

## **Seek truth      by Rev John Castle**

A sermon given on Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> September 2025

Readings: Isaiah 59:8-16;

John 1:14,16-18, 8:31-32, 14:5-7, 16:13-15; 18:33-37

### **Introduction: Building blocks for a happy life**

Welcome to the first in our series of four sermons entitled "Building blocks for a happy life". I've written a short explanation in the September newsletter, so to save time I won't go over it now. But to summarise, I believe that our attitudes to certain areas of life make a big difference to how we feel and how we act. These areas include questions of how we decide what is true, how we think about ourselves, the balance between our individual rights and desires and the needs of the wider community, and where we place our trust. When we decide to be disciples of Jesus, we may find that how we think about these areas as Christians is in conflict with the attitudes and values of the world around us.

But the danger is that in practice our attitudes get shaped more by the world than by Christian teaching.

In a recent meditation from the devotional app *Lectio 365*, Pete Greig wrote this:

Inevitably the media I constantly consume starts to consume me. It realigns my neural pathways, amplifies my prejudices, and embeds unhealthy dependencies. The culture in which I swim inevitably shapes my most fundamental perception of reality... This can sometimes be positive. For example, when I inhabit an encouraging environment, I become more encouraging. When I spend time with prayerful people I

become more prayerful. But of course it can also be deeply destructive. Cynicism is contagious. Consumerism is unfulfilling. Pornography is addictive. As a follower of Christ I am called to be a catalyst in culture, affecting change, but all too easily I am more like a chameleon merely mirroring the colours of my environment and blending in. But I am called to be different, to be holy, to be prophetically distinct.<sup>1</sup>

## **What is truth?**

I chose to make the first building block the search for truth. This was a big part of Western culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the goal of philosophy and science. Philosophy asked, What can we really know about the world and ourselves? Science explored how the universe really began and how it evolved to how it is today. How does the human body work – and the human mind, for that matter?

Scientific discoveries and the theories to explain them quickly had an impact on religious belief. When the Creation stories in the Bible were found to be incompatible with science, the easy conclusion was that we can't trust the Bible. At the same time, biblical scholarship began to undermine traditional beliefs and assumptions. What if the first five books of the Bible weren't actually written by Moses as had been believed? Or even, what if the virgin birth and the resurrection of Jesus were myths invented later by his followers to justify their faith in him?

I clearly haven't got time to deal with this issue in depth here, but I should just say that the truth about God isn't best conveyed in scientific language. If you want to understand

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<sup>1</sup> Lectio 365, Monday 31<sup>st</sup> August 2025, based on Romans 12:1-3

how God's truth is expressed in the Bible, take the trouble to get to know the text of the Bible and the kinds of literature contained within it. Genesis says God created the universe. That, I believe, is the truth! How he did it I will leave to the scientists to explain.

## **Post-modernism**

In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells the Roman Governor that he came into the world "to bear witness to the truth". "What is truth?" Pilate asks, but doesn't wait for an answer. From his point of view, having to deal with Jesus is an inconvenience he'd rather do without – just another example of the Jews arguing about their own religion.

Similarly, how many people today trouble themselves to investigate who Jesus is, and what is the truth he came to bring? We'd rather have a "pick and mix" approach to what we believe. Our culture has moved from the period of Modernism, where truth was sought in science, to Post-modernism, where everyone's opinion is considered valid, and every individual can follow their own beliefs, however wacky they might seem.

Here's a little joke to lighten things up. A lady dies and goes to heaven. She asks God a question.

"God, if you don't mind, there is one thing I've always wanted to know." "Ok, ask away," says God.

"Do vaccines cause autism?" asks the lady.

"The truth is no, vaccines have nothing to do with autism", replies God.

The woman shakes her head and says, "They got to you too, this thing really goes high up".

Sadly, this joke illustrates the fact that some people really don't want to know the truth, or they misrepresent it, sometimes by over-simplifying a complex issue in a way that misses out important facts. Often people do this because of political or ideological considerations. The result is a distortion of the truth. We see this when politicians make claims based on spurious interpretations of statistics; when ideology about gender clouds clinical judgements about how best to treat troubled teenagers; or when the realities of why people seek asylum are blurred by prejudice and xenophobia.

"What is truth?" is certainly a fair question. For example, it is a biological fact that, with a few rare exceptions, human beings are born with either XX or XY sex chromosomes. Sex isn't "assigned" at birth by a midwife or doctor. But it's also true that there are people – an increasing number, it seems - who find it hard to identify with the stereotypical gender norms of our sex-obsessed society. We need to respond sensitively to their needs, but without denying biological realities. Instead of telling primary school children that some people are "born in the wrong body", we need to ask why the majority of teenagers with gender dysphoria are girls? This should be a wake-up call to tackle the culture of toxic expectations created by pornography, social media and smartphones.

The truth about sex and gender has many layers, and simplifying it to an ideology that disregards scientific fact and

psychological complexity doesn't help anyone – in fact, it causes harm to individuals and polarises society.

## **Moral truth**

Another big problem in our culture is that we no longer believe in moral truth – that some things are right and others are wrong. Or, to be more precise, when it comes to moral decisions, I follow “my truth”, and you can follow yours. Let's be clear: I don't want to go back to stoning people for adultery; but condoning a “free for all” attitude to sex is to endorse a culture which makes it easier for people to abuse and degrade others. It seems the only criterion for what is morally acceptable is “consent” – and what exactly *is* consent when someone says “yes” because they feel under pressure to do so?

For the protection of the vulnerable and for the good ordering of society, we clearly need some moral rules to govern our behaviour in all areas of life. But where are those rules to come from?

## **Conclusions so far**

There are several points that arise from what I've explored so far:

- There are different kinds of truth, for example scientific, theological and moral;
- Truth is often complex, and simplifying it or distorting it to fit your politics or ideology can bring great harm

- Our society is in a complete muddle about truth. As Isaiah wrote, “truth stumbles in the public square”.<sup>2</sup>

## **Truth, justice and righteousness**

There are some similarities between our society and the one that was being addressed in today’s reading from Isaiah. In that prophecy, God speaks out against a society which is marred by an absence of justice, righteousness and truth. They all go together – or are abandoned together.

The heart of what had gone wrong in Israel was a failure to put God and his laws at the centre of the life of the nation. Israel’s covenant with God was that in response to his love and protection they would worship him alone and follow his commandments – a blueprint for how they should order their society according to principles of justice and righteousness.

This country used to consider itself a nation founded on biblical principles – although it took activists like William Wilberforce and Josephine Butler to highlight injustices and campaign for change in the law. But at the moment the guiding principle of public policy seems to be the promotion of individual choice as the highest good. We’ll be looking at individualism versus community in the third of these sermons.

## **Revelation**

So where should we turn for truth and the correct principles on which to run both our society and our lives? As Christians, our handbook is the Bible and Christian traditions of interpreting it. The Bible is the story of how God reveals

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 59:14 NRSV

himself – in creation, and through particular people like Abraham, Moses and the prophets. As Micah wrote,

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?<sup>3</sup>

I've already mentioned how the Law given through Moses was intended as a blueprint for the society of ancient Israel. But a greater revelation of God was to come in the Incarnation of the Son of God as the man Jesus. As John wrote,

The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup>

As Jesus said to Pilate:

For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.<sup>5</sup>

So as Christians, here is the answer to the question, “What is truth?” Jesus has revealed what God is like, and his teaching shows how God wants us to live. So our guidance comes first of all from this, not from the latest trend in secular values or public morality. We should test everything against what God has revealed in the Bible and through Jesus. That, of course, presupposes that we actually read the Bible. If you don't please consider making this a priority. There are lots of resources to help you – apps like Lectio 365 and others which

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<sup>3</sup> Micah 6:8 NRSV

<sup>4</sup> John 1:17 NRSV

<sup>5</sup> John 18:37 NRSV

you can read about on our church [Prayer page](#) – and, of course, joining a house group. If you don't read the Bible, how will you know what it says, so that you can receive guidance?

A very useful little prompt is to ask ourselves “What would Jesus do?” Now I know that Jesus did not make a pronouncement on every issue which we face in our modern society, but becoming familiar with the Bible and praying about the issues we face is the best way to allow the Holy Spirit to guide our thinking along the lines of what God has revealed to us.

## **Conclusion**

So let's not just be swept along with the spirit of the age, accepting that most people must be right, or that it truth doesn't really matter as long as you can choose what to believe and how to live. Rather, let's submit our wills to God, searching for his truth and living by it. As St Paul wrote,

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. <sup>2</sup> Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God— what is good and acceptable and perfect.<sup>6</sup>

And as the book of Proverbs says,

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,  
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Romans 12:1-2 NRSV

<sup>7</sup> Proverbs 9:10 NRSV