

## **What is truth? Truth is a person.**

John 14:1-14

A sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Easter

It was just a year ago (May 8, 2025), that the Roman Catholic Church elected a new pope. He took the name Leo XIV.

Ten days after his election there was an elaborate ceremony called an investiture or inauguration, in which he was given the authority and regalia of the papacy.

During this ceremony a pallium is put around his neck. A pallium is a white “Y” shaped stole worn backwards. It’s important because a pallium was also traditionally put around the neck of a new Roman Emperor when he was crowned. The pallium is a relic of the fact that the Roman Catholic Church was established in the image of the Holy Roman Empire.

Another regal papal symbol has been a crown or tiara. All popes from the 9<sup>th</sup> century (Nicholas 1, 858) until the 1970’s were crowned with a papal tiara or triple crown. But back in 1978, Pope John Paul I (Pope for only 33 days) discontinued that practice, and popes after him followed his lead.

A second symbol given to the pope is the papal ring. It is important but not really that important. When a pope dies, his papal ring is destroyed and a new one is made for the new pope.

For every new pope what happens is this: The night before the inauguration ceremony, the pallium and ring are placed on the Tomb of St. Peter to establish the continuity that Catholics claim goes back through the popes to Peter himself. Then, the next day the inauguration ceremony begins with a procession in the Basilica of St. Peter, down into the underground where “the Tomb” of St. Peter is to retrieve the pallium and ring. They are carried up by two deacons and later in the ceremony placed on the new Pope.

In Roman Catholic teaching, the church preserves the truth of the gospel through the papacy which rules over its priesthood from century to century.

As you perhaps know, the apostle Peter is not the successor of Christ but he is called the Vicar of Christ, the one delegated to act on Christ’s behalf.

There’s really no question that both Peter and Paul died in Rome. But it is out of the question that anybody knows where their tombs or bones are. In those days when somebody was executed as a rebel or slave, the bodies were thrown in the Tiber River.

The idea that some would know where the bones of Peter or Paul are is simply not possible. Seventy years ago, there were excavations under the Vatican trying to establish or

find the tomb and bones. This is a place where there was a kind of tomb or memorial to Peter, called a Tropaion.

The archeologists digging down there found a box of bones. The big news was they had found Peter's grave and found his bones, until somebody pointed out that it was a female skeleton. Then "the story" disappeared from the news.

The important thing is that the pallium which was placed on the memorial to St. Peter is then placed on the shoulders of the new pope, establishing his authority as the Vicar of Christ.

One of the most notable popes of the modern era was Pope Benedict XVI (2005-2013). In 2006 he gave what came to be known as the Regensburg Address. He said that one of the big problems of modern times is what he called "the dictatorship of relativism." He said that those whose thinking is relativistic are as much dictators as anybody else. When others claim truth, they insist on relativism.

What a relief that a world Christian leader addressed the problem of relativism.

We may be tempted to conclude from this that we can make common cause with Rome, as the saying goes: The enemy of my enemy is my friend.

Is Rome our friend? Yes and no. On the one hand, we are glad to join with other Christians whenever possible to lift high the cross of Christ.

On the other hand, the Vatican today continues to reject the Reformation critique of the Christian tradition in general and Luther in particular. Recall that it was another Pope Leo, Pope Leo X, in 1520 who excommunicated Martin Luther, denouncing him as "a slave of a depraved mind" and his followers as "pernicious and heretical sect." Every pope since Leo X has refused to lift the excommunication on Luther although they have done that for Joan of Arc, Michael Cerularius (the Patriarch of Constantinople in 1054), Galileo, and others.

The issues which divided Christians in the 16<sup>th</sup> century continue today.

Nevertheless, Pope Benedict XVI challenged the relativism of the modern world and raised the right question: What is truth?

Our gospel text today from John 14 (verse 6) states: "Jesus said, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father, but by me.'"

What is truth? Truth is a person. Not a set of doctrines. Not an idea about love. Truth is this particular person and not Allah, not Buddha, not Confucius, or whomever else.

This person is the truth. This person who died on the cross and rose for you and me.

That also shows what truth is not. We don't say: "The truth is in the church, and therefore the church is what it's all about." We don't say: "Truth is in a conversion experience. Or: "Truth is a commitment or decision I've made."

Rather: Truth is this person who died on the cross and rose again for you and me. That's totally different.

When Pope Benedict XVI was elected pope in 2005, the Anglican Archbishop of South Africa, Desmond Tutu, said of him: "He was not my choice." Tutu then added: "God is not a Christian."

Desmond Tutu was a kind of post-Christian religious leader who believed that the religions of the world are like the famous Buddhist analogy of the blind men: An elephant was brought to them, and they were told: "Now you can feel what an elephant is like." One felt the leg and said: "He's like a tree." One felt the elephant's side and said: "He's like a wall." One stroked the tail and said: "He's like a rope." And so forth for all six of them.

Tutu had the idea that there is some sort of "godness," a general "godness," and that while Jesus is god, others, like Allah or Buddha may share in this godness, too. In this view, whatever you feel comfortable with is O.K. because religions are like blind men touching different parts of the elephant.

To which the Christian answer is: "They're all blind."

The Lord has made himself known in the cross and resurrection. The Lord himself was on the cross solving the problem of evil, sin, and death.

This means that it is not that Jesus is God, but rather: God is Jesus. This makes all the difference in the world. "The Father and I are one" (John 10:30). "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). And as John 14:6b adds: "No one comes to the Father, but by me."

What does this mean for you and me?

It is commonly said among us that there is nothing certain except death and taxes. We have to pay our taxes, and we can't avoid death.

There is something else which is more certain than that. The Christian message is that which is certain. It doesn't depend on you and me.

God died in Jesus Christ and rose again for our salvation. It changes everything. It means the life we lead and all those things we get involved in are secondary.

The truth of the Gospel gives us perspective.

“In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you I go to prepare a place for you? . . . and when I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also” (John 14:2-3).

We are his, and that changes everything; it changes how we live and where we are going. We are headed toward his kingdom, his new creation. And that gives us the certainty and therefore the freedom now, the freedom to be his creatures here and now.

“Jesus said: ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.’”

Amen