

Living the truth: 1 John 2.18-29

I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and you know that no lie comes from the truth.



A question first about this little scrap of papyrus. It's known as P52, and it's one of the most famous papyrus fragments in the world. Who wrote it, and where is it?

Let's start with the material — papyrus. It looks like paper, but it's made from the stems of Egyptian papyrus reeds which grow in the river Nile. It was one of the most popular writing materials in the Roman world, and thousands of ancient texts written on papyrus have survived. But it's not very durable — in a damp climate like ours, it just turns to compost. So most of the papyrus fragments that survive from the ancient world come from the dry sands of Egypt — including this one. It was found in a shoe-box of fragments, dug up from a Roman rubbish-tip in Oxyrhynchus in Upper Egypt, which ended up in Manchester when it was bought for the John Rylands Library in 1920, and it's been in Manchester ever since. You can check it out on the library website here. (And when things are back to normal, you can pop into Deansgate and see it for yourself.)

<https://www.library.manchester.ac.uk/search-resources/special-collections/guide-to-special-collections/st-john-fragment/>

P52 wasn't identified till 1935, when a papyrologist called C.H.Roberts was making a catalogue of the library's collection of papyri. Riffing through that shoe-box must have been a bit like finding a cardboard box full of random jigsaw pieces in a charity shop — you have no picture to tell you what it should look like, and you don't even know if they all belong to the same jigsaw. Roberts was a bit of genius at reading these things, though,

and he spotted some Greek words that reminded him of John's Gospel. Sure enough, if you compare it in detail, you can see bits of John 18.31-33 on one side — with bits of John 18.37-38 on the back.

That tells us something very interesting about the book it came from. This bit of torn papyrus must be part of a book with pages — what we call a codex — and not a scroll. Why? Work it out — if it was a scroll, John 18.37-38 would be further along the scroll, not on the back. That's interesting because the codex (a book with pages) was the very latest form of information technology in Roman times. People had been using scrolls for centuries, but they were very cumbersome, difficult to carry and difficult to look things up in. So people were starting to use notebooks made of papyrus or parchment to carry around and jot down things they really wanted to remember (Paul refers to his notebooks in 2 Timothy 4.13). We don't know whether John wrote his Gospel on a scroll or a codex — but here we have proof that pretty soon after it was written, it was being copied into notebooks. Right from the outset, Christians have been good at adapting the latest technologies to spread the word (the same thing happened when printing was invented — it quickly became a great way of getting God's Word into the hands of the people). Digital revolution, here we come!

It also tells us something about the people who made this copy of John's Gospel. All books were copied by hand in those days, of course — you could pay a lot for a really classy copy of a classical text. But people often made their own copies (or paid someone to do it) — if it was something you really wanted to read, you would share it around your friends and people would make their own copy before passing it on to somebody else. It's the ancient version of "going viral" — not quite as fast as today's tweets, but that's how ideas and beliefs spread. So this scrap of papyrus tells us that by the middle of the second century (Roberts dated the papyrus to about 125-150 AD), there was a group of people in Oxyrhynchus, way up the river Nile, who cared enough about the story of Jesus to want their own copy of John's Gospel. Which is quite extraordinary, given that John didn't even write his Gospel until he was an old man, probably around 90 AD.

In Friday's TFTD, Robin was talking about the "Johannine Community". He described it as "an [ancient Christian](#) community of uncertain existence, which placed great emphasis on the teachings of [Jesus](#), particularly as revealed through the [Gospel of John](#). ... The thinking is that there must have been a time when for some Christians the Gospel of John must have been the only Gospel they had access to, and the letters of John were the only epistles they had access to."

That's probably quite a good description of the group in Oxyrhynchus who owned this tiny scrap of John's Gospel. Almost certainly, it was the only gospel they had. But

because they had it, they could read and re-read the sayings of Jesus and the story of Jesus (this fragment tells part of the story of Jesus' trial before Pilate). And (because most people couldn't read at all) they could share the story with a group who gathered in someone's house or workshop to listen to the stories and chew them over and pray together and share the Lord's Supper and try to work out how they could be Jesus's disciples in Oxyrhynchus. Moreover, they knew that they were part of a network of people trying to follow Jesus all over the world — letters like 1 John were the social media that kept them in touch with each other. That's how the church began!

I don't know about you, but I get goose-bumps when I see a tiny scrap of the past like P52. It's something concrete that you can reach out and touch (they won't actually let you touch it, of course, but I have held the glass case that protects it). It makes me realise that I'm part of a world-wide web of real people who've been reading Jesus' story and passing it on and praying together and trying to work out together how to live as Jesus' disciples in their world — just as we are in our world. To me, that's part of the fascination of studying these ancient texts.

Robin was wondering what it might be like to be part of this church, and he found two clues in 1 John 2: it's a community that does not conform to this world, that practises active peace-making, that believes itself forgiven of sin and empowered through this forgiveness to get better and better at emulating the life of Christ himself. And it's a community that knows that in order to confront the darkness, you have to face up to the darkness within yourself.

I'd like to add another clue from today's reading: it's a community that *holds onto the truth*. Walking in the light and walking by the truth are strands that run right through this letter and John's Gospel. In fact that's the theme of Jesus' confrontation with Pilate in John 18.33-38: Jesus says, "You say that I am a king. This is why I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate asked him, "What is truth?"

Social media, as we all know, can be forces for evil as well as good. Lies and fake news can spread faster than the truth, and they can be used to create insuperable barriers of intolerance and hatred within an apparently civilized society — as we're seeing in the USA right now. Dismantling those barricades of fake news is going to take years: it's a painstaking process of understanding the logic of argument and how evidence works. And the first step in living the truth is facing up to the truth about yourself — even when it's inconvenient. Holding onto the truth can be costly: you may have seen the Hong Kong activists being arrested last week, and one of them saying quietly, "I believe we are called to speak the truth and to live the truth".

But if we believe that God is a God of truth, then we have nothing to fear from the truth — in fact, it's the only safe place to be. These lines from Psalm 31 are often used in Night prayer (Compline):

Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit:

For thou hast redeemed me, O Lord God of truth.

It's a good prayer to use at the end of the day (or the beginning for that matter). It means that we can commit ourselves, our souls and bodies, confidently into the hands of the God who already knows all the truth about us (even the truth we would like to hide from ourselves) — and loves us just the same.

God bless, Loveday

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