

What is Truth?

A sermon for Evensong on the Fourth Sunday in Lent, 2 Timothy 4:1-18

The Dean reflects on a question that reoccurs throughout the narrative of Jesus' trial and is just as significant to us as we ask about the truth of the gospel.

The truth is never simple. The truth is slippery and difficult to grasp. The truth is hard to hear.

Some people would like to believe that their own experience is all that matters, "this is my truth" they say, in a phrase that closes down meaningful discussion. It's become such a common phrase in the popular media recently that I wondered about its origins. They may go back as far as the late 19th century to the Philosopher Nietzsche, who has his character Zarathustra say: "That is my truth; now tell me yours."

The phrase was apparently a favourite of the Welsh politician Nye Bevan and was picked up by the Welsh rock band "Manic Street Preachers" whose 1998 album was titled "This Is My Truth, Tell Me Yours."

But notice how, in each of these instances, there is an invitation to dialogue.

This is how I see things, but I'm interested in your point of view.

By contrast, over the last twenty years, the phrase has come to mean, "this is my truth, I'm not interested in yours". In particular, the truth claim has been linked to accusations of abuse, the #metoo movement, black lives matter, or used in other situations where people who have felt voiceless have found a voice.

Fair enough, until you don't listen to a different perspective or ask, "now tell me yours".

"My truth" shuts down your truth and leaves no space for exploration or dispute. Where there is no shared truth there is not truth at all.

Add the dimensions of false news, suspicion of so-called "experts" and the decline in respect for traditional sources of authority, so that no-one's "truth" is shared or believed, and you have a world in which truth seems to be an "empty signifier" a word without meaning.

Except, that isn't true.

In John's gospel, (14:6) Jesus says to the disciples on the night before he dies, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life."

It is a radical claim, to say "I am the truth". The truth about what? The truth about God.

It that is true, and if your truth is not outside you, if your truth is only "my truth" and not shared, then you are making yourself God, aren't you?

If "my truth" is always right, then lurking behind it is the idea that I'm innately good, I'm god-like. If I'm good, then my truth is good. Really?

"My truth" which cannot be challenged, becomes a tool to fight other people with. Now, that can be helpful, if it helps us to push back popular lies about identity, worth or beauty – lies that privilege white skin, tallness, thinness, whatever it is...

Being true to yourself is a laudable goal.

But if we always judge what is true on the basis of our own perspective and never to ask “tell me your truth” what kind of neighbours, citizens or friends will we be? How will we grow in empathy, compassion or wisdom?

The writer to Timothy is writing from the perspective of a community, the newly emerging church of Jesus Christ. The truth that is being forged is being shaped by that community, sharing their truths, being willing to be challenged by one another, exploring the truth together.

Out of that community a truth is emerging which is life giving and transformational. This letter encourages Timothy and his community to proclaim the truth that they have received, the gospel truth about Jesus....

“proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favourable or unfavourable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.”

The writer can see how difficult the task has become, in a world where no-one wants to hear difficult or challenging truths. Instead, they would rather cling to the comfortable myths that suit them.

“For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.”

It's always good to hear words written nearly two thousand years ago and to recognise that human nature hasn't changed that much. Or, to misquote G.K. Chesterton, to see that it has always been the case that “when people stop believing in the truth, they do not then believe in nothing, but in anything.”

The gospel artist Jonathan McReynolds has written a beautiful song (you can find it on YouTube) which is called “my truth” and puts a spin on it straight from the letter to Timothy, I will finish with some of his lyrics.

Everyone has a God
Whether they notice it or not
Something to glue their beliefs to
As for me, that's something's You

For better or for worse
We all have a life we must preserve
And everyone is on key to their own melody
I just feel Your song was made for me

And everybody has their point of view
And everyone lives like life taught them to
But I'm just gonna keep my eyes stayed on You
'Cause You are my truth...

Everyone won't agree
And I don't always live You perfectly
But that doesn't change the strength of Your name
We've got history that can't be erased

If you're listening to this album
And you're still waiting for me to clearly state my truth
Well, here it is
My truth is that I've needed God's grace
Way more than I thought I would

My Truth 2023