

# **Surrounded by the Truth: Scripture, Community and the World**

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When I was invited to speak about truth, my thoughts went, in one direction, to the Gospel of John, because, although truth is a frequent topic in the New Testament, use of the words ‘true’ and ‘truth’ is especially characteristic of the Gospel of John. So I have structured what I have to say around a number of aspects of truth as they appear in John’s Gospel. But my thoughts also went, in another direction, to the contest about truth that is going on in our contemporary western culture. This is a contest in which what are now known as modern and postmodern attitudes to truth contend. It should also be a context with which Christian truth must engage in a way that is identical with neither a modern nor a postmodern approach but seeks an authentically Christian way.

## **(1) Postmodern Pilate**

“‘What is truth?’ said jesting Pilate, and did not stay for an answer.” Often quoted words of Francis Bacon, alluding, of course, to the account of Jesus’ trial before Pilate in John’s Gospel. In fact, it is with the question ‘What is truth?’ that Pilate brings that trial, such as it was, to an end. It is not a genuine question, but a way of exiting the conversation, which Jesus had brought round to the matter of truth. Its tone is dismissive. The pragmatic politician thus prepares the way for his cynical surrender to death of a man he knows to be innocent.

Pilate’s non-question is, I think we can fairly say, a postmodern one, i.e. it is a question characteristic of our times. Has truth ever seemed such a dubious notion as it does for many in our society? There are a number of reasons –

(1) The unprecedented pluralism of our contemporary western societies suggests to many that truth must be relative, if anything. Rival truth claims provoke scepticism about all truth claims.

(2) The unprecedented individualism of our contemporary western societies makes individuals feel autonomous and so not bound to any tradition of religion or ideas. If the individual feels free to choose their own truths in the consumerist market place of ideas the sense of truth as there to be acknowledged or discovered too easily gives way to a sense that truth is subject to my freedom. It’s not truth that obliges my acknowledgement of it, but my choice, my taste, my convenience that determines truth. Truth is what works for me, and therefore not necessarily what will work for you.

These relativizing, even individualizing approaches to truth claims have as their corollary a suspicion of all claims to universal truth. Big claims to truth look like attempts to foist my truth onto you. And the suspicion goes further: attempts to propagate allegedly universal truth are instruments of power, ways of suppressing difference. From the disillusioned perspective of postmodern people all truth is just a vehicle of the human will to power.

So postmodernity has problematized truth. Not that it was ever an uncontroversial subject, as Pilate’s question again reminds us. But those are, as it were, the contours of the problem of truth in our time and place. I shall sketch the contours a little more as I proceed. But I want at

once to point out that western society is both modern and postmodern. That is to say, currents of postmodern thinking coexist with by no means exhausted modern attitudes. An example is science. While postmodern thinkers do apply their corrosive suspicion of all truth claims to science also, and while alternative therapies, for example, have relativized for many people the universal claims of orthodox medical science, nevertheless science retains a prestige in our societies as the only sort of truth that seems to stand up without relativizing or individualizing. One might have thought the ‘science has disproved religion’ sort of argument would have gone the way of other kinds of modernist rationalism, but in the UK at least it is alive and well, with no little thanks to Oxford’s professor for the public understanding of science, who devotes himself in fact to the propagation of atheism and the refutation of religion. Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* threatens incongruously to be *the* Christmas bestseller in Britain.

## (2) Truth in person

Pilate’s question did not expect an answer, but the reader of John’s Gospel knows its true answer. Jesus himself is the truth. ‘I am the way, the truth and the life,’ he has said four chapters earlier. The pity is that the answer to Pilate’s question stood there before him, but in the act of asking the question Pilate turns away from him.

But what can it mean to say that Jesus is the truth? Not just that he speaks the truth, though he does. More than that, he embodies the truth in the way he lives and dies and is raised from death. He is the key to all truth, the one in whom God reveals to us as much as we can know of the ultimate truth of things.

Notice, then, some implications for the kind of truth in which the Christian Gospel deals:

(1) Truth in John’s Gospel, truth in the sense that Jesus is truth, is a rich, multidimensional, holistic concept. Not just a number of true statements, but a whole way of living and dying. We shall come back to that.

(2) Secondly, truth is found in encounter. In all genuine discovery of truth there is the sense of encountering something real, coming up against something we must acknowledge and recognize. We are ourselves in the encounter, of course; we put ourselves into it; it has a subjective element. But we also come up against something that has its own reality and integrity. In the genuine encounter with reality we cannot grasp and possess it, get it into our own control, direct it to our own ends. In that kind of attempt to take over truth and use it, we retreat from encounter and distort the truth. In encounter truth cannot be fully grasped, there is always more to it than we have seen, but, for all that, our partial perception is a genuine sighting of reality.

That truth is encountered we see most fully in the case of Jesus as truth. As the human person he is, as God embodied in a human life, his personal reality confronts us. He eludes our grasp, as all persons do in genuinely personal encounter. We cannot apply to him the modern rationalist desire to master truth, but nor is the postmodern notion of constructing our own truth for ourselves appropriate – not, once again, if we encounter him in his personal otherness. Of course, it is in fact all too easy to construct a Jesus figure of our own making – Jesus as we would like to him to be, a Jesus who is nothing but a reflection of ourselves or our ideals, even a Jesus as we fear he may be. Quests of the historical Jesus – modern or postmodern – always run that risk. But when they fall for it they evade the experience of encounter, preferring a useful idol to the personal otherness of Jesus. They turn, like Pilate, from the possibility of encounter back to mastery and control.

(3) Jesus was and is a particular human person, as well as being the universal God. His story in the Gospels is a very particular bit of human history. Yet he is, Christians have always believed, of universal relevance. Thus truth, in this case as throughout Scripture, is both particular and universal, and universal only by being particular. God makes himself particular in order to be God for all people.

This very characteristic combination of the particular and the universal is where Christian truth distinguishes itself from both modern and postmodern ways. Conversely, the modernist and the postmodernist object to it for precisely opposite reasons. For the modernist truth is universal and must be universally evident to human reason. Truth has to be something like mathematics, which is simply true at any time and place. Truth, in the important sense of truth to live by, cannot be particular. No particular person could embody the universal truth of God.

For the postmodernist, on the other hand, there is only the particular. The Enlightenment's supposedly universal truths were merely the ideas of western culture imposed by a kind of cultural imperialism on other people. The only truths are particular. There is my truth or our group's truth but it cannot be exported.

For Christians, truth is accessible in the particular story and person of Jesus. But it is not just our truth. In the particular story and person of Jesus truth is accessible to all people. This is the experience of those who have encountered truth in Jesus across a huge diversity of cultures, times and places. To be sure, their experience was contextual. That is, they encountered Jesus from within the contextual reality of their cultures, times and places. The ways in which the universal relevance of Jesus came home to them in particular differed. The truth of God in Jesus is big enough to relate to all human contexts in their particularity as well as in the common human condition they all share. But it was the universal relevance of the particular human being whose story they read in the Gospels that they have encountered – and still do. Does this account of the universality of Jesus actually mask some kind of Christian authoritarianism and oppression? We shall come back to that.

### **(3) Practising truth**

The Gospel of John speaks not only of believing the truth, but of doing the truth (an unfamiliar, even rather odd expression in English): 'all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God' (3:20-21).

This is another insight into the holistic nature of truth as this Gospel expounds it. This is a truth that in the end we cannot know without practising it. That 'doing the truth' seems to us an odd phrase may be a symptom of a rather too narrowly intellectual idea of truth. But if Jesus embodies truth, then truth requires us also to embody it in our lives. If the story of Jesus is a true story in the profound sense that in it we encounter the truth of God, then our own stories must in some sense reflect his. Our own stories need to be true stories too.

Jesus also says – in fact, these are the words of Jesus to which Pilate's dismissive response is his non-question 'What is truth?' – Jesus says: 'Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice' (18:37). Again it sounds unfamiliar and odd, and we need to attend rather carefully to those parts of scripture that sound a little odd (or a lot odd). The oddness suggests there may be something we have to learn. 'Everyone who belongs to the truth' – notice how at a stroke Jesus contradicts any propensity we have to think truth belongs to us. This is no 'truth for me'. Nor is it truth we can grasp and use for ourselves, and we dare not impose it on

others as though it were ours to impose. The Gospel does not belong to Christians. It belongs to Jesus and we belong to it. It claims us and requires us to listen.

To belong to truth is to listen to Jesus, to speak truth (and how rare that is in much of our contemporary culture) and to do truth.

### **Authoritative truth**

Jesus in the Gospel of John underlines the truth of some of his most important sayings by beginning them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you...' Literally, the phrase is 'Amen, amen, I say to you...' Amen is from the Hebrew word for truth. When we say Amen at the end of a prayer we are underlining our agreement with it, making it our own prayer. 'Yes, yes, yes' we mean. 'Yes, it's true.' When people in a Pentecostal congregation shout out 'Amen' in response to something the preacher has said, they are using the term quite rightly. But Jesus says it not in response but in introduction. It underlines the authority with which he speaks: 'This is really, really the truth, you must believe it.'

But doesn't that sound authoritarian? It is very revealing to notice that whereas authority used to be a good word, distinguished from 'authoritarianism,' which was a misuse or distortion of authority, many people in our contemporary culture make no such distinction. Authority is oppressive because it seems to contradict freedom. And freedom is the overriding value of contemporary western society.

I've been rereading Philip Pullman's fantasy trilogy His Dark Materials - I don't if many of you know it. In Britain it's very popular both as children's reading but also as one of those cross-over books that appeal to adults just as much. It's children's literature of the highest quality, but sadly it's also deeply anti-religious and anti-Christian. I mention it because God is usually referred to as the Authority (capital A). The term has entirely negative connotations. God's representatives on earth, ecclesiastical institutions, seem to be responsible for all the oppression against which good human instincts rebel. The plot re-runs the story of Satan's failed rebellion against God in Paradise Lost. This time Eve and Adam eat of the tree with impunity and the forces of rebellion overthrow the Authority for ever. The authoritarian kingdom of heaven, Pullman hopes, will give way to a republic of heaven.

It's a brilliant, mythological version of the modernist secular story of human freedom heroically won from the oppressive authoritarianism of traditional religion. It's a peculiarly appealing story in our time. Is there an alternative Christian story – a story of authoritative truth that so far from suppressing freedom enables true freedom. Jesus evidently thought so, for he also says in John's Gospel, 'The truth will set you free.'

### **(5) Liberating truth**

The full quotation is this: 'If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free' (8:31-32). Here the truth that sets free is found in discipleship of Jesus. Here is a freedom that is not total individual autonomy, not freedom from everything and mastery over everything, but a freedom found in belonging and consistent even with obedience. How can this be? How can God's truth be authoritative without being authoritarian?

Let's recall the broad context in which Jesus says this: the Gospel story. It's the story of God's love for the world, love such that his Son came to die for the world. To return to Pilate - We noticed the irony of the fact that it was when God's truth incarnate stood before him that Pilate turned away with his sceptical 'What is truth?' But the irony goes further. Pilate's dismissal of truth sends Jesus to the cross, and this, the paradoxical climax of John's story, is where above all Jesus enacts God's truth. Jesus is no less and never more the embodiment of the truth of things – the reality of God's love for the world – than when he dies on the cross.

The authority, with which Jesus speaks and acts, then, the authority of God's truth in this story, is the authority of grace. Through Jesus Christ, John's Prologue tells us, grace and truth happened. This category – the authority of grace – is a key category in the biblical understanding of authority that distinguishes it radically from any kind of authoritarian domination. The biblical story is not, as Philip Pullman would have it, a story of domination, coerced obedience and rebellious autonomy, but a story of God's grace (God's loving giving) and our free and glad response. In this story all is given by God, including freedom. The world, our being in it, our redemption from the evil we make of it – all are God's gift, and in God's dealings with us gift always precedes God's requirements of us.

We noticed that real truth is demanding: it claims us and requires us to live according to it. But before it is demanding it is, just as characteristically, gracious and liberating. To the truth of God's love for us our response is not the coerced submission of the slave, but the free obedience of love. Its paradigm is that verse of Psalm 40 in which the early Christians heard Jesus speaking: 'I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart' (40:8). This is the obedience of those who glimpse the possibility of their best desires converging with God's, who recognize God's will as the desire of their own hearts, whose experience of God's love makes love the freely chosen goal of their lives.

Because obedience to God, whose will is the true law of my own being, is different in kind from obedience to any human authority, the biblical writers struggle with analogies for it. The analogy of servants' or slaves' obedience to their masters or subjects' obedience to their king is frequent, but also transmuted by paradox: 'As slaves of God live as free people,' says Peter (1 Pet 2:16), while James speaks of obeying 'the perfect law, the law of freedom' (1:25). In John's Gospel, in Jesus' long farewell to the disciples, he says: 'You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have heard from my Father' (15:14-15). What Jesus drops there from the image of servant is not the language of command and obedience, but the requirement of blind obedience that is made of the mere slave. Like Jesus himself in obedience to his Father, his friends know what is the aim of his commandments have in view, and themselves endorse and conform to that aim.

Let me illustrate, in a limited but contemporary way, one way in which accepting the authoritative truth of the Gospel can be liberating. We live in a society that exalts postmodern autonomy with its supposed freedom of the individual to choose in every area of life. But this postmodern freedom is not all it's cracked up to be. Most postmodern people are in fact strongly constrained by cultural trends, the media, the commercial interests that promote advertising and fashion, peer expectations and so on. Those whom this consumerist culture supposedly sets free are as often as not subject to compulsions to work excessively and to conform to impossibly demanding expectations of success (levels of stress have never been higher) or alternatively to the compulsions of drug abuse and the empty quest for fulfilment

in merely hedonistic pleasure. Choices are indeed multiplied to an unprecedented extent, but many of them are merely trivial. Really significant choices are much more difficult to find in a society that values choice as such, rather than the ability to make good, rather than bad, choices. Misled by the postmodern message that any value is as good as any other, people make ignorantly disastrous choices and suffer uncomprehendingly from them.

People who become Christians can well find it a liberation from all of that. To put oneself under the authority of God is a way of breaking with the cultural pressure, the demands of other people's opinions and expectations, the interiorized demands of the advertisers, the need to get on and to get ahead. It's a way of making for once a thoroughly non-trivial choice about the whole way one sees and lives life. It's a way into a world in which there are real values to guide one and real truth to conform to. It may be demanding, but, unlike the irrational compulsions of consumerism and hedonism, it has a truly desirable goal in view.

How sad, then, it is to see Christians themselves entangled in the enslaving pseudo-freedoms of consumerism. What Paul said to the foolish Galatians applies: 'For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery' (5:1).

#### **(6) 'His testimony is true'**

If the truth of God, the true revelation of the reality of things, is to be found in Jesus and his story, how can we know it? In the way the Gospel of John sees this, a key category is that of testimony or witness to the truth. The Gospel itself claims to be the testimony of the Beloved Disciple, that anonymous disciple of Jesus who appears rather unobtrusively in the Gospel narrative until he finally emerges as one specially qualified to witness not only to what happened but also to its significance. His 'testimony is true' (a remark made twice in the Gospel) both because he was there and because he was given the insight of a truly competent witness to events of such history-making significance.

One of the things I do in my new book is to explore the notion of eyewitness testimony in relation to the Gospels. It is a mistake, I think, to suppose that we can dig behind the Gospels historically and reconstruct a purely historical Jesus who could be of any significance or interest for faith. Like most historical evidence, what we have in the Gospels is testimony, and it is the kind of testimony ancient historians most valued: the testimony of involved participants who spoke of the meaning of events they experienced from the inside. Dispassionate observers are not the best sources for much of what we want to know about history. Especially with uniquely significant, history-making events, where crude ideas of uniformity in history break down, we need testimony from the inside. The Holocaust is the signal modern example of an event we should have no real conception of without the testimony of survivors.

If we want to know anything significant about Jesus, we must trust the testimony of the eyewitnesses that we have in the Gospels. Trusting testimony is a normal, perfectly rational thing to do. We do it all the time in daily life: that is, we believe people who are in a position to know what they tell us, unless we have reason not to trust them. One can try to test the reliability of witnesses – we don't have to believe them uncritically or gullibly - but if we do find them reliable then they have to be trusted. We cannot independently verify everything they say and that's the point of testimony. So while I'm not trying to remove faith in the special sense of faith in God and in Jesus or that such faith is response to the disclosure of

God in the Gospel history, I do think that historiographical and theological considerations converge in the nature of the Gospels, rather than tearing faith and history apart.

Those who were eyewitnesses of the Gospel events are unique in the kind of witness to Jesus they bear. Without their witness no one else could be followers of Jesus. And this is why John's Gospel, though it's often misunderstood at this point, confines the language of witness and testimony to the immediate disciples of Jesus who, like the beloved disciple, told what they saw. 'You also,' says Jesus to them, 'are to testify, because you have been with me from the beginning' (15:27). That cannot be said of any but the original disciples of Jesus. The reason for it is, of course, that the truth to which they witness *happened* in history. The gospel is not a matter of timeless truths or good ideas or moral injunctions, but the story of God's grace happening in the world in the events of Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection. Jesus as he is in that Gospel story is the truth. So the witnesses have to have been there. As John's Gospel says of the Beloved Disciple at the cross: 'He who saw this has testified' (19:35).

That is what John wants to stress, but it need not rule out the use of the word witness, as by some other New Testament writers, as a calling of all Christians and of the Christian church throughout history. We just need to be clear about the difference between the eyewitnesses and ourselves – otherwise we shall neglect the historical truth of the Gospel, its happenedness – but then we may also call the church's testimony to the truth testimony in a secondary way.

### **(7) The truth of testimony**

The way that Christians tell the truth is by way of witness and this is so because of the nature of the truth to which they witness. I want to stress and to dwell on this point a little because it relates to the widespread current criticism of religions that claim universal truth. I've already made the postmodern point that such claims are authoritarian, mask oppression and delegitimize difference. But the point is even more strongly made in the idea that religions that make universal claims incite and sanction violence. The popularity of this view – in the UK anyway – is connected with the surprising resurgence of religion as a hugely effective force in the world. Surprising to secularists, that is, because they had expected the steady decline of religion. Instead, we see radical Islamists determined to change the world through remarkably self-sacrificial violence (this isn't something else disguised as religion because suicide bombing is incomprehensible without religious motivation). Many British people also see rightwing American fundamentalism driving the American and British attempt to impose western values on Islamic countries by force and violence. A clash of violent ideologies? – much too simple an analysis, but one can easily appreciate how those who abhor such violence put it in succession to the religiously sanctioned violence of the past: such as the Inquisition and the crusades. Isn't such violence necessarily produced by religions committed to absolute truths that require acceptance by all people? Isn't there a kind of violence already in the intolerant assertion that we have the truth and others who differ from us do not?

In response we should make it entirely clear that assent to any claims to truth may not be enforced. Truth loses its own power to convince when we suppose it needs law enforcement and violence to secure its place in the world. Coercion of any kind – and there are forms of coercion other than the purely physical – coercion of any kind is what distorts truth into a vehicle for the will to power. There are certainly few more oppressive regimes than those that believe they stand for a truth that must be enforced (though such a truth need not be religious by any means). Christianity has always known in principle that belief cannot be coerced but

in practice it is sadly the case that all too often Christians have endorsed the religious use of coercion. That's why we need to be so clear and resolute about this. Christian truth cannot be coerced. It ceases to be true if it is.

Any kind of truth claim has its own appropriate way of inviting belief. Scientific truth, for example, has its own means of claim and methods of verification. They are appropriate to science, but we should not suppose that the success of science makes the same means and methods normative for other kinds of truth. Probably the best way of describing the way in which Christian truth should be claimed is the image of witness. Witness is non-coercive. It can be compelling but it cannot be compulsory. That is, its power to convince resides in the truth to which it witnesses, not in the power of those who witness. Often enough, as in the case of cross and the martyrs, the powerlessness of the witnesses is the vehicle of the truth's power to convince.

Adequate witness to the truth of God in Jesus Christ must be holistic. As we have seen, this is truth that cannot be known without also being practised. Witness to it must involve the whole of life and even death. Only then can one see that the witness is not self-serving, not manipulative, but transparent to the truth to which it points.

In the current concern about religious violence people commonly claim that it's religious extremists (one of the meanings given to that slippery term fundamentalists) that are the problem. People who are moderate about their religion are OK, it is implied. It's when people take their religion too seriously that they begin to threaten the rest of us. The trouble with an Al Qaeda suicide bomber is that he really believes that his cause is worth dying for and he is assured of paradise if he gives everything for it.

I don't buy that approach. There's nothing moderate about loving God with all our heart and all our soul, all our mind and all our strength – as the God of Israel demanded and Jesus heartily endorsed. There's nothing moderate about Mother Theresa or Dietrich Bonhoeffer or any of those people Christians have recognized as saints. Mother Theresa surely was a religious extremist, extreme in her love of God and her devotion to the poor, extreme in giving up so much and giving herself so much to others. Sanctity is extreme, and it is, I think, significant that, while secularism may produce outstandingly moral people, only religion produces saints.

So we should not, I think, be seduced by the secular desire to keep religion within comfortable bounds, even though violent and coercive forms of religious adherence make such a desire understandable. Not the whole-hearted commitment to truth is the problem, but the kind of truth that is at stake. The truth of God in Jesus Christ demands wholehearted commitment to the way of Jesus, a truth that cannot be supported by violence, a truth that violent enforcement can only contradict. That truth may also prove unsettling for secular society for it certainly cannot leave society to go its own way unchallenged. But its power to disturb is part and parcel of its intrinsic power to convince.

Let me in conclusion try to sum things up by brief comments on the three topics named in my title: Scripture, Community and World.

### *Scripture*

The truth of Scripture is the truth of its witness to the God of Israel and the God of Jesus. At its heart is the apostolic eyewitness testimony to Jesus. Its truth is both irreducibly particular

and irreducibly universal. It tells the particular story of God's particular people Israel and God's own particularization as the historical individual Jesus. But precisely this particular story claims universal attention and promises universal grace.

### *Community*

The truth of Jesus Christ requires embodiment in life lived according to the truth, and that means, not just the individual disciple, but the life of the Christian community. A faithful community cannot but witness to the truth it believes and seeks to live. It cannot be content with a reputation for good works or supportive community unless this reputation is transparent to the truth of God in Jesus.

For a Christian community to be faithful to the truth of the Gospel it must be alert to the danger of coming to think that truth is something it possesses and can put to use. God's truth is not what works for us, not what we find useful, but what claims us and impels us always beyond our own concerns. God's truth is always greater than we imagine.

Christians are people who, while recognizing the transcendence of truth, that we can never grasp and possess it, do care about truth, and this enables them to engage seriously and respectfully in dialogue with people who think differently. It is not the relativists - who think every claim to truth as valid or as invalid as every other - who can participate with others in serious conversation about truth. Only if we think that error is a real possibility and idolatry a real temptation can we be serious about truth in a way that qualifies us to engage with others who care about truth.

### *World*

The world is a complex place, and there are truths of all sorts to be found in all sorts of predictable and quite unexpected places in it. If we want to claim, as I think we should, the universality and definitiveness of Jesus Christ as the key to all truth we need not think of this in a purely exclusionary way but can profitably, I think, consider it as relational truth. That is, all truth will come finally into its own, find its place in the still far from realised scheme of things, when it is brought into relationship with Jesus Christ. So just as witness to the truth of Jesus cannot be pursued by coercion and violence, so also it cannot be furthered by arrogantly or even fearfully closed minds to whatever truth there is to be known. As those who belong to the truth of God in Jesus Christ, as those who have been claimed by the truth of the Gospel, we must above all be faithful to the truth that has claimed us, but, just because that truth claims universal relevance, just because it is not an unpretentious little local truth but the truth of God, we must go on seeking its relevance out there in the world with other seekers of truth.