

# Day of Pentecost

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## Introduction

I wonder how often, when we think of the festival of Pentecost, we consider Jesus' naming of the Spirit as the 'spirit of truth'? Dwelling on the meaning of truth itself, its flow from God the source of all things, and deepening our understanding of the concept of truth as spirit, we read this text together. This Sunday, this year, our attention is called to the 'spirit of truth'.

Pentecost is often a service about personal spiritual empowerment, tongues of fire, and communication between cultures and language groups. It is a time to think of unity in difference, which is the best outcome of any conflict, and to look to the ways in which God's spirit unites Christians everywhere. Have you ever been in a conflict where the truth itself was in dispute? Or where the conflicting truths of a situation led to hurt? Is truth always perceived with absolute clarity? If not, how do we discern truth?

Reading the passage with the truth in the forefront think about the relationship between truth and knowledge of the truth.

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## Text

John 14:8-17

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

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## Comment

“In war, truth is the first casualty.” Is a common saying, sometimes rendered as, ‘Truth is the first casualty of war.’ Ironically this quotation itself is very hard to trace being misattributed over centuries to Aeschylus, the Greek playwright, and also to twentieth century American politician Hiram Johnston. In both cases we don’t have clear evidence that either of them said it. This is often the way with common sayings, they belong to all of us and none of us. The universal nature of a truism doesn’t prevent it from being true. The ‘spirit of truth’ is something we easily recognise at the level of homespun wisdom. However, when we describe a saying or proverb as a ‘platitude’ we again question its usefulness, as if to repeat something which is true denigrates the value of its truthfulness. Or alternatively, we know it to be true but are deciding not to act upon its truthfulness.

Jesus described the ‘spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him.’ In human society people seek a truth that they would go to war for, even sacrifice their own lives for, and yet in that profound and horrendous conflict that is warfare the very truths the faithful soldier believes are those that should be more deeply called into question. There is a strong tradition of the ordinary soldier challenging the truths of the leaders of war:

*Forward Joe Soap’s army, marching without fear,  
With our old commander, safely in the rear.  
He boasts and skites from morn till night  
And thinks he’s very brave,  
But the men who really did the job are dead and in their grave.  
Forward Joe Soap’s army, marching without fear.  
With our old commander, safely in the rear.*

Sung to the tune of the popular hymn, ‘Onward Christian Soldiers’ this soldiers’ song epitomises the humour and honesty of the men at the front and contrasts it with the spin and ‘truths’ of the commander in the rear. Truth is something which is lived in action, by experience of war, not the words composed in mess quarters and headquarters.

The obscure nature of truth is emphasised in the words of Jesus, a truth the world neither sees nor knows. The method he suggests for demonstrating the truth lies in action. This may seem very counter cultural for us. Words, arguments, logic, good public speaking, all these things demonstrate truth from untruth in our world. We divide politicians into liars and honest brokers by what they say. We analyse and judge people by their words. But this is not Jesus’ measure of our humanity. He looks not at our words but at our actions. All the effort we put into believing the right thing, having the right form or order of worship, teaching the right doctrine or theology, all this is nothing to Jesus. His judgement is based on our loving actions.

The spirit of truth, then is a spirit of action not words. If we look at our conflicts again, the ones we thought of in the introduction, where there was a dispute about truth, whose actions were true? How did we act in that context? Is everything we did something to be proud of? What words did we use? And how did we speak of others when they were not in the room?

How we act in a conflict lasts a lot longer than what we said. And to be true in the spirit of truth, our actions must stem from and give out to others, divine love.

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## Response

If God’s spirit of truth is a gift of Pentecost, think about what that gift means to you today. Choose a loving action, give a gift, do someone a favour, or repay a favour whatever it may be. What is the truth in the spirit of that action?

Think about it as an act of worship not made of words, or bound by beliefs, but  
freely given.  
How do loving actions transform conflict?

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## Prayer

Spirit of truth, who is completely reliable forever,  
let me be true in my actions,  
and from those actions of truth and love  
let the spirit of truth be known.  
May I be reliable, dependable,  
good to all in a crisis or conflict,  
and may I reflect the good works of Jesus  
who walked the earth in kindness,  
Amen.