

Revd Michael Burns  
Christ Church West Wimbledon  
Sermon : January 31st, 2021  
“The Fourth Sunday of Epiphany”

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**EPIPHANY 4, 2021**

A question that many people now ask themselves in today's world: Is this fake news? It's a common question many now ponder – and acutely relevant today as false theories are currently circulating about the mass vaccination of the population against the coronavirus. The definition of fake news is 'false or misleading information presented as news, with the aim of damaging confidence'. Once common in print, the prevalence of fake news has undoubtedly increased with the rise of social media. The term has always been used to cast doubt upon legitimate news, and a certain former U.S. president has been credited with popularizing the term by using it to describe any negative press coverage of himself. However, the use of the term 'fake news' in itself has been increasingly criticized, with the British government deciding to avoid the term, as it is (quotes) "poorly-defined and conflates a variety of false information, from genuine error through to foreign interference". Now you know the official line.

But fake news really is nothing new. In the time of Moses, he spoke to the Israelites about the need to distinguish between genuine and false prophets: a true prophet being one who speaks with God's authority. That same authority was what astounded the disciples when Jesus taught in the synagogue and was even more evident when his words were matched with powerful deeds. As we follow the life and ministry of Jesus, we realise that he actively engaged with people – he walked with them, talked with them, sat and listened with them, ate and drank with them, healed them. Sometimes he was stern, other times he was gentle – but above all he acted towards everyone with kindness in his encounters with them. I took part in a webinar recently encouraging clergy to look after themselves in these days of lockdown. One speaker summarised what she spoke about by saying “it is all

about kindness” – being kind to ourselves and being kind to everyone else around us that we encounter: kindness being defined as “the quality of being friendly, generous, and considerate”.

Today’s Gospel continues the accounts of the revealing throughout the Epiphany season precisely who Jesus is. Here the revelation – that he is ‘the Holy One of God’ – comes from an unlikely source: a man with an unclean spirit. In any public space such as a church where all can wander in, it is never easy when there is a potential disruption to deal with. On occasions I have found it difficult to engage with those who are being threatening or disruptive in church – it’s always better to try to sit and listen to them and their story in a calmer and quieter place. But it is not always easy to handle these situations and we always have to ensure our own personal safety.

But despite such risks, a question for us all today – how prepared are we to accept profound insights from those on the margins of our society or from those outside the walls of the church? It’s an interesting question to ponder. Thankfully there is a hugely increased awareness of the need to listen to the stories of others whoever they are and from whatever background they come – but we all still have much to learn.

I well remember a brave Methodist colleague of mine some years ago who one Sunday morning disguised himself as a tramp and sat begging at the entrance to his church. The collective heart attacks amongst the congregation of that church when he got up and walked into the pulpit to start the service must have been a sight to behold. He later reported that almost all had ignored him and looked the other way – and astonishingly none of them had actually recognised him as their Minister. He also said that few if any had tried to engage with him or showed him any kindness.

May we as a church always be ready to listen with kindness to the stories of others, particularly those from different backgrounds or those we might find difficult to get alongside. May God bless them – and us.

**A prayer from Holocaust Memorial Day:** Let us commit to seek a more peaceful world, where all are valued and none are excluded; where justice and mercy flow like rivers; where relationships are built on love and acceptance, not fear and intolerance; and where we all recognise our part in bringing that peace. **Amen.**