

# HEARERS OF THE WORD



Acts 2:1-11; Psalm 104 (103); 1 Corinthians 12:3-7,12-13; John 20:19-23

## Jesus breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

John 20:19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

### INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

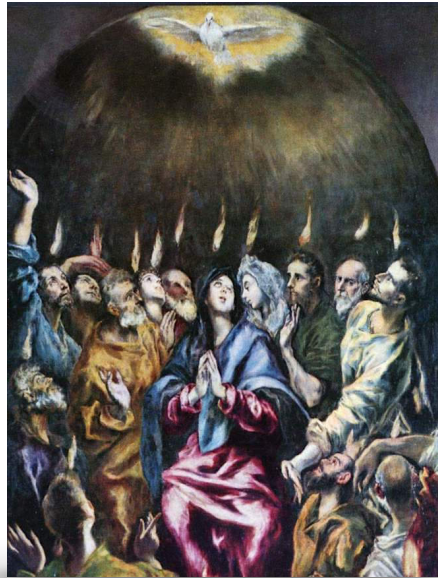
The resurrection appearance narratives are unique to each Gospel. This means that we are dealing with deep reflection, presented in the form of narrative, rather than with the more historical reports we find in the Synoptic gospels. These narratives manage to express faith in Christ risen from the dead, as well as to address issues current at the time of writing.

### KIND OF WRITING

In John 20—perhaps originally the final chapter—there are four resurrection appearance scenes: (1) Mary Magdalene (in two moments); (2) Peter and the beloved disciple (in between the two moments with Mary); (3) the gift of the Holy Spirit and (4) doubting Thomas, prepared for by the third scene. Scenes 1, 2 and 4 deal with how one comes to Easter faith. Scene 3 deals with the gifts of the Risen Lord to his followers, that is, the Holy Spirit and forgiveness.

### OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

- (i) The first day of the week suggests creation, which began on the first day.
- (ii) Peace (*shalom*) has a special range of meanings in the OT: fertility, health, prosperity, good relationships (see Psalm 122). Victory over death is included



here.

### NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

- (i) This Gospel uses the *topos* of the new creation to frame the story of Jesus. It starts with “in the beginning”. On the cross Jesus’ words echo “when God had finished” on the sixth day. The Easter stories are twice signalled to be “on the first day of the week” and in today’s story, Jesus, echoing the Creator in Genesis 2, breathes on the disciples.
- (ii) The phrase “just as” echoes important themes in the Fourth Gospel. In general the point being made is that Jesus does not simply set an example that they should follow, but that Jesus’ example enables the following. This means that believers do not simply “copy”, but are enabled to do as Jesus did by the gift of the Risen Lord and the power of the Holy Spirit. See these texts:

For I have set you an example, that you also should do *just as* I have done to you. (John 13:15, adjusted)

Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ I

### Thought for the day

The four marks of our Christian belonging are our personal journey, our community belonging, our practical discipleship and our adult integration of faith and life. None of us “inhabits” all four dimensions fully, all of the time, and yet all four dimensions should in principle be there. The good news of Pentecost is that the Spirit, poured into our hearts, enables all four aspects of our faith to live: the Spirit helps us in our prayer; the body of Christ is animated by the gifts of the Spirit; our service of others gets its energy from the Spirit and the Spirit “reminds us” of all that Jesus taught. Today, we celebrate discipleship in the community of faith.

### Prayer

We open our hearts and lives to you, Holy Spirit: breathe a breath of new life into us all!

give you a new commandment, that you love one another. *Just as* I have loved you, you also should love one another. (John 13:33–34)

Abide in me as I abide in you. *Just as* the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. (John 15:4)

*Just as* the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, *just as* I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. (John 15:9–11 adjusted)

“This is my commandment, that you love one another *just as* I have loved you. (John 15:12 adjusted)

And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. *Just as* you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. (John 17:11, 18 adjusted)

*Just as you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them just as you have loved me.* (John 17:21–23 adjusted)

#### ST PAUL

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. (Romans 8:12–17)

#### BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verse 19** It does not say immediately “the twelve,” which would emphasise authority, but rather “the disciples” which underscores attachment to Jesus. As often in John, we are meant to think of the historical disciples of Jesus of Nazareth as well as the present readers, who are disciples of the Risen Lord. Jesus “comes” in John—something special to him. This recalls: *I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.* (John 14:18) *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I.* (John 14:27–28)

**Verse 20** In Luke, Jesus shows his hands and his feet, to show that it really is himself indeed. This motive is elided in John, who reminds us not only of the manner of death, but the spring of salvation, the water of life which flowed from the side of Jesus. Thus both the death of Jesus and its efficacy are presented. Again unlike in Luke, there is no hesitation, but rather complete joy as they “see” the Lord in that full sense the word has in John’s gospel. This deep seeing fulfils the words of Jesus, *In a little*

*while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.* (John 14:19–20) Even the perfection of joy has been anticipated by Jesus in the gospel: *So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.* (John 16:22, 24)

**Verse 21** Just as in the OT, a theophany always means a task or a call, likewise in the NT, the Risen Lord has roles for his followers. Theirs will be the task to bring to the world the riches and blessings achieved by the Risen Lord. The first sentence sends them out and the second sentence makes the mission possible. The note “just as” is stronger than a comparison—it means there is a direct continuity between the first and second sendings. The gesture of breathing is taken from Gen 2:7.

**Verse 22** This verb “to breathe” is used only here in the New Testament and is a direct echo of the OT usage. The re-reading in Wis 15:11 is close to John because it links the verb to inspire which is based on the root *pneuma*. At this moment the new creation comes to be. It is likewise a fulfilment of a prediction of John the Baptist: *And John testified, ‘I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptise with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit.’* (John 1:32–33)

**Verse 23** Of course, this gift of the Spirit is given to all and has nothing to do with a special gift to the apostles and even less to do with ordination. The Spirit is given to all, as we read: *By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.* (1John 4:13) This joining of the Risen Christ and the gift of the Spirit prevents any separation of the age of the Son from the age of the Spirit. The unexpected word about forgiveness of sins (in the plural) echoes something in Matt. 18:18 *Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.* Within a resurrection appearance story, the mission to preach forgiveness of sins is found elsewhere—cf. Lk 24:27; Mt 28:19 and even Mk 16:16, if you must. But this is the only mention of forgiveness in the Fourth Gospel. As there is no “clergy” in the Johannine community, the gift of forgiveness is given to the community or

the church (assembly) as a whole.

#### POINTERS FOR PRAYER

**1.** Jesus comes into a room full of fear. Sometimes it is fear itself that makes us close the door on others and on God. Occasionally a person comes along with the gift of breaking through our closed doors, a person who comes to be with us in our fears. Do you have memories of people getting through to you and being with you despite your closed doors? Who brought you peace in a time of anxiety?

**2.** Jesus showed his wounds to his friends. Moments of grace can occur when another shows us their vulnerable side, or when we do that with them. Let your memories speak of such experiences to you.

**3.** As Jesus was sent by the Father, so he sent out the disciples. This evokes images of receiving and handing on the things that give life: values, meaning, sense of purpose, love. Who are the people who gave you life by what they handed on to you? To whom have you handed on what is life-giving?

**4.** In our tradition the final verse reminds us of the Sacrament of Reconciliation but its meaning is broader than that. Spirit-filled people are people who forgive. You might like to recall memories of when you have forgiven, or retained, another’s sins. What difference has it made to you and others when you forgive rather than hold sins against others?

#### PRAYER

Send down, O God, upon your people the flame of your Holy Spirit, and fill with the abundance of your sevenfold gift the Church you brought forth from your son’s pierced side.

May your life-giving Spirit lend fire to our words and strength to our witness.

Send us forth to the nations of the world to proclaim with boldness your wondrous work of raising Christ to your right hand.

We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

# To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good

1 Cor 12:1 *Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed.* 2 *You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak.* 3 Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says “Let Jesus be cursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit.

1 Cor 12:4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; 5 and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; 6 and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. 7 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

1 Cor 12:12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

## INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This is a wonderful passage for the feast of Pentecost, taking us to the very heart of what it means to be community. The ideal can still inspire and keep us focused on what truly matters.

## KIND OF WRITING

In this great letter, chapters 12, 13 and 14 belong properly together, dealing in turn with diversity, love and order. Diversity is evident (12); less evident is the one giver of all the gifts. The actual order of things (14) constitutes a practical application of the principle of love so marvellously developed in chapter 13. The grand structure is both evident and important: ABA<sup>1</sup>.

The careful presentation of Paul’s teaching in chapter 12 shows the following steps.

1-3: *Introduction*

4-11: *charisms, prophecy and tongues*

12-26: *the metaphor of the body*

27-31: *charisms, prophecy and tongues.*

As is immediately evident, after the introductory verses, this chapter falls into a concentric pattern (aba<sup>1</sup>). The edited excerpt takes v. 3 from the introduction and vv. 12-13 from the middle section.

The opening two verses are included here for completeness’ sake.

## ORIGIN OF THE READING

The context in the community is conflict—to us a peculiar kind of conflict over the spiritual gifts. Being superior in prayer is a seductive sin under the guise of grace.

Even though the issue is quite local to the Corinthian community, the experience of diversity *and conflict* is normal to all assemblies and the principles behind our real communion are surely valid and practical up to today.

## RELATED PASSAGES

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. (Rom 12:3–8)

## BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verse 1** A new section is marked by two indicators: firstly “now concerning” and secondly the double negative of not wanting them to be uninformed.

**Verse 2** Paul reminds them where they have come from by underlining the inability of their previous “gods” to speak at all, in contrast to the plethora “speaking gifts.” It is a subtle hint that when they, the Corinthians, speak in tongues or in prophecy, it is really God who is speaking. Taking credit or being proud therefore has no place whatsoever.

**Verse 3** Paul gives an example, which is in part problematic. Paul’s main point here is that the general confession of faith is inspired by the Spirit, common to all Christians without distinction and focused on Jesus, crucified and risen. As for “cursed (lit. anathema) [be] Jesus,” it

might be (a) a misunderstanding of Paul’s teaching (see Gal 3:13, but the word cursed is different) or (b) a deliberately disturbing sentence to show that not every uttered ecstatically may be attributed to the Spirit.

**Verses 4-6** These two lines are quite poetic even in English. Each affirmation start, in Greek, with the word *diairesis*, which means both distribution and difference. The NJB gets nearest to conveying both meanings: *There are many different gifts, but it is always the same Spirit* (1Corinthians 12:4). The emphasis on the *giver* prohibits any claim that this is our own. Furthermore, the emphasis on the *same* giver throughout leads to the key affirmation in v. 7. As for activating all of them in everyone: see 1Cor 8:6; Rom 11:36 and even Acts 17:25.

**Verse 7** “My” gift is never really for me alone. Cf. *So with yourselves; since you are eager for spiritual gifts, strive to excel in them for building up the church.* (1Corinthians 14:12)

**Verse 12** The metaphor is not original to Paul but comes from the politics and philosophy of the time. In that context, the usual use was to know your place and even more important to stay in it! Paul is radically different: all members are equal and in any case it is the body *of Christ*.

**Verse 13** Again, in his affirmations, Paul underlines what is common to all, in contrast with elitist pretensions. The radical Paul is evident: all have the Spirit equally, fully and without distinction, whatever about the particular *manifestation* of the Spirit given to some. It would be one consistent for Paul to be think of both baptism and Eucharist (drink) at this point. Cf. *For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.* (1Corinthians 11:29)

## POINTERS FOR PRAYER

**1.** When free from possessiveness and pretension, the recognition of the gifts can be a source of life and joy.

**2.** Can I name my own sense of belonging as a Christian? What are my gifts? With whom do I share them?

## PRAYER

Loving God, in the Spirit you call us into fellowship and communion. We thank you for your different gifts to each and all. As we recognise you the one giver, may we imitate you in the building up of all. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.



# The Day of Pentecost

Acts 2:1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Acts 2:5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6 And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7 Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 9 Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”

## INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This dramatic scene and commentary correspond in some measure to the opening tableau in Luke 4:16-30. Like that opening scene in the Gospel, the portrayal of the day of Pentecost is both synthetic and programmatic. It is synthetic in that it gathers into a foundational scene the many experiences of the Holy Spirit which marked the life of the early church. It is programmatic in that this is the scene which holds the energy behind the breath-taking expansion of the Way recounted in the Acts. Luke lays out the material in the symbolic language of forty days appearances and the outpouring the Spirit fifty days after Passover (see below). That this is symbolic may be appreciated by noting that in John’s Gospel the Spirit is given fully on Easter Sunday itself.

## KIND OF WRITING

This is a symbolic *tableau*, capturing multiple experiences of the Spirit, in dialogue with Gen 11:1-9 and Joel. It combines the two themes of the Jewish feast of Shavuot / Pentecost. (i) Harvest: Pentecost initiates the gathering in of the

Gentiles. Harvest language always suggests sifting, i.e. judgment. (ii) The giving of the Law on Sinai: Pentecost celebrated the writing of the Law on the hearts of believers (cf. Jeremiah).

## ORIGIN OF THE READING

(i) Shavuot or Pentecost was one of the three pilgrimage feast of Judaism. Legislation can be found in Ex 23:16; 34:12; Lev 23:15-21; Dt 16:9-12. It was an important harvest feast as we see from Paul’s eagerness to be in Jerusalem for it (Acts 20:16). By the time of Jesus’ ministry, it had also come to mark the giving of the Law, the Torah, on Mount Sinai. The metaphors used—sound, wind and fire—all have a considerable OT background.

(ii) The feast is also mentioned in the Mishnah, in the significant context of the last judgment:

At four seasons of the year the world is judged: at Passover for grain; at Pentecost for fruit of the tree; at the New Year all who enter the world pass before Him like troops since it is said, He who fashions the hearts of them all & who considers all their works (Ps. 33:15); and on the Festival [of Tabernacles] they are judged in regard to water. (Rosh Hashanah 1:2)

(iii) Pentecost, in Acts 2, is in dialogue with Gen 11.

(iv) The speech which follows cites the prophet Joel 2:28-32, in the Septuagint (Greek) version, making significant adjustments.

## RELATED PASSAGES

There is a direct link to Luke 4:16-30. Also the story of the birth of the church in Acts is an evolution and practical development from this brief scene here.

## BRIEF COMMENTARY

**Verse 1** That is, the beginning of the Christian harvest which is the theme of Acts, taking us from Jerusalem to Rome. The languages are perhaps not meant literally. It means more that the Gospel message “speaks” to every human heart.

**Verse 2** God as a wind is found elsewhere, both in the OT and the NT. It is invisible, unpredictable, uncontrollable and powerful. Thus it suggests itself as an image for God. This is true, yet it is not the wind which fills the house, but the sound! We are to think of an over-

whelming, deafening sound.

**Verse 3** Distributed might be better than divided, because the author stresses unity throughout. Fire was equally mysterious to early humans – being apparently not a thing, yet capable of giving light and heat (positive), death and destruction (negative).

**Verse 4** Speaking in tongues was apparently a frequent phenomenon in the early church (1 Cor 14:1-33). “Filled” is a fulfilment of a prediction and command of Jesus (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4-5, 8).

**Verse 5** This suggests that we are to think not of all nations, but of Jews in these lands or among these nations. Again, he is not thinking of transient residents, but rather permanent foreign residents. The city did have a mixed population.

**Verse 6** This represents the reversal of Babel.

**Verse 7** Luke uses the crowd to express appropriate reaction.

**Verses 8-11** The list is symbolic – because the details are problematic. E.g. why Judea? Parthians and Medes were no long political significant.

## POINTERS FOR PRAYER

**1.** It might help to reflect on times in your own life when you experienced a special awakening and enthusiasm for Gospel. What was going on in your life before this and what were the effects afterwards?

**2.** The passage from Acts includes another interpretation: they are full of new wine. Did you ever get that kind of reaction, where someone “explained” your engagement in the faith by means of another interpretation?

**3.** The gifts of the Spirit are many (see Galatians 5:22 and 1 Corinthians 12): can I name my own gifts and thanks to God the Holy Spirit?

## PRAYER

God of new life and new beginnings, send your Holy Spirit again upon your people gathered in prayer. Breathe into us the very breath of God, in whom we live and move and have our being. We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

# THE LITURGY

Acts 2:1-11; Psalm 104 (103); 1 Corinthians 12:3-7,12-13; John 20:19-23

## THEMES ACROSS THE READINGS

The Gospel represents, in some measure, the *Johannine Pentecost*, on the first Easter Day. The symbolism of the forty days and fifty days is a Lucan construction.

## THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 104 (103) with its universal vision makes a great response to the story of Pentecost: *Send forth your spirit, O Lord, and renew the face of the earth.*

## SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

### First Reading

*Acts 2:1-11*

This symbolic *tableau* gathers together many experiences of the outpouring of the Spirit. As we hear it, we open ourselves afresh to the same life-giving gift.

### Second Reading

*1 Corinthians 12:3-7, 12-13*

Even today the wealth of talent within the community of faith is astounding. Sometimes, it leads to tensions and then we need to remember the teaching of this reading: it is the same God who is working in all of them.

### Gospel

*John 20:19-23*

As you hear this Gospel, you may notice an intentional echo of the creation of Adam out of clay: *God breathed.*

## WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

### Monday 9 June

*Saint Columba (Colum Cille), abbot*

*Colossians 1:24-29*

The readings are special for the feast. St Columba was known for the practice of severe penance. The reading from Colossians sheds spiritual light on physical sufferings.

*Mark 10:17-30*

This reading too is chosen to reflect on the life of St Columb. He chose a life of great simplicity, even deprivation, first of all in Ireland and later on on the beautiful and remote island of Iona.



### Tuesday 10 June

*St Ephraim, deacon and doctor of the church.*

*2 Corinthians 1:18-22*

Here is a wonderful passages, in its simplicity and directness: God's "yes" to us all in Jesus.

*Matthew 5:13-18*

How am I called to be salt? Even more, how am I called to be the light of the world?

### Wednesday 11 June

*St Barnabas, apostle*

*Acts 11:21-26, 13:1-3*

Passages from two different chapters present the mission and ministry of St Barnabas — clearly an important figure in the first phase of the Pauline mission.

*Matthew 5:17-19*

This is a tricky passage to handle. The community sees itself as authentically Jewish and therefore the Torah is to be observed and not set aside. However, some new did take place in Jesus and the Torah is to be applied differently as a result.

### Thursday 12 June

*2 Corinthians 3:15-4:1, 3-6*

Paul is reflecting on things which hinder his fellow Jews from reading Scripture. The last sentence is wonderful, joining creation and resurrection.

*Matthew 5:20-26*

This severe Gospel invites us to go beyond mere external observances and to notices what is happening in our hearts.

### Friday 13 June

*St Anthony of Padua, priest and religious*

*2 Corinthians 4:7-15*

Paul only too well aware of his human frailty. And yet, his very weakness allows the power of the Gospel to shine through him.

*Matthew 5:27-32*

Matthew insists on the journey inwards! He teaches that whatever hinders our full response to grace should be set aside. He know very well that the problem is not physical — my eye or my right hand — and in any case, one can't keep lopping off limbs! It is the examination of the heart that counts.



### Saturday 14 June

*St Darnet, virgin*

*2 Corinthians 5:14-21*

The opening sentence — a little long — lays the foundation for the practical teaching to follow. As we have been reconciled with God, let us be bearers of reconciliation ourselves.

*Matthew 5:33-37*

This Gospel passage — no doubt valuable in its own day — must have a special relevance for us today when truth is under siege. We learn even as children that words can be used to distort and shift blame. Perhaps we can still learn as adults that the truth will set us free.