, let me just say that loving one another is the key theme!

What is truth?

One of the memorable quotes from John’s gospel is the words of Pilate at the end of his interrogation of Jesus. Jesus has just said that he came into the world to testify to the truth. “What is truth?” asks Pilate, but doesn’t wait for an answer[8]. The answer was in fact standing right in front of him. Truth is important for Christians, but so is love. The right combination of both of these is what John is urging on his readers. I think it’s equally important for us today.

[7] 1 John 2:27 NRSV
[8] John 18:38