
Truth Matters

Sermon • Rev'd Andrew Hoggan • 7 June

Isaiah 64:1-8, John 16:4b-15



In the vs we just heard read, Isaiah is trying to convey something of the awesomeness of God, and how far above our comprehension God is. Further, if we were to compare ourselves with God, if we think that we are anything other than sinners and we fall short, Isaiah makes a graphic point by saying our righteousness is like filthy cloths. Literally menstrual cloths.

To be aware of such things helps us understand why the gospel is indeed good news. And so to John's Gospel we turn. John 16:4b-15

Let's pray, Lord open our eyes and hearts to the truth of your Word that we may indeed be recipients of the good news working in our lives, amen.

A Question as we begin: Is there a place for the church in today's world? Many would say no. They may well point to declining numbers and church scandals prove their point.

Such ones may not be aware that the church is in fact growing and thriving in various parts of the world. And if one were to compare churches that are growing, with churches that are shrinking, something would stand out.

Churches that proclaim the Gospel, and help their people understand the gospel, tend to grow.

As I have been emphasising in our lead up to, and including Pentecost, at Prebbleton. Where the word of God is working, and the Spirit of God are working, and the people of God are working, things will happen.

This morning want us to look into this thing truth and say clearly and as strongly as I can “Truth matters.”

In John 14 & 16 Jesus makes a strong connection between the Holy Spirit and truth. In fact he calls the Spirit “the Spirit of truth”.

Let’s see how true Jesus was to his Word.

Before Jesus Crucifixion he promised 4 things would happen.

- He would rise from the dead.
- He would ascend to his rightful place of glory at the right hand of the Father.
- He would ask the Father to send the Holy Spirit.
- And we would be his witnesses.

Easter and Pentecost proved all those promises to be true.

Truth Matters: That the gospel is true matters. That we can trust it matters. Resurrection. Ascension. Sending the Spirit. Witnessing to Jesus. As Jesus said it would happen, it happened.

We often bewail the fact that the church is not advancing, and congregations, at least in our part of the world, are aging and shrinking.

Let’s just note that on the day of Pentecost the first thing the 120 Spirit filled believers did was to leave the house where they had been waiting, and praying for what Jesus had promised, and when it happened they hotfoot it outside to where the people are.

Then when the people want to know what’s going on, Peter stands, and boldly proclaims the gospel. He shows that what the people are seeing and hearing is God at work by his Spirit.

We know the result. 3000 are converted and filled with the Spirit. Luke tells us they devoted themselves to four things. The first being apostolic teaching. That apostolic teaching heads the list is, I think, significant.

Why? Because unless we are taught well, we will not do the other three things on the list well.

You may have noticed I like reading from my bible. The reason? As helpful as having the words on the screen are, one of the potential consequences of seeing text on a screen, and having the bible passage printed on bits of paper, is we can fail to appreciate that what we are seeing and hearing is part of a bigger story.

And without a bigger understanding, and a bigger context it's hard for us to understand, or understand rightly.

I personally would love to see folk bringing their own bibles to church. Or having a grown up translation of the bible like the NIV or the NRSV in the pews. I would love it if folk follow through the passage we are looking at as they hold the bible for themselves in their own hands.

So what's the difference between a growing and a shrinking church? There can of course be a multiple reasons. But let me simply say, when the Word of God is working, when the Spirit of God is working, and the people of God are working things will happen.

No wonder or surprise then that the first attack and strategy of the enemy, as recorded in Genesis, was to undermine God's word. "Did God really say you should not eat of the tree in the middle of the garden?"

Satan's aim was to distort and discredit the truth of God's word. The end result? A breakdown in trust, and a breach in relationship.

Move forward to our day and some of the things people believe. It's hard to comprehend how the very concept of truth has been so distorted and discredited.

And while in our secular age folk might shun the idea of God and forces that are in opposition to God, our discrediting and denial of truth is at its heart a spiritual matter. It's a part of the spiritual battle we are in.

A little social history. We are 30 years or so into a way of thinking and living that has been labelled Post-modernism.

Very quick summary. Modernity was the period of a hundred or two years prior to about 30 years ago. It was a period where rationality and logic were highly regarded.

If you couldn't take it apart, analyse it, test it, you could not say it was real and objective. Science was king. Science was "objective and trustworthy. As for faith and spirituality? Well you can't subject it to scientific analysis, so you can't really trust it.

The upshot of this? Science became the leading influence of our culture. Faith was a private matter and should be kept private.

Imagine, imagine if on the day of Pentecost the 120 had followed that kind of thinking. That faith is a private matter. Imagine if the 120 had stayed in the house having a happy clappy time.

Death and Resurrection. Ascension. Sending the Holy Spirit, witnessing to Christ. Easter and Pentecost proved Jesus true to his word.

Now as unhelpful as modernity was in respect to the Gospel getting a hearing, at least modernity was governed by logic and rationality. You could argue a case for the gospel.

Not so much in Post modernity.

The Post Modernist will often challenge the idea that there is an overarching truth. A truth by which you can test and examine other truth claims. You have your truth. I have my truth. What's to say your truth is any more true than my truth?

It can even reach the point where people believe reality is shaped by perception. In other words, if I believe something to be true then it is true.

Now forgive me I don't want to be insensitive. We are to love and care for people whatever they believe. But as an example of perception supposedly shaping reality. If I wake up tomorrow and believe I'm a woman..... I'll leave it there.

The majority of us sitting here this morning might be thinking to deny that things can be true or false doesn't make sense. It's either true or false that I will drown if I have no way of breathing underwater.

Well, the fact is the majority of us are over 30 years old, so we are shaped more by modernist, not post modern thinking.

But lest we think it's just younger folk who have rejected the idea that truth is important. In 2016 a new label entered the political vocabulary. "Post Truth Politics".

In other words, at least in some folks minds, in the political realm, truth is expedient. When it comes to politics we have gone beyond the need for truth.

It now seems you can now say anything you want to get, and or stay ahead. You can exaggerate. You can even get caught out in tens of thousands of falsehoods and lies. A bunch of folk will still vote for you. Listen carefully and ponder.

- In such a post truth world, what of the one who said “I am the way, the truth, and the life”?
- What of the one who is called the Advocate, the spirit of truth?
- What of the one, Satan, the who is called the father of lies?

Who seems to be running the show sometimes?

How does the gospel get a hearing in our topsy-turvy world where if I believe the world is flat, it won't be long before my social media feeds will be reinforcing that idea.

I'm tempted to say, and I admit I'm somewhat nervous to even say it.

How does the Gospel get a hearing when some sections of the church have become so power hungry and politicised, that they support the one who is by en large responsible for this term “post truth politics” popping up in 2016.

The upshot of all this. If someone were to ask me if the Gospel is relevant today I might ask them a few questions by way of answer. I might ask;

- What do you trust in?
- Do you think truth is important?
- What happens in a world where anything goes, and truth is simply the label I give to permission myself to do whatever I want?
- Do you think such a world would be just, or fair or safe?

In a world where it seems to be ok that truth is fluid and unanchored to reality, do we need in the church to cry “enough”. And say that there something concrete and rational to lead and guide us through life?

And importantly, that something, is really a someone. God who leads and empowers by His Word and His Spirit.

Vs 7 “I tell you the truth” Jesus said . “It is to your advantage that I go away.” That might have seemed like a very uncomfortable, even unwelcome, truth at the time. But it was true.

It was to their advantage because Jesus would come back in a new and even more influential way. Jesus spoke of the Advocate, the one called the “Spirit of truth” doing three things. Vs 8-11, When he comes he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgement.

- About sin because they do not believe in me.
- About righteousness, because I am going to the father and you will see me no longer.
- About judgement because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

There is some debate about the what “proving the world wrong” means. Some translations have “will convict the world”. As best as I can understand it, the general idea is this. The world, that is those who are not under the rule and reign of Christ, will be made aware of their situation and what that means.

In Jesus day, the so called righteous ones. The Jewish religious leaders, conspired to end Jesus life. Jesus resurrection proves them wrong. As the prophet Isaiah graphically illustrates, righteousness that is based on our actions rather than God’s, is as filthy cloths. Menstrual cloths is the literal translation.

In John 16, as Jesus talks of the work of the HS, he is saying this. When the Spirit of truth comes he will make the world aware that any claim to righteousness outside the work of Christ is empty and ineffective.

What of this judgment? “About judgment because the ruler of this world has been condemned.” The judgement here is in relation to the enemy of souls, of Satan. When Jesus rose from the dead, that was the sign of Satan’s defeat and that condemnation and judgment are his future.

The Father of lies has lost. That is the truth of the gospel. That’s why the enemy hates the gospel so much. It is both a declaration of the victory of Christ, and the defeat of Satan.

How do we sum all this up. In many ways we live in a world of make believe. That’s the effect if truth is sidelined, and people construct their own reality.

At its heart the assault on truth that has ramped up over the last 30 or so years is a Spiritual matter. It’s a continuation of what the Father of lies started in the garden of Eden. It is a way of waging war against the one who says “I am the way, the truth and the life”.

As Jesus talked of the Spirit proving the world wrong, or convicting the world, did we not see that happening in the most wonderful and encouraging way on the day of Pentecost.

As the Word worked. As the Spirit worked, 3000 were cut to the heart. The were convicted and they cried out for help. And they got it. What Jesus said would happen happend.

In our day and in our setting we need to remember who is in control. We stand in, and we guided be and live by the truth.

I mentioned earlier that from 2016 a new term had entered the political arena “post truth politics.”

- Imagine if you can, what it would be like if our doctors could just make stuff up when they were treating us.
- Imagine if we could not trust the contracts we enter into because words can be reinterpreted to suit our purposes.
- Imagine next time you go through an intersection, what it would be like if red can mean either stop or go.

We can't say, when it comes to truth, that what is happening today is unique, as much as getting more extreme.

I remember in the 70's, Nixon looking straight at the camera and saying “I am not a crook”. I remember in the 90's, Clinton's looking straight into the camera saying “I did not have sex with that woman”. I'm not sure what I would pick if I were to think of the current context.

Thankfully, we still get somewhat upset when a public figure is caught out and they try to lie or spin their way through it.

I think, that that says something about the way God has made us in his image. The one who is truth, has put a longing for truth within us.

So to finish, as mixed up as our world is, as much as we might wiggle and squirm when God's truth challenges our truth, God is still in control. And God has given us his Word and His Spirit to help us.

As I have said a few times this morning, and I suspect it's a drum I will keep beating.

- When the Word of God is working.
- When the Spirit of God is working.
- And when the people of God are working....

Finish the sentence for me, “things happen.”

Let's pray, Lord Jesus in a world that in many way seems unanchored to reality, we thank you that truth, your truth wins out, and we can stand secure. Whatever the cost may we hold fast to the truth of the Gospel and give witness to you, amen.

