

## Sermon Archive 245

Sunday 12 May, 2019

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Psalm 23

John 10: 22-30

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



[https://www.radionz.co.nz/audio/player?audio\\_id=2018692568](https://www.radionz.co.nz/audio/player?audio_id=2018692568)

Jonathan Freedland, a journalist for the Guardian, has written a work of fiction - a book called "To kill the truth". In the book, one of the characters says *"The fatal flaw about truth is that it relies on shame. When truth relied on shame, people were embarrassed to be caught in a lie. Before **him**, no one wanted to do it, but then this once in a generation, once in a millennium, man comes along, couldn't give a rat's, doesn't even blush, feels no shame; he doesn't care, and you don't need to care either; and just like that, truth is dead."*

Prompted by Radio New Zealand's Kim Hill to comment on why he'd invented a character to say such a thing, Jonathan Freedland said:

*I saw, just the other day, the extraordinary image of Donald Trump standing on the balcony of the Whitehouse, with the Easter Bunny next to him - a man dressed up in an Easter Bunny suit. And he was meant to be giving bland, innocuous remarks to the children who were there for the traditional Easter egg roll. But Trump being Trump, he couldn't help himself, so started talking about how great he was. And one of the things he said was "I funded the military, because as you know the funding was getting very depleted". Now, that's totally false; the American military is massively funded . . . And Obama didn't deplete the U.S. military. But it's this story that the American military was on its knees until the great Donald Trump came and spent money on it . . . It's completely false, but it has a sort of narrative arc to it. And so somebody like me, a Guardian journalist, jumping up and saying "No, in fact Obama actually increased spending" - you're spoiling the story! That happens all the way through the Trump story. He's constantly nagged at by fact-checkers who point out his serial dishonesties. There are these people keeping tabs on him, and it is at a rate of 5.8 falsehoods a day - but they are the sort of nerds at the school*

*prom; no one wants to hear from those guys. They'd much rather allow this man to spin this great story in which America is going to be made great again.*

Freedland's contention seems to be that we've entered a strange kind of world where truth isn't enough, doesn't work, has somehow lost its power.

Jesus is walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. He's approached by a group of people who ask him whether he's the Messiah. That they say to him "How long will you keep us in suspense, tell us plainly", is kind of an accusation. They're suggesting that he's been unclear, or evasive. "Tell us plainly who you are".

Jesus says "I've told you already - you just don't believe me".

Jesus speaks the truth - but is that enough? I suspect Jesus doesn't think so. I suspect that he suspects his audience will carry on believing something else, embracing "alternative facts", telling a different story.

When you've spoken the truth, and people don't believe you, what can you do? I guess you can carry on speaking - drawing on evidence, presenting further truths. Do you recall the approach the risen Christ took with the alternative-facted couple on the road to Emmaus?

*He said to them, 'Oh, how foolish you are! . . .' Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. [Luke 24: 25 & 27]*

Maybe there *is* time for patient explanation - for a second go at asserting the truth. But back to Jonathan Freedland:

*When the scandal broke about these cruel images of separating migrant children from their parents, Trump went on TV and said "that's a democrat policy - that's not our policy". It was a complete lie - but of course it was quite a powerful rebuttal "don't blame me, it's not my policy". Everyone knew it was his policy - but somehow the man without shame has tremendous power, because they don't get themselves tied up in knots - they just give you this clear line. And you know, their supporters . . . will nod and believe it, and you, as the truth teller, are left trailing in their wake, running after them with all your documents and your sub-clauses - and the truth defender ends up looking very [pedantic] and weak.*

It's interesting to see that Jesus didn't spend a lot more words on the portico

ambushers. He simply reiterated that they had been told the truth. And if the words of truth weren't enough for them, then maybe they should consider what they had seen. Jesus talks about the power of the works that he has done. Truth has not just been spoken. It has been lived, expressed in deeds that everyone could see. Could it be, in a time when words have been cheapened, that actions might deepen in meaning.

Actions. In the post-truth portico, Jesus describes himself as a shepherd. What do shepherds **do**? They lead their flocks to green pastures and still waters. They find right paths. They inspire courage and confidence - they provide comfort. They set the table. They don't run away. They speak with a voice that is strangely familiar - echoes from the days of our innocence. The "Jesus people" have witnessed all these things in Jesus - and for them, it has been enough. Truth. To the ambushers, Jesus says "I have told you, and you do not believe. But the works I do in my Father's name testify."

Could it be, that in a post-truth era, when cynics abuse words to the point of rendering them useless, truth still finds a home in sacred deeds? Could it be that nurturing will always speak better than destroying? That loving will always speak better than hating? That forgiving will always speak better than judging? That sacrifice will always speak better than empty words? The truth power of the deeds of Jesus!

To the obstinate audience, where words are falling on deaf ears - Jesus presents truth (in its beauty) to the eyes. Is that enough?

I suspect that Jesus thinks not. I suspect he thinks that the campaign of falsehood will continue, and begin to exert a destructive force - because he goes on next to talk to the ambushers about his role as protector of the flock. Of the flock he says "no one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand."

Twice, in quick succession, he uses the word "snatch". He seems to believe that in an anti-truth environment, the good soon becomes a target, something to be stolen - a bauble in the eye of the ambusher. When truth has died, the vestiges of the good become all the more important to protect. Jesus takes up a kind of defiant championing of what is good and rare. (He takes on the verbal posture of someone who later will say "I lay down my life for my sheep".) Having in his hands something snatch-able (precious but snatch-able), his language gets more assertive.

Kim Hill asks Jonathan Freedland, “do you think truth can be revived?” Jonathan replies:

*Society cannot function without truth and facts and evidence, and therefore I’m going to say that yes, I think it can be revived. But I think it means that defenders of truth have to be much more assertive than we’ve been. And you can see the first signs of this. In the 2016 campaign, the American media felt the way you get to fairness is by balance. So, if Trump is accused of five dishonest things, you must find five dishonest things that you can accuse Hilary Clinton of - even if the things you’re accusing her of, in the end, were fake. But there was this idea of her emails would be set against all of his proven dishonesties and deceptions. I hope they’ve learned the lesson that the job of a journalist, if someone says it’s raining, and another person says that it’s not raining, is not to say “well, one says it is” and one says “it’s not”; the job of the journalist is to open the window, poke your head out the window, and say whether it’s raining. And that’s the task we have to reassert. We allowed Trump to exploit our own weakness which was a sort of desire to be fair - and I’m thinking about the press here, but [also] all the individual agencies in society, academics, the universities, other experts - we had a desire to be fair. And I think we have to replace that with a desire to be truthful . . . I think we will find new tools for asserting the truth.*

People of Knox, when Jesus said to those who would ambush him “you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep”, he seemed to be saying that there’s an intransigent kind of person for whom hearing and speaking truth is too great a task. Jesus seldom gave up on people, and we spent last week thinking about the miraculous conversion of Saul, a wonderful change that no one expected. So we need to be a bit careful here, not focussing too critically on the people in the portico. Let’s rejoice that there *is* a community, the flock, who listen for the voice of the shepherd - who respond with joyous receptivity when they hear and see it. Let’s give ourselves to listening, to living, to enfleshing the life of the shepherd in our shared life, and to protecting what is rare and good.

Can it be done in a post-truth era? Or has it been snatched from Jesus’ hands?

While we consider that, we keep a moment of quiet.

The Knox Church website is at: <http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz.html> . Sermons are to be found under News / Sermons.