

“If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned.” + In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

In his commentary on the passage we have just heard from the Gospel of John Our Holy Father Augustine wrote this, “The branch is suitable only for one of two things, either the vine or the fire: if it is not in the vine, its place will be in the fire; and that it may escape the latter, may it have its place in the vine.” *Aut vitis, aut ignis* “Either the vine or the fire”. In other words, **this all really matters**. What we believe matters. What we do matters. This is no gospel or doctrine of nice, this is not ‘If I were a fuzzy-wuzzy bear’. This is about salvation: Heaven, Hell, Death and Judgement. There is nothing more important than all of this, there is nothing more important than Truth.

Yet we live, we are often told, in a “post-truth” age, an age of “fake news”. We live in an age where public figures can say $2+2=5$ and really mean it, where legislators and opinion-formers can argue that girls can be boys and boys can be girls, and an age in which religion (if it is treated at all) is a matter of preference not truth. Bl John Henry Newman saw this in his own day, and in 1879 John Henry Newman identified an error that states, “Revealed religion is not a truth, but a sentiment and a taste; not an objective fact, not miraculous; and it is the right of each individual to make it say just what strikes his fancy...Men may go to Protestant Churches and to Catholic, may get good from both and belong to neither.” How very modern! This was taken from his famous *Biglietto Speech* given as he was formally told the Holy Father had deigned to raise him to the rank of Cardinal. The error Newman identifies he calls liberalism, writing “And, I rejoice to say, to one great mischief I have from the first opposed myself. For thirty, forty, fifty years I have resisted to the best of my powers the spirit of liberalism in religion.”

This error of liberalism in religion that Newman recognised as one of the chief errors of his own day, is, and always has been a lie. For it is the one who professes tolerance who never forgives, the who speaks of mercy who is the greatest dictator, and the one with the

placard saying 'Peace' whose screams are the shrillest. The reason for this is very simple. If there is no objective truth, but only subjective preference, then our disagreement is not about something immensely important but objective, it is about ourselves. Therefore, the expression of disagreement for the liberal is always, and must always be a personal attack, because they believe in nothing else. The liberal needs his safe space because he cannot distinguish between a criticism of the 'Gold Standard' and calling his children ugly. Newman went on to say, "As to Religion, it is a private luxury, which a man may have if he will; but which of course he must pay for, and which he must not obtrude upon others, or indulge in to their annoyance."

This liberalism in religion is very far from the gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord is no liberal, though He is the model of liberality. This is because He is the Truth. Yet, Newman's implacable and lifelong opposition to liberalism in religion was not a purely academic endeavour or purely intellectual concern, it was for him the essence of Christianity loved and believed by millions. Faith necessitates not just an assent to truth but total surrender to the will of God, a life of humility and virtue. The error of the religious liberal is that he thinks himself to be God, he happily cuts himself from the vine because he believes himself to be the vinedresser; he is the only source of truth. This is the antipathy to the words of Our Lord Himself, who tells us that it is only by abiding in Him that we can have life. In his novel *Loss and Gain* Newman describes one such preacher the Very Reverend Dr Brownside who was brought up to Oxford from Nottingham for the solemnity, a little, bespectacled man, with curly black hair...The Dean was one who believed that, "there was no truth or falsehood in received dogmas of theology; that they were modes, neither good nor bad in themselves, but personal, national, or periodic." If there is no truth in religion just, "modes", then the preacher is not preaching Christ but himself. Salvation does not come through the likes of Dr Brownside.

Against this we find Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ who proclaimed himself to be, "the Way, the Truth, and the Life", who said, "My flesh is real food", who tells us that apart from Him we can do nothing and deserve no more than to be thrown into the fire and burned.

Brothers and sisters, we know that there is the truth and there are lies, but for us to hold to truth does not make us pharisees, or clericalists, or Pelagians, but rather, simply, 'Catholic'. There is no humility to be found in one who prefers confusion to the truth, rather there is humility only to be found in one preaches the Truth in Love, who preaches not himself, his own ideas, his own opinions but rather Jesus Christ, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all." If we wish to be humble like Our Lord, if we wish to be **saved** then we must be humble in the face of the truth. For it is not love that sees a friend in error and lets them go on their merry way without a word, that is not love, **that is hatred**. Love and humility impel us to tell our errant friend of his error, to do all within our power.

Stood with Our Lord, with truth Himself, is Bl John Henry Newman who opposed the Satanic pride of liberalism with the quiet power of the truth against those, as he wrote, who say, "that the great end of the Gospel is the union of hearts...and that, in consequence, Creeds are but fetters on souls who have received the Spirit of Adoption; that Faith is a mere temper and a principle, not the acceptance for Christ's sake of a certain collection of Articles". Liberalism in religion, whether called naturalism, modernism or given some other name entirely, is not a problem of the past, but, sadly, a problem for today.

Hearing errors proclaimed in far too frequent a pulpit, seeing truth denied in far too frequent a book, and knowing Christ to be betrayed in far too frequent a heart we might well become despondent, or worse than despondency, we might become nostalgic. Nostalgic for better times and better years, nostalgic for times which were easier. How dare we? How dare we yearn to have been born in another age when this is where God's providence has given us birth and where God's grace has given us life? How dare shrink from persecution and, "shrink from the rough life of pilgrims"? Brothers and sisters we may be weak, but our God is strong. Here and now is where we must serve him.

Newman wrote, “Dreadful as is the prospect of Satan’s temporary triumph, fierce as are the horsehoofs of his riders, and detestable as is the cause for which they battle, yet better such anguish should come upon us, than that the recesses of our heritage should be the hiding-places of a self-indulgent spirit...May God arise and shake terribly the earth...rather than the double-minded should lie hid among us, and souls be lost by present ease”.

There may be those in churches other than this who provide stones instead of bread, who instead of fish give scorpions, but no place where Newman is known and understood, and where his intercession is invoked, and his praises sung can be a place where sentiment replaces Truth, and the words of Our Lord and Saviour are reduced to a Gospel of Nice, and the Doctrine of Feelings. The trials we see before us will not rend in two the Barque of Peter, but if we surrender to the Satanic pride of the lies of the World rather than the humble Truth of God Himself, then our souls are in peril. *Aut vitis, aut ignis*, said Our Holy Father Augustine: “Either the vine or the fire”. Bl John Henry Newman teaches us that the problems of this present age, by whatever name they are known, are not new. Having described the state of England at the end of his *Biglietto Speech* he said, “I lament it deeply, because I foresee that it may be the ruin of many souls; but I have no fear at all that it really can do aught of serious harm to the Word of God, to Holy Church, to our Almighty King, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, Faithful and True, or to His Vicar on earth. Christianity has been too often in what seemed deadly peril, that we should fear for it any new trial now.” The problems are not new, but neither is the answer: we must abide in Christ. In love, in truth, in eternity.

Brothers and sisters let us take strength from the Lord, hope from Heaven, and example from Bl John Henry Newman.

Bl John Henry Newman, *pray for us*.