



7 October 2018
The Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity
Choral Evensong
Proverbs 12 vv. 15–22
John 18 vv. 33–38a

Thinking Allowed : Christian Engagement in Public Debates

Truth Decay

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A bishop in the mid-Twentieth Century, Henry Montgomery Campbell, was known to try his hand at poetry. In his will it was discovered he had left one his poems to be read out to all of his clergy on his death. It was short and simply said: 'tell my priests when I am gone o'er me to shed no tears; for I shall be no deader then than they have been for years.'

Well, it is true that not all clergy are fireflies in the dark night of this world. I knew one very grumpy vicar in London who told me his motto in life was 'Start each day with a smile. Get it over with'. However, I have tried this term to invite preachers, lay and ordained, with a bit more of a fizz about them and I have asked them each to look at a live public debate and to ask whether the Christian tradition has any particular wisdom to bring to it or not. When in doubt I always think it's good to 'ere on the side of provocation and so these debates include Brexit, Populist Politics, Refugees and, next Sunday, Wellbeing with Guy Stagg, a young Cambridge graduate who decided to walk from Canterbury to Jerusalem via Rome and Istanbul, a journey taken with some painful mental health, to see whether he might discover any inspiration from religion on the way.

And this evening I wanted to alert us to what has been called Truth Decay. I mentioned this title to a Fellow over a noisy lunch the other day and, he, slightly mishearing, thought I would be preaching tonight on the benefits of fluoride. But no. I'm wanting to ask whether as a society we are losing interest in truth, whether the idea of there being objective truth, facts, are now less important to us than opinions, crisis chatter or infotainment? Is to be interesting more important than being right? Is there a declining value of accuracy, as society's reserve currency? Is what matters not veracity but impact? Is dishonesty therefore not held to account as it once was? Is lying just a laugh that amuses by messing up a system of value?

Now, it is tempting to blame some political and state leaders, if this is our situation. Some of them, as you know, tend to campaign in graffiti and then govern in tweets. Some seem to think that what is truthful is merely what reinforces the mood of the crowd, even alternative facts. History, thankfully, is peppered with those who warn us about such political manipulation. Alexander Hamilton, for instance, one of America's Founding Fathers, argued for a system of constitutional checks and balances to guard against the possibility, and I now quote him, 'of a man unprincipled in private life' and 'bold in his temper' one day arising who might 'mount the hobby horse of popularity' and 'flatter and fall in with all the non sense of the zealots of the day' in order to embarrass the government and 'throw things into confusion that he may ride the storm and direct the whirlwind'. Wow. Imagine that. Perhaps that's why it was always important to believe that the first President, George Washington, said 'I cannot tell a lie'.

As you know those such as George Orwell and Hannah Arendt warned from experience that totalitarian rule ultimately takes hold by slow injections of falsity that people begin to repeat. And so for all practical purposes, Orwell concludes, the lie will have become truth. It spreads and leads to a general distrust of experts, the belief that, say, science, if inconvenient somehow, is a conspiracy, and historical studies that don't back up your arguments can be revised. Journalism begins to reflect a selfie stick culture, seemingly holding things at an objective distance but actually only reflecting yourself and tribe at the end of the day. Religion, too, can hide its darker truths with pious religio-speak or some deference to authority and expect the congregations to say Amen. If there is anything to what I say, this is a dangerous place to find ourselves.

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In the Gospel reading we just heard Pilate asks Jesus: ‘what is truth?’ but he doesn’t hang around to find out the answer. After all, the crowd is putting on the pressure outside. A college such as this is built to ask the same question: ‘what is truth?’ but then to stick around, together, to pursue the answer. A college is one of the antidotes to any fashion of falsity, a group of people committed to the pursuit of truth, in dialogue and fellowship, each ready to be corrected when necessary, passionate about accuracy, fearless in seeing past and present and researching into the as yet unknown. A chapel in a college must be part of this commitment, open, generous, not defensive but a partner, curious for truth. I have always suspected that religion works best not when trying to answer questions but when it questions answers. ‘The lip of truth shall be established’ say the Proverbs. I want this space to be used for reverent worship and also for honest, questioning dialogue. An inclusive chapel community must be as unafraid to reason as we are unashamed to adore.

And I also want this chapel to remind us that truth has other forms than facts, that sometimes truth is far too important to be literalistic about. The truth that is expressed artistically, musically, in narrative and myth, is the truth that is always part of the human inner landscape - the sense of life as fragile gift, the unignorable intrusions of mystery when love or loss enter it, the intuition that somehow we need saving from ourselves, from self-destruction, by a love both beyond and within. I believe that when we walk in here we walk into a poem. The liturgy is poetry in motion and we fail to understand its beauty if we miss its’ density of suggestion, the eavesdropping on the soul, the sensitive state of consciousness that its poetry can prompt. We are not spectators here. We pursue the truths that translate into our living. For this place was built to celebrate the fact that we have each been given a gift – it is our being. And the gift we are asked to give back in return for it is our becoming, who we become. As St Ambrose tells us, it did not suit God to save his people through logic. The truths that transform us are embodied in richly suggestive and provocative, often artistic, forms and, through receptive insight, in the truths we learn in authentic human encounter when we dare to take off the masks that eat into our faces. Primarily, for Christians, to encounter the person of Jesus Christ is the most free-ing and fresh truth of all.

Today if we don’t stand for something we might fall for anything. Stand for truth. For a reverence of language and its proper use. Let’s not be seduced by a quick clarity - for difficulty can be very fruitful in life. There musn’t be any triumph of the deceptively simple over the honestly complex. Finally, then, one Christian contribution from Martin Luther King: ‘Expediency asks the question, ‘Is it politic?’ Vanity asks the question, ‘Is it popular?’ But, conscience asks the question, ‘Is it right?’ And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but one must take it because one’s conscience tells one that it is right’.