

St Nicholas' Anglican Church, Mordialloc, Sunday 20th January, 2019 (Epiphany 2)

Revd Dr Sharne Rolfe, Vicar

Readings:

Isaiah 62:1-5

Ps 36:5-10

1 Cor 12:1-11

John 2:1-11

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Sermon:

A man is sitting at a bar staring at his drink when a burly, angry-looking biker steps up next to him, grabs his drink and downs it in one swig. "Well, watcha gonna do about it, mate?" the biker says menacingly as the man at the bar bursts into tears.

"This is the worst day of my life", the man says. "I'm a complete failure. This morning I was late to a meeting and my boss fired me. Then I went to get my car in the carpark, and I found it had been stolen and I don't have any insurance. I left my wallet in the cab I took home. I found my wife in bed with another man, and then my dog bit me. So I came to this bar to work up the courage to put an end to it all. I buy a drink, I drop a capsule in it, and sit here watching the poison dissolve; then you show up and drink the whole thing! But enough of me. How's your day going?"

I suppose there's a lot of messages we could take from this little story, but the one I want to reflect on today is that things aren't always what they seem to be. Things aren't always what they seem to be! If you need any confirmation of this, then I recommend you take a look at a book in all the bookshops at the moment called *The Spy and the Traitor*. This is no Ian Fleming, James Bond, book of fiction. *The Spy and the Traitor* is real, and tells the factual story of the KGB spy turned double agent Oleg Gordievsky who spent years in a very senior position in the Russian *rezidentura* (KGB centre) in London, employed by the KGB, but all the time feeding highly confidential information to MI5, MI6 and eventually the CIA. Of course, we might discuss at length the morality of all this.

The author of the book, Ben Macintyre, comes down heavily on the side of the moral fortitude and bravery of Gordievsky who had come to reject Communism via a long and tortuous moral struggle. But for today, I want us to focus instead on the theme of deception, of things being not what they may seem.

Gordievsky, and indeed all spies and intelligence agents, live daily with the need to have double lives, to a greater or lesser extent. Double agents enter into a psychological nightmare of deception, since they are working for one organisation in the service of undermining the very organisation that they are now loyal to. In the interests of maintaining their guise, and indeed in the interests of self-preservation, the friends and family, and even the wives and husbands and children of people who work in the field never know the truth.

Gordievsky lived a lie that had to be hidden from just about everyone, and like many before him, it tore at his psyche, at his soul. The person he loved and trusted the most, his second wife, the person with whom he shared a deep and abiding love, could not be allowed to know the truth about his life, his roles, and the reason for his anxiety, tension and stress. How awful that must have been is beyond my imagination. If you haven't read this book, I recommend it to you. It reveals the shadow side of life, a shadow side that is remarkably common in our current world. It opens the reader's eyes to the reality of espionage, just how deeply infiltrated our lives are with the work of intelligence agencies and their personnel, and how vulnerable people can be when a deliberate approach is made to recruit someone to a particular espionage agency.

Reading *The Spy and the Traitor* rather did my head in. How anyone could live with so many secrets, so many lies, is beyond me. And I think that's because one of the great gifts of our faith is the emphasis in it on truth. Truth is the counter-point to deception, and in the Christian, Godly life, we are called to be honest, truthful, to put deception behind us. As Paul writes to the Ephesians in describing the old life and the new, "So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours..." (Eph 4:25) And from the wisdom sayings of the book of Proverbs, "The LORD detests lying lips, but he delights in people who are trustworthy" (12:22) and "A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends." (16:28) It is the eighth commandment (Exodus 20:16) that condemns lying. Because God is regarded as the author of all truth, the Church believes that humans are obligated to honor the truth. The most obvious way to fulfill this commandment is not to *lie* — i.e. intentionally deceive another by speaking a falsehood.

Telling the truth isn't always easy. It's something we all struggle with, every day of our life, even if the extent of our struggle is nothing compared to that of Oleg Gordievsky! But as a dear Christian friend of mine once said, and it is very wise, if you want to be able to trust someone in big things, then you must be able to trust them in little things as well. We pray that what is called "trueness of heart" (Psalm 36:10) might be evident in all that we do, not just the big things.

We heard from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians today that wonderful, beautiful passage about the spiritual gifts, the manifestation of the Holy Spirit for the common good - gifts of wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, discernment, and the gift of speaking in tongues and the interpretation of this. (12:1-11) Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ had them all, and in today's Gospel reading from John we hear about the very first of the sign of his miraculous gifts, the much-loved story of miracle at the wedding in Cana.

Rowan Williams once said: "Truth makes love possible; love makes truth bearable." The Christian strives to live a truth-filled life, but the speaking of truth in love is central to this life. When hard news or rebuke needs to be spoken, it should be done with tenderness and sensitivity, with humility, and never with arrogance and harshness. We speak the truth in love when we care enough to speak the Gospel into our own lives and into the lives of those around us. This is God's everyday calling for every Christian.

Oleg Gordievsky could have come to a very sticky end indeed as a double agent - capture by the KGB, interrogation and execution. And, as the book reveals, the financial desperation and treachery of a traitor in the CIA very nearly did Gordievsky in. But the escape plan, long practiced by MI5, held, and he made it safely back to London from Moscow. But the long-standing deception took its toll, and it isn't really a happy ending. The truth about the double life, once-revealed, destroyed his marriage and alienated him from the one person in his whole life who had meant the most to him.

Let us commit today to appraise our own lives for the sin of dishonesty and falsehood, of deceit and duplicity. And let us pray for honesty in our leaders throughout the world. *The Spy and the Traitor* opened my eyes to a world of subterfuge that I had hitherto thought was in the realms of fantasy. And I can see now that the way things are, espionage plays its part in keeping our world safe. But

this world in which we need subterfuge, double agents, lies and deception to keep us safe is not the sort of world God has in mind for his people.

It can sometimes seem overwhelming to imagine how a truthful, peaceful world might in the end come about. But Jesus urges us to start locally, with truth in the small things. And with God's grace, truth will radiate out from there in ways we can not even imagine. We give thanks that we have access to God's truth through His Word, through Jesus Christ. And we give thanks that we have that great reassurance from Jesus himself that if we continue in his word, truly as his disciples, we will know the truth, and the truth will make us free. (John 8:31-32)

+In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.