

## **Heroes of the Faith: Irenaeus      by Rev John Castle**

A sermon given on Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> April 2022 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Psalm 119:9-16,105; 1 John 4:1-6, John 1:14-18

### **Does truth matter?**

You might think this is a rather strange question, but it has become very important in our world today. There has never been a time when it has been easier to share opinions and news. Social media provides a platform for people to share views about politics, the Covid pandemic and pretty much anything else. In Russia at the moment independent news channels have been closed down, to ensure that only one view of the war in Ukraine can be heard. In our own country MPs are questioning whether the Prime Minister lied to Parliament. And in some universities lecturers with views deemed to be politically incorrect are forced to keep silent or resign.

But what about theological truth? You may have heard the phrase "It's so much theology", implying that when it comes to belief about God there are no right answers, only a huge range of opinions. Does it matter what we believe about God?

In our lives what we believe affects how we feel about ourselves and others, and how we behave. If you tell a child that he or she is bad, or won't ever achieve anything, the child will grow up with low self-esteem and under-achieving. If you believe that men are superior to women, or that

people of a different race are in some way inferior, that will affect the way you treat other people. What you believe about God will make a big difference to whether you pray, and how you live your life: if he is a distant Supreme Being who isn't really interested in our mundane lives, you won't be open to experiencing the closeness and tenderness of his love for you, and you probably won't be very motivated to follow his guidance for your life.

This is the first in a series of five sermons on Heroes of the Faith, otherwise known as saints. I've chosen to start with Irenaeus, who was bishop of Lyon in France at the end of the second century AD. Irenaeus's predecessor was martyred in the persecution of Christians under the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. But what Irenaeus is remembered for is his theological writings, mostly directed against the heresies that were threatening the Church in his day.

Mentioning heresies may make you think of how the issue of Christian truth was treated in later centuries, perhaps during the Middle Ages or Reformation era, when Christians were killed by the State for believing the "wrong" version of Christianity. Things were very different at the time of Irenaeus. The Roman Empire was a pluralistic society, much like ours today, where a huge variety of religions and beliefs were tolerated. One of the biggest challenges to the Church was Gnosticism. I haven't time now to explain it, as Gnostics had some quite complicated beliefs, but the key challenge was that they believed that matter was evil, but spirit was good. They believed that the material world had been created, not by God the Father of Jesus but by another god,

called the Demiurge. Salvation was about being rescued from the material world so that your spirit could be with God after death, but only some, a few enlightened ones with particular spiritual qualities, were capable of achieving it. You needed to have the special knowledge, which is *gnosis* in Greek. They believed that Christ was the Saviour, but did not believe in his Incarnation in the way we do.

The Gnostic belief that the physical world is evil had two possible consequences for human behaviour, and in particular sexual behaviour: either you treated sex as part of the evil physical world, and abstained from it even in marriage; or you thought that as the physical world wasn't important, it didn't matter how you behaved sexually.

Irenaeus refuted the idea that matter is evil, teaching rather that the material world is created by God, and that the Son of God himself shared in our physical nature through the Incarnation, which was the key to redemption. Christ's saving work on the Cross to atone for our sins was all part of God's plan to redeem fallen humanity by becoming human and undoing the damage caused by the sin of Adam and Eve. He referred to Paul's teaching that whereas "in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive."<sup>1</sup> The Son of God shared our human nature, so that we might share his divine nature.

Irenaeus's task was to argue that the doctrine of the Church was correct, and that the alternative views were wrong. But why should people believe his interpretation of the Bible?

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:21-22

Irenaeus's background was important here. He was born and brought up in Smyrna, modern Izmir in western Turkey, and as a boy listened to Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, who featured in our last sermon series on Heroes of the Faith. Polycarp in his youth had met some of the original disciples who had met Jesus, and had listened to what they had said about the life and teachings of Jesus. He was keen to ensure that his teaching, and the teaching of the wider Church, was based on the teaching of the apostles, and Irenaeus, in his turn, tested his own interpretation of Scripture and that of others against this apostolic tradition. For Irenaeus, the key to a right understanding of the Bible, both Old and New Testament books, was to follow the apostolic tradition.

What does this mean for us today? There will always be people who want to bring a totally new interpretation of passages of the Bible, which contradict our traditional understanding. The nineteenth century saw several of today's cults and pseudo-Christian sects, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Christadelphians and Christian Science forming around people who made their own interpretation of the Bible. As I said earlier, what we believe influences how we feel about ourselves and others, and how we behave. So having a correct understanding of the teaching of the Bible is really important for us as we try to live our lives in accordance with God's will.

The doctrine of the Church of England is based on the Bible and the tradition of teaching and interpretation that goes back to the Church Fathers, such as Irenaeus, and the ecumenical Creeds, particularly the Nicene Creed. Of

course, we need to think about how our faith applies to the situations we find ourselves in today, both in our personal lives and in society. Picking Bible verses to justify or support views and behaviour that we have absorbed from the secular world around us is hardly the right approach. I believe that, like Irenaeus, we need to ask what the teaching of the early Church was, so that we can be faithful to the revelation that God has granted us in the Bible, and, supremely, in the person of Jesus Christ.