

Second Sunday of Advent

Dear parishioners and those friends who visit our parish website,

I know relatively little about the first President of the United States, George Washington. I know that he had slaves on his plantation but that he treated them in a humane way. To that extent he was very much a man of his time. The significant thing I do know about George Washington, and what makes me mention him frequently in both private and public, is that he never knowingly told a lie. I realise that perhaps the most tantalising thing that Jesus did/did not do is that he did not give an answer to Pilate's question: *quid est veritas*, what is truth? [John 18, 12]. Scripture scholars and ordinary Christians like myself have felt a sense of frustration over the centuries that at that key moment Jesus remained silent. One of the things that parents teach their children from a very young age is to tell the truth and not to tell lies. Or maybe that fundamental pedagogical principle of good parenting no longer applies in our world of *alternative facts* [the most quotable quote of 2017] or *competing narratives* and *different truths*? Freidrich Nietsche said: "I do not mind that you lied to me, it just means that from now on I can never believe you."

Like most people in this country, I too have been following the general election campaign, have been listening to those ambitious for the highest offices in the land, have been scrutinising the spending plans of the principal parties, reading newspaper columnists and watching those hoping to be MP's in the new parliament squirm as they avoid, duck and stone-wall the forensic questioning of TV journalists. And I ask myself which of them is telling the truth, and then the other key question – the one Pilate asked Jesus – what is truth? And the next thing I wonder about is: if the Prime Minister, the President of the US, those who have held high office in the past and are being called to account through the revelation of new "facts", Catholic bishops even, play fast and loose with the truth, how can I credibly insist that my children tell the truth? Christmas poses a particular problem for parents with small children: should we tell our children that the presents under the tree were left by Santa Claus, or should we puncture one of the most endearing of Christmas myths by letting in the daylight on the Santa Claus story?

Of course, the Christmas story the Bible tells itself comes wrapped in a lot of mythical embroidery, and it stretches in some of its detail our understanding of *historical facts* and *truth*. But one thing we Christians believe is absolutely true: God loved the world so much that he sent his only-begotten Son to *dwell with us*. And that is a truth you can and must pass on to your children: it is the key truth that makes it so essential that we celebrate Christmas each year with gratitude and joy. The adult Jesus was to say of himself: *I am the Way, the Truth and the Life* [John 14, 6]. I feel sure that this was a truth to which George Washington too subscribed.

Father Patrick