

Good God, Good Church: Truth Telling - 6th February 2022

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[0 : 0 0] We're midway through this Sunday series that we've been doing over recent weeks called Good God, Good Church. It's a way of working out how God's goodness, especially as seen in the life of Jesus, might be reflected in the way that we are church, how we live under God in community with one another.

So we kicked off this series a few weeks ago now by looking at the overall idea of goodness. That was when we were back online on YouTube. We've explored compassion and empathy, also grace and generosity.

And then last week, Ruth helped us to think about what it means to prioritise people. And if you haven't caught any of those, they're all up on YouTube. So do get back to the back catalogue, should you wish, to keep up with what we've been talking about.

But each of these qualities that we've been looking at so far, they're very much in evidence in the way that Jesus conducted himself. And I guess as with all things in life, we won't go far wrong if we keep Jesus as the one whose example we follow and ask God to inspire us by.

And so this week, we're going to continue this theme of looking at Jesus for how to be a good church. But it would be good to turn our attention today to the idea of truth, and in particular, truth-telling.

[1 : 1 8] And by that, I mean the ways in which we might conduct ourselves, but also the truth which we allow God to tell us. As I hope we'll see this morning, truth is a quality which Jesus embodies in all sorts of ways.

So that seems a decent principle for us to explore as we seek to be this good church under a good God. What is truth, though? Big question. And it's actually a question that Pontius Pilate asks in the face of Jesus, as Jesus stands trial before him in the run-up to his crucifixion.

But from Pontius Pilate, some 2,000 years ago to our day and age, this same question, what is truth? It's a big one, but I think it's probably a bit more complicated to answer than we might sometimes imagine.

Indeed, what I want to do this morning, really, is suggest that there are three main ways, but different ways, that we can use the word truth. Three ways which, for me, can help us to understand what it means to be a people of truth, you know, a church of truth under God.

And I'm going to get, I guess it's a little bit kind of philosophical this morning. So if you want to grab an iron brew or something from the fridge just to give you that sugar and caffeine boost, you'd be most welcome.

[2 : 3 8] But if we can, stick with me with this, because my hope is this could be quite helpful for us. So this question, though, what is truth? As I said, there are three ways we're going to look at this morning.

Way number one, I'd say, that we use this word truth, is to think of truth as fact, individual facts about our physical reality.

So it's a fact. It's true, for example, that giraffe tongues can be 20 inches long. Who knew?

Who knew? Wikipedia knew, I tell you. It's true, for example, that humans are the only animals with chins. Do you know that? Chinny recon and all that, yeah.

It's true that you're more likely to be killed by a vending machine than a shark. That's a fact. And it's, I don't know how, but yeah, there we go.

[3 : 38] Just watch out for the fridge over there. All right. And it's true that my name is Matt. My mum's maiden name was Pratt.

And so if she'd been so inclined, I'd have been called Matt Pratt. All right. It's got a good stage name ring to it. Yeah, we escaped that one. Now, are all these things true?

Yes, they are. Yeah, that's truth as fact. And so from scientific truth to historical truth and all sorts in the middle, we often tend to think of truth as facts about reality.

So, for example, the big frustration in politics over recent years is the way in which truth as fact has been eroded. You remember all that alternative facts nonsense that was under Donald Trump?

And it seems that denial of truth as fact, well, it dominates, at the moment at least, the way we're currently governed, it seems, with a constant stream of lies and cover-ups and denials and all the manoeuvrings around that.

[4 : 48] Now, we'll see how long it takes for us as a country or those in Parliament to choose to allow such massaging of facts, such lies, perhaps, to continue to shape our common life.

But thankfully, truth as fact is a principle which predates even the most privileged of parties, and long may that principle endure.

Indeed, if we go back to the time of the writing of the Bible, there's a fair amount of truth as fact stuff in the Bible's pages. So it's true, it's a fact that there was a temple built in Jerusalem.

There's truth that the Roman Empire dominated the ways of first-century life. It's truth that sheep were looked after by shepherds. It's truth that, as pretty much all mainstream historians agree, a guy called Jesus really did exist.

Yes, there are all sorts of other stories in the Bible, particularly in places in the Old Testament like Kings and Chronicles, which do seem to exaggerate numbers and spin stories in a way which makes it hard to know whether the writers are thinking, yes, this is true in a factual sense.

[6 : 07] But there is enough still truth as fact in the Bible for us to know that it's a key principle and a key understanding of the way God calls us to live.

So truth as fact, one understanding of what truth is. Hold that thought because another way of understanding or defining truth, so a second way, is not so much truth as fact, but truth as meaning.

In that something is true if it tells us something integral about what it means to be human. So something like a novel or a film, that can speak truth to us about what it means to be human.

A character's experience can say something true about human conditions of love or loss of delight or despair. But what's interesting with this truth as meaning idea is that a story doesn't have to be true in a factual sense to contain truth.

So for example, Master Frodo, his quest in The Lord of the Rings, it's a made-up story. But it's a... I know, shocker. Spoiler alert, sorry. It's a made-up story, but it's a story which if you've read the books or seen the films, it nevertheless speaks truth to us about friendship and fellowship and courage.

[7 : 37] Well, for me and Gem at home, we've been watching this series, Ted Lasso TV series about a fictional American football coach who comes over here to manage a Premier League football team.

Now, it's a made-up story with made-up characters, but the writing of this fictional story contains such truth that it's funny and moving and uplifting.

And if you ever come to my office at home, if you ever pop around and see me, I've even framed a picture of this guy on my wall, Ted Lasso, because I find him to be... Yes, he's fictional, but I find him to be such a truthful and inspiring character.

So do check it out if you get a chance to watch that series. There's a bit of effing and jeffing in it, but apart from that, it's okay. All right. Equally, though, if you think about it, the stories that Jesus told, the parables, such as Good Samaritan and the Lost Son, you know, two famous ones, they're not true stories in a factual sense, because again, the characters are made up.

But these fictional parables, they convey immense truth about what it means to be human and how we're to understand God. Jesus' parables may not be true stories in a factual sense, but they are stories with truth.

[8 : 56] They're stories which ring true when we read them, because they help us to understand truth as meaning and not just as fact. Indeed, I'm often struck, I think, that for all the emphasis that some quarters in Christian circles place on whether or not the Bible is literally true or not, often the most precious, the most loved stories are the ones which Jesus made up.

Why? Because understanding truth as meaning and not simply as fact, that resonates deeply within us. So truth as fact, secondly, truth as meaning.

But then a third way which we can understand or define truth is this, truth as wisdom. Now what do I mean by that? Well, seeing truth as wisdom is all about how we live our lives, how we live in light of the truth that we encounter in things like facts and in things like meaning.

Now truth as wisdom, it's not as easy to define or put our finger on this kind of truth. Rather, it's what it means in a big sense to live truthfully, to truly live.

It's not simply truth as dry facts, it's not even understanding truth as something which resonates within us. Rather, seeing truth as wisdom, we could say is what truth looks like in practice.

[10 : 32] Indeed, with this idea of truth as wisdom in mind, we're going to have a reading this morning from John's Gospel, chapter 14, in which Jesus talks about this kind of lived out truth.

He's speaking to his disciples at the Last Supper just a few hours prior to Pontius Pilate asking him this question, you know, what is truth? And in this clip, let's see if we can spot how Jesus himself defines truth.

Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in me. My father's house has many rooms.

If that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

You know the way to the place where I am going. Thomas said to him, Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way? Jesus answered, I am the way and the truth and the life.

[11 : 51] No one comes to the father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my father as well.

From now on, you do know him and have seen him. It's a passage which contains this famous statement of Jesus when he says this, I am the way and the truth and the life.

And it's a nicely memorable, poetic line. I think partly because anything said in threes makes it a statement that's easy to remember.

So from sex and drugs and rock and roll to the good, the bad and the ugly, you know, even hands, face, space. If you notice, the government often use three word or three sentence slogans.

It's a lot easier to lodge them in our minds. The drawback though of saying things in three such as this way, truth, life one, is that it's reckoned by linguistic scholars that our minds tend to focus more easily on the first and the last of three things mentioned.

[13 : 01] I'll leave you to work out if that's the case with sex and drugs and rock and roll, which one you don't tend to focus on in those three. But if we take Jesus' statement of him being the way, the truth, and the life, the first thing he says, the way, now we might think, yeah, okay, that makes sense.

I can identify with that kind of language. Jesus is the way because we're called to follow him. He's the road, the track, the path to knowing God in this world and the next.

And it's interesting, even the earliest followers of Jesus, they weren't known as Christians initially. they were known as followers of the way, the way of Jesus. Equally, when he says the third thing, I am the life, it kind of makes sense since not only does Jesus give us life as God in the first place, but in rising from death to new life, he offers that same resurrection life to us as well.

But then the middle one in this sandwich, the middle of the three tiles, I am the truth, perhaps more easily overlooked because it's in the middle and yet it's got just as much significance as Jesus being the way and the life.

See, in answer to that question, what is truth? Jesus says, I am truth. I am what truth looks like in person.

[14 : 24] I am truth put into practice. I am living truth. Yes, truth may include facts. Yes, of course it does. And truth may include meaning, but ultimately, Jesus is the embodiment of truth as wisdom.

Embodiment of what true life lived out is all about. That's why Pilate's question to Jesus is so ironic because he's asking what is truth and he's literally staring him in the face.

Now, what's all this got to do with having a good God and being a good church? Well, it seems to me that we often find it easier to fall into thinking that truth is more about facts or it's more about meaning than it is about the wisdom of living life as Jesus lives it.

Now, why do I say that? Well, if we prioritise facts as the ultimate way of understanding or defining truth, there can be a tendency, I think, sometimes to become pretty fundamental about seeing facts as being key to our faith.

So, some people can easily become pretty obsessed with reading the Bible primarily as a book of facts, as a fact book. For example, in Genesis, for example, it says the world was created in six days.

[15 : 51] If we believe that to be true, for people who think truth is fact, it must also be a fact that the world created in six days. And therefore, anyone who doesn't believe that truth as fact is therefore not, in some people's eyes, a true believer.

And so you can see what happens for some people. Belief in truth as fact can easily become for them a marker of what it means to be true in your faith. Instead, I think I'd suggest in light of what Jesus says of himself, we're better served by seeing truth not primarily as fact, but as wisdom, as life lived out, life best seen in the person of Jesus, the one who is truth himself.

The writer, Madeleine Langel, she puts it like this, we do not draw people to Christ by loudly discrediting what they believe, by telling them how wrong they are and how right we are, but by showing them a light that is so lovely that they want with all their hearts to know the source of it.

Now, truth as fact is fine, but truth as wisdom is better. What if we prioritise meaning as the ultimate way of understanding or defining truth?

Well, it can be a tendency I think sometimes to make our experience of life as key to our faith. So, when things are going well, when life gets a double thumbs up from us, when we experience health, wealth, happiness, then we feel close to God because our experience tells us that that's true.

[17 : 37] you're hashtag blessed as Ruth was saying the other day. We see ultimate truth in meaning, in how we experience, how we take in, how we understand life.

But again, the drawback of this, perhaps you can see what happens. Seeing truth primarily as meaning can become pretty dependent on how well we think life is going.

So, when life's going well, our faith is strong because we believe God is good all the time and so on. But when life doesn't go so smoothly as it certainly hasn't done for these last couple of years and more, when we face perhaps financial worries or health concerns, relationship difficulties or mental health well-being, all of a sudden we might say that our faith gets knocked or our faith gets rocked by those circumstances.

why? Because I suspect perhaps inadvertently we've been looking for the truth of our faith in meaning and experience and not always in Jesus himself.

Instead, rather than primarily seeing truth as facts or even truth as meaning, if we define truth as wisdom, as life lived out with the person of Jesus, then we'll learn that the truth of our faith rests not on how we feel or even on what we experience but on the truth that in all of life's complexities, in all of the inevitable ups and downs of life, Jesus is truly behind and beside and before us in all that we face.

[19 : 29] And I wonder for you, I appreciate it's a lot to sort of keep up with or take in perhaps. I wonder for you as you listen to this kind of stuff, to what extent maybe has your faith over the years, if you look back or if you look at the present, been based on seeing truth as fact in that we rely on proof and evidence to maintain our trust in God.

Maybe that's something for you which has been key to your understanding your faith. I wonder for you to what extent has your faith been based on seeing truth as meaning in that it's our experience of life and the need for things to go well which therefore fuels our trust in God.

I think if we're honest, either one of those two things, if they've become key for us, if they've become paramount, well maybe today might be a good day to ask God to help us ensure that our faith is based instead on seeing truth as wisdom, as life lived out truthfully and therefore trusting first and foremost in the person of Jesus with all of the diversity and depth and at times difficulty which comes with that.

Now focusing on Jesus as our model for truly living we've been saying over recent weeks and more is key for what it means for us to be a good church and so living truthfully means that just as Jesus did in the way he treated for example the woman who was anointing him with expensive perfume will follow Jesus' lead by living truthfully by living with we might say integrity that means choosing courage over comfort being prepared to stand up for those who lack a voice or the opportunity to defend themselves from being exploited living truthfully means that just as Jesus did in feeding the 5,000 will follow Jesus' lead by living as we were saying the other week with generosity given of our time, our possessions, our money even when it would be simpler or easier or more lucrative for us not to living truthfully means that just as Jesus did in calling out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees will follow

Jesus' example by living with honesty that means choosing a challenge lies even when it would be simpler or more comfortable not to but it also means that just as Jesus was with the woman who was caught in adultery we're to be characterised by gentleness weighing up how to communicate truth to someone in a way which builds them up rather than simply bashes them down and ultimately in all of this living truthfully means that just as Jesus did in all of his interactions will follow Jesus' lead by living in ways which are characterised by love treating others as we would want to be treated treating others as the people they are loved and valued by God integrity generosity honesty gentleness love all some of the qualities of a life lived in line with

[22 : 47] Jesus who is the truth and we'll wind it up with this it says in John's gospel John's big on truth he says this truth came through Jesus Christ John 1 17 we can understand truth as facts yeah but that will only get us so far as individuals so far as a church we can understand truth as meaning of course there's great stuff in that but that too will only get us so far ultimately though we can understand truth as wisdom wisdom which is all about how life is lived life which is modelled to perfection by Jesus the way the truth and the life and as we go through what it means to be a good church under a good God my prayer is that we would collectively build our lives both now and always on Jesus who is the truth

Amen Amen Amen