

The papers are full at the moment of comments about the foolishness of invading Iraq twenty years ago based on non-existent evidence of weapons of mass destruction - 'evidence' in the words of Armando Iannucci that

'consisted mostly of whatever it was Iraqi informants knew our intelligence agencies most wanted to hear...No premise was too flimsy to get thrown on to the pile of spurious evidence. And before we knew it, that pile was big enough to justify sending our troops off into harm's way.'

It also prompted a year later this most mortal of remarks from Tony Blair after it became apparent that there were no weapons of mass destruction

'I'm like any other human being – fallible.... I only know what I believe'.

Now the deep irony of such a comment is that in our fiercely secular society it's religious maniacs such as ourselves who are often accused of privileging faith over reason, or as some might put it fiction over fact, and Tony Blair's Catholicism is a problem in this respect, but the story of the blind man in today's gospel passage makes it clear that the reverse is the case – that far from knowledge being an enemy of belief, faith is built on truth rather than prejudice, or should be. For the blind man knows that he has received his sight from Jesus but the Pharisees, with all their superior knowledge and book, learning cannot believe the evidence of their eyes. They've already made up their minds that the man is born blind because of sin and no sinner can be healed on the sabbath and, in a further irony, some decide that to do so is a sin. They are going to find a weapon of mass destruction whatever the evidence says. So we have Jesus on the side of truth here and the religious authorities of the day on the side of a falsehood. This could of course still hold true today for the opposition isn't between a secular and a religious take on reality but between truth and falsehood, and the question we are being asked by Jesus is not whether to privilege belief over knowledge but to know the full truth of our reason for being here- to know ourselves more truly rather than less, and truth, whatever that might be, is always on the side of belief for us. As Thomas Aquinas once put it:

'every truth about nature is a truth about God'

What this story does so beautifully is prepare us for that ultimate scene where Pilate queries truth only to have truth in its fullness standing immediately before him. This is not a truth we like to hear because it will always challenge our prejudices, our fears, our security in falsehood whether secular or religious. Our preference that is for darkness rather than light. Perhaps Tony Blair would have been wiser to say:

I'm like any other human being – fallible ... I only know what I believe to be true

Or perhaps better again:

I only believe what I know to be true.

Please discuss. Answers on a postcard please to this address – we have enough books already.

Br John Mayhead

Monastery of Christ Our Saviour