

# 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

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'I swear that the evidence that I shall give shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth'. This is the promise we make in a court of law. In today's Gospel Jesus prays for his disciples – for us – "Consecrate them in the truth". In his message for today Pope Francis focusses on the freedom that only truth can bring in a world where much is made of 'fake news'.

What do we mean by truth? It is not as obvious as it seems. It is one thing to avoid saying something that is false another to tell the 'whole truth'. Where do we begin in telling a story and where do we end? St John says towards the end of his Gospel that the world could not contain enough books if he tried to tell everything Jesus said or did. What we say may be true but it is also edited – put in a frame. Even without manipulating the image a carefully composed photo can deceive by what it leaves out.

Pope Francis notes that part of our fallen human condition is the capacity to twist the truth. 'Fake news' is about using the media to deceive and manipulate the reader or audience by spreading false information based on non-existent or distorted data, sometimes to advance specific goals, sometimes to influence political opinion or serve one's own economic or other interests. It is nothing new! One of the most famous tabloid headlines in recent decades was 'Freddie Starr [a well-known comedian] ate my hamster', which appeared in The Sun on 13th March 1986. Needless to say he always denied it and some years later in a TV interview the publicist Max Clifford admitted concocting the whole story. He was unapologetic insisting it had boosted Freddie Starr's career.

It is not only the person who distributes 'fake news' who is at fault but those who accept such stories at face value without questioning their sources, especially when they fit in with their own preconceptions or prejudices. However implausible people will say 'there is no smoke without fire'. Yet we all know that is untrue – stage smoke effects are produced with dry ice and don't need a fire! More dangerous than a lie that is so big we think it must be true is a story that selects things that are true in order to give a misleading overall impression. Pope Francis refers to the story of the serpent's words to Eve in the Garden of Eden. He suggests that God's motive in forbidding Adam and Eve from eating the fruit of the tree in the middle of the Garden was to prevent them gaining divine wisdom.

Pope Francis contrasts an abstract view of truth in the Greek and Roman worlds, where it means correspondence with reality, or lack of concealment ('aletheia', with the Hebrew concept which is about the virtue of uprightness. 'Emunah' and 'Amen' come from a root that means something that stands firm and can be relied upon. When we say 'Amen' we are accepting the reliability of what has been said. When we accept the truth of the Scriptures we do so because we believe that the Apostles are reliable witnesses.

We can be mistaken in what we say because our knowledge is limited and our memories can play tricks but we have an obligation to tell the truth, and we can tell the truth only if we are willing to test the reliability of the information we receive. Truthfulness also requires us as far as we can to give a balanced and complete picture not to present truth selected to give a distorted overall view. We must take responsibility not only for what we say but how we say it. We can speak the truth unnecessarily and out of malice – the sin of detraction – or with love as a way to overcome some failing or wrong, to wound or to heal.

Our Lord consecrates us in truth because he knows that the truth will set us free but he pays a price. Because he will not deny who he is he is put to death on a cross. May the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, put words of truth on our lips and a search for truth in our hearts, whether we are engaged in ordinary conversation, or writing, but especially if we are making use of social media. The few words of a tweet or an email can do irreparable harm. They can also be used to encourage and inspire. The choice is ours!