

Sermon Easter 7 Year B 2018

Our Mother

who is in heaven and within us,

we call your names.

Your wisdom come,

your will be done

in all the spaces in which you dwell.

Give us each day

sustenance and perseverance.

Remind us of our limits as

we give grace to the limits of others.

Separate us from the temptation of empire,

but deliver us into community.

For you are the dwelling place within us,

the empowerment around us,

and the celebration among us,

now and forever. Amen.

Well. What on earth was that?! Let me reassure you, that it won't be the version of Lord's Prayer that will be in use from here on in end at this church. But it did make an appearance at a prominent Anglican Church recently, at Grace Cathedral, an episcopal church in San Francisco. And this 'version' of the Lord's prayer (if we can actually call it that...) was used in what was called a 'Beyoncé mass'. Now, if you don't know who Beyoncé is, perhaps ask one of our younger folk and they can tell you. But basically, Beyoncé is a big name in music, an African-American, larger-than-life singer. In fact, she's one of the world's top-selling artists, with over 100 million records sold and 22 Grammy awards. So, a big name, and big fan base.

Now, the singer herself wasn't part of this service. I doubt even Grace Cathedral could afford the fee. But her music was the central platform of the service. All her top hits were part of the programme. The service was intended to let fans (the 900 or so who turned up) 'sing their Beyoncé favourites and discover how, quote, *'her art opens a window into the lives of the marginalise and forgotten, particularly Black women.'* We might think that all sounds fair enough. The church *should* be involved in issues of justice. Indeed, the church has often been at the forefront of such struggles.

The particular point we would want to challenge in this context, though, is that in fact *Jesus* is the one who opens 'a window into the lives of the marginalised and forgotten.' Lose sight of that and we've moved into another territory, and not a Christian one. Now, there were some reservations about this 'Beyoncé Mass' from some parts of the church, even from the Episcopal Church, which has so departed from faithful believing as to be barely Christian. Still, some faithful voices remain. And to those who found this service troubling, the organisers said, '*You might want to remind them that God is in all the world and that Beyoncé is made in God's image. The church has not treated women of color fairly and it is time to face this truth.'* Of course, the church has less-than-perfectly lived out its vocation in many aspects of its life. But there is a legitimate objection that needs to be heard of shifting the focus of Christian worship *off* God and *onto* ourselves and a pop idol. Shifting the direction of our worship to such a degree that it simply becomes an ally to a political cause, or really a political ideology – as this surely was – then we can rightly, I think, question whether it was in fact worship, and so whether it properly belongs to the church.

And to the assertion that this was all justified as a means to address the unfair treatment of women of colour I think can also be challenged. Of course, yes, there have been shameful and reprehensible experiences in our collective history. But it doesn't hurt to remind that there has been no organisation, no institution, no society, in the entire history of the world - and today - more inclusive of every age, sex, race, culture, intellectual ability or socio-economic background than the church! None!! The gospel has been carried to ends of the earth. And for *all people of every age* it has been found to be good news. The idea that Christianity is somehow the conspiracy of old, white men is sheer nonsense. The church has given voice and dignity and belonging to countless groups and individuals when afforded by none other.

Now, somewhat ironically, this 'Beyoncé mass' was Produced by Grace Cathedral's contemporary-culture-themed ministry called 'the Vine'. The Mass was one of a three-part series at the church called "Speaking Truth: The Power of Story in Community," aimed at telling stories of those supposedly marginalized in Christianity. 'Speaking the Truth'.... Yes. Truth-telling is part of the mission of the church. Truth is a core, what we might call, 'Gospel value.' Commitment to Truth is essential to our self-understanding and our vocation in the world.

Truth is of key concern to our Lord Christ. We hear in the Gospel today amongst the last words Jesus utters in the presence of his disciples. Set on the night of his betrayal, this portion of the Gospel is in the form of a prayer for his disciples: *Sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth.... For their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.* What we hear as 'sanctify' might also be read as 'consecrate'. And both words, to 'sanctify' and 'consecrate' carry the same meaning, the same essential idea: *being set apart*. In other words, truth is the core to our calling, our identity: set apart for the truth so, as we hear in the gospel today, we might share in the Truth that Christ himself shares in.

This idea of truth is of great concern to Gospel writer John. It runs like a golden thread throughout the Gospel. In the prologue of the Gospel we are told how *grace and truth come from Jesus Christ*. Jesus says how true worship, acceptable to the Father is that which is offered in Spirit and Truth. We are told how we shall know the truth and *truth will set us free*. Jesus declares himself to be *the way the truth and the life*. Before Pilate, Jesus confesses that he came to *testify to the truth*, to which comes the famous reply, *what is truth?* Some have always struggled to acknowledge the truth.

In the shadow of Pentecost, we also recall how the Comforter, the Paraclete, who will be sent from the Father, is the *Spirit of Truth*. And he the One who will *lead us to all truth*. In other words, the truth that was Christ's and to which he bore witness would *continue* to be known and experienced in the life of the church. This was the lived experience of the infant church. Remarkably – miraculously - even in his absence, the truth and power of Jesus *continued* to be experienced by them.

This is why departing from the truth is such a big deal for the church. Because at its heart, Christian faith is a *revealed religion*. That is, God *discloses* something of his mystery to us. We believe that God finally and decisively reveals himself in the person of Jesus Christ. And it his life and the record that bears witness to his life – the scriptures - that remain for us normative and formative. In other words, there are givens. God has shown his Truth to us. In the power of the Spirit the church has guarded and maintained that truth. Christian faith is accepting that truth.

In the program for the 'Beyoncé mass', that startling version of the 'Lord's prayer' I opened with 'Our Mother', was set side-by-side with the more traditional version. Now, perhaps something of the up-dated version (let's be generous) sounded reasonable, attractive to some of you. However, we cannot (if we wish to be authentic, true to our faith) rewrite or reinterpret or reimagine the biblical texts and the faith of the church to say something we think it ought to say or would like to say, as if we knew the mind and will of God better than what God has chosen to disclose to us. And then presenting these changes as somehow equal in dignity, and value; equal in inspiration. To this we must boldly and unequivocally say, No!

It is the neglect and flagrant rejection of this central truth that has led to so many troubles in the church today. There *is* a set of firm, uncompromising truths that cannot be abandoned. Truths which we must accept with humility and trust. The church can, indeed, *must* be in conversation and active engagement with the world around it, with its struggles and cultures and ideas. But this engagement is within a set of parameters. We might call it orthodox believing, or creedal Christianity. Within this a great range of diversity in thought and expression *can be* accommodated. There is not just one way to be a faithful Christian. There is not even just one way to be a faithful Anglican! But we accept Christ on his own terms, the truth the Father has revealed through him. Christ prays that we be sanctified in the truth. We can fulfil this prayer by holding fast to the Scriptures and the faith that has been handed on to us. Amen.