

Defending the church's truth claims

15. 'What is truth? said jesting Pilate; and would not stay for an answer' : Bacon *Essays* (1625)

Staying to tell the truth

In order to explain why I am going to devote a whole piece to truth and telling the truth, I ask you to imagine that we have just put the dogmas of the church reverently in the church safe in the vestry for a while. That done; how are we to talk to others about the Christian vision? It is clear that Peter and Paul thought that the facts of the life and death of the man Jesus and their sense of his continued presence with them told them something correct, not something incorrect, about God. We may stand beside them in the conviction that, difficult though it may be to do so, we also have to wrestle with this same reality. We also would wish to assert that the man Jesus is somehow part of the truth about the universe in which we live, that is, a universe which we now understand in different terms. The great dogmas of the church had the exact 'how' of this all neatly sorted out. But they look now to many (but not all) of us like an old brown daguerrotype of something once perceived as real enough but long, long gone. Imagine for a moment that we have just put those dogmatic statements reverently away in the church safe in the vestry. All we have to mull over in the mind is this conviction that Jesus is somehow the truth, the trust that in Jesus we are not deceived. We are driven back to re-read our New Testament, to re-read it with commentaries at hand, to talk about it with like-minded friends, and to make of it what we can together. Faith with dogma out of the reckoning (because it is locked in the vestry safe) depends utterly on the touchstone of truth; all it has to go on are the witnesses and stories in the Bible, witnesses of whom we are aware in the world today, and friends, and books, and the conviction which truth seems to bring to what we understand to be our deepest selves.

Telling the truth. If truth is important to us; it is also important in the mission field in which we live. In the field telling the truth about what we believe is vital. Not everybody recognises that he or she could be mistaken; but nearly everybody I know recognises that somebody else can be mistaken about the truth. What is not readily forgiven, outside the church, is that somebody else should not tell the truth as he or she whole-heartedly believes it to be. Civil society depends on persons telling what they whole-heartedly believe to be the truth on matters of importance. Civil society is all the church has to work on - it calls civil society its 'mission field'.

Uncertainty about the truth. Uncertainty as to what is the true status of the statements in the creeds is unsettling. Repeating them without fully understanding them, or believing only part of them, leaves us compromised and feeling compromised about what we understand to be the most important things affecting the way in which we conduct our life. At very least confident missionaries

are likely to make a better fist of it than those who feel slightly shame-faced about their personal position.

'Spoiling' the truth, double standards. I believe that it is important that we should do all we can to avoid spoiling the word 'truth' and that we should raise as few doubts as possible in peoples' minds as to whether we know what the word 'truth' means. If we often fail to tell the truth, or have a double standard about it, we eventually raise a doubt as to whether we know what truth is. But it looks to me sometimes as though we in church have got accustomed to not telling the truth about our faith. I want to test that suggestion.

But first, Is there such a thing as truth? Most people in most situations get away with not worrying too much about truth. Sometimes they feel that telling the truth will be unnecessarily hurtful and soften it a little out of compassion; sometimes they tell less than the truth to save their skins; but they do not doubt its existence. Clever people tell us that there is no such thing as truth; but the advantage of the thing is that, unlike the *ousia* and *prosopon* of the great creeds of the church, everybody knows what you are talking about. The clever people may be right: truth may not exist; but in a practical way we believe in its existence. It is a good workaday concept. Many of us treat the existence of truth as the best available working hypothesis. Many think that the phrase 'telling the truth' has an identifiable meaning. In every day life everybody instinctively tests whether the person with whom they are engaged in conversation is 'telling the truth' (or is he or she having them on?) all the time as the conversation proceeds.

Telling the truth in court. The characteristic situation in modern society in which most people have to take a close look at truth is the court case. Many people watch court dramas shown on film and television. Why? Partly, perhaps, because they are anxious for 'justice' to prevail; partly to enjoy the downfall of the lying crook, his disintegration under cross-examination. This pleasure in the questioning of perceived 'untruth' only works because nearly all viewers are to some extent acquainted with truth, though they may not be on speaking terms with it. I know of a civil case about a piece of land, in which a brother of the claimant to the land agreed beforehand to be his witness and to tell some not-quite-truths in court to improve his brother's case. He told his lies and was being cross-examined when everything stopped for lunch. Over lunch the witness had a chance to reflect on the truth of what he had originally said in court and on the bad time he was having under cross-examination. He found that his heart was not in it. He did not come back into court after lunch. He had a heart attack and died in the ambulance on the way to hospital. As I understand the matter, faced with having to make a decision about it, he took truth seriously. The strain of trying to go on not telling the truth as he whole-heartedly believed it to be killed him. No doubt that will be counted to him for good. That was a civil case, but criminal cases also are testing times for truth. Every petty villain knows that, if he is caught stealing a handbag and brought to court, the witnesses against him will be required to tell the truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth about this important matter.

Telling the truth about what we believe. 'The truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth'. That is not always how we in churches witness to our faith. It is uncomfortable to look into it. Not many outright falsehoods, or palpable lies, perhaps; but consider some of the other alternatives to 'the truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth' - a little prevarication; truth with an unspoken private qualification; half truth; truth which includes a suggestion that something false is also true; a truth believed by others stated as if we personally believed it; double-speak; fudge - there are many variations.

I wonder sometimes whether we inside church institutions have got so used to saying one thing about our faith and actually meaning something-ever-so-slightly-different that no one inside even notices any more?

I wonder whether the cumulative weight of the little bits of not-quite-truth-as-such in matters of faith which we routinely tell in the course of a year has something to do with the problem that no one outside any longer seems to believe a word we say about it? We say our faith is important; many of us make statements about it repeatedly in public, or at least in our churches which are open to the public; if we can not bring ourselves to tell the truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth as we whole-heartedly believe it to be about our faith, why should any one believe what we say? Why should they trust us, if we employ one standard of 'truth' for our faith and a different standard for everything else?

Selling houses and keeping faith. Again, people sign contracts for buying houses and expect to abide by the terms. But church is different. There people sign up for creeds and constitutions - solemnly assert that they accept the package - but no one in church is so crude as to insist that they ought actually to believe the creed, or operate the package on a daily basis. Heaven forbid we should enquire about anything so personal, or be so finicky and legalistic. Liberal Protestants appear to admire those Roman Catholics most who depart most radically from the articles of faith to which they weekly affirm that they subscribe. Somewhere down the line the old notions of telling the truth and keeping faith have been mislaid.

What are people outside to make of the church's claim that Jesus is 'the Truth'? They know very well that Christians do not all see the truth in the same way; but they may rightly require of each of us that we start by showing some signs of having a coherent understanding of what the word 'truth' means to us before we start talking about 'faith'.

I am not persuaded that all this is entirely our fault. The question is, Do we have to stumble between the truth as we whole-heartedly believe it to be and the propositions of 'the Faith' for ever and ever amen? I have been trying in previous Parts to show in an orderly sort of way how the church (always with the best of benign intentions) has got us into our present humiliating situation. Can it be true to say that nothing can be done about it? Is there no other valid way of expressing the Christian vision?

In Part 16, Who will lead the defence of the churches truth claims?

