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**TWO THOUSAND YEARS ON:
WHAT IS TRUTH?**

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by

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Two Thousand Years On: What is Truth?

Some time in the first half of the first century A.D., a relatively young male Jew was hauled up before the imperial governor of the Roman province in which he lived. The charges against him were not easy to disentangle, though they looked to the governor like an internal Jewish squabble and had something to do with the temple and the Messiah of the Jewish people. In an exchange with Pilate, the governor, the question of kingship arose and Pilate eventually described his prisoner as 'the king of the Jews'. Questioned about kingship, Jesus is recorded as having said that his kingdom was not of this world, so we have here no standard claim to political authority. More explicitly, he told Pilate: 'You are right in saying I am a King. In fact, for this reason I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me'. So we have no standard interest in political authority here either. Sovereignty belongs to the truth. So Pilate, finding no basis for strictly criminal charges against Jesus, tries to dismiss him subsequent to uttering the famous question: 'What is truth?'

The text which narrates all this conceals the questioner from our view almost completely, at least up to this point. In what tone of voice and in what spirit did Pilate ask his question? I want to propose five possibilities, some of which turn Pilate into a modern or a postmodern.

1.

The question exuded indifference. What truth is, is neither here nor there. One good thing about getting to my old age is that you are allowed to reminisce. It is the experience of many of us that, when we were students, in the 1970s, debates over Christianity or belief in God could be pursued with some passion and seriousness. Truth mattered. Now the scene is somewhat different. At a recent University student debate on Christianity in which I was asked to participate, I found more than one of the students slated to oppose me in the debate casually writing out their speeches just before it while chatting away happily to me. They flung a few insults at Christianity in their speeches but did not seem to care much what happened in our exchanges. I am not saying that this is entirely typical or that students in the 1970s were entirely serious. But many have noticed a shift towards apathy in religion, as in politics, unless we are talking about single issues. Things may change or already be changing in the wake of the increasing public profile of Islam. Meanwhile, what are we to make of the question of truth in a climate of indifference?

There have, of course, been significant attempts to cajole people out of indifference or its near kinsman, mild disdain. Schleiermacher and Tillich in their different ways attempted something broadly along those lines. But however successful or unsuccessful we judge them to have been, the phenomenon of indifference raises questions rather about the communication of truth, than the content of truth-claims. If a cancer patient professes no interest in the truth or otherwise of the diagnosis, it does not put pressure on the diagnostic claim itself. The only question is how to impress it on the sufferer. Yet although indifference does not particularly compel any exposition or defence of the content of a claim to truth, it might have a bearing on the form in which truth is communicated. Pascal, in the seventeenth century, wrote as follows.

It was not right that he [that is Jesus Christ] should appear in a manner manifestly divine and absolutely capable of convincing all men, but neither was it right that his coming should be so hidden that he could not be recognized by those who sincerely sought him...There is enough light for those who desire only to see, and enough darkness for those of a contrary disposition.¹

That is, since many humans are not disposed to seek for truth anyway, God is not disposed to give it indiscriminately. The way in which humans propose to relate themselves to the truth governs the way in which God proposed to reveal it. 'Christianity', as Kierkegaard put it, 'does not lend itself to objective observation, precisely because it proposes to intensify subjectivity to the utmost'.² Christianity is interested in maximising human passion for the truth and its talk of truth takes that into account. Pascal's statement should not be taken as a declaration that those who do not accept truth as Christians believe it are simply not disposed to accept it. The point is not, that is, to pronounce a moral anathema on unbelief. Pascal is making an observation to the effect that the form of revelation takes into account characteristic human indifference. Something like that is suggested by Jesus's habit of speaking in parables: they have at least the partial and occasional function of making understanding impossible for those who do not anyway wish to understand, while inviting a deliberate investigation of their meaning on the part of those who do wish to understand. An indifferent Pilate is not confronted by a plain revelation.

2.

Perhaps the question is argumentative. There has certainly been argument up to that point in John's narrative of the trial. 'Are you king of the Jews?' 'Well, who is saying that - you or others?' 'You expect me to take part in a Jewish debate: am I a Jew? What have you done?' 'My kingdom is not of this world'. 'Ah - got you - so you are a king!' 'You're right; I was born to testify to the truth'. 'What is truth? Carpenter, prisoner, define your terms'. Of course, argument is not opposite to indifference. It can conceal it. But let us take argumentative engagement at face value. Is truth arrived at by process of definition? Or, definitions aside, what does argument yield?

A long tradition of philosophical argumentation in the English-speaking world prizes the precise analysis of concepts. Talk of truth, in such a context, requires first of all a definition of what we are talking about. And an obvious legitimacy attends such a requirement. There is no religious virtue in rejecting the ideal of philosophical clarity. But let us observe the restrictions which an argumentative Pilate must accept on a dialectical route to understanding talk of truth. Philosophical argument which is suitably rigorous calls for logical skill. One false move and the game is up. Am I to stake my life on the results of such a sophisticated and precarious reasoning process? Who but philosophers can assess what other philosophers are up to? Anyway, they would be out of a job if they all agreed. Christianity is not for any gnostic guild, including the philosophic one. Moreover, it is instructive to note how philosophers proceed when an argument they adopt for a certain conclusion is found to be faulty. Often, they reformulate the argument. Now why would you reformulate an argument for something? If my argument for believing in God, or for a certain way of conceiving God, is wrong, why not give up my conclusion, my belief in or conception of God? Well, we might distinguish between a willingness to revise our conceptions and to abandon our basic beliefs, but the general answer is this: my belief in or about God does not in fact depend on getting the argument right. So when I get my argument wrong, I offer a new argument instead. But that shows that arguments are often just attempts to buttress or prove beliefs that we have not normally acquired via an argumentative route.

Kierkegaard puts it quite nicely again. 'God is affronted by getting...an intermediary staff of clever brains; and humanity is affronted because the relation to God is not identical for all men.'³ If argument is a means to truth, most people, being unable to argue, are debarred from judgement in the matter. So is truth really mediated through intelligence quotient? Now we must not misunderstand here. Having been professionally involved in philosophy over the years, I am not

anti-philosophy. It is not that there is no room whatsoever in Christian religion for rigorous rational argument. Socrates is welcome in the kingdom, in that respect, though perhaps the Sophists are not. Jesus, in John's Gospel, debates. But if anything fundamental hangs on our ability to offer a philosophically rigorous argument, on the terms of the analytic or any other tradition, then definitions of truth and assessment of truth-claims are for an elite only. An argumentative Pilate might have progressed much in the analysis of concepts, but little in the apprehension of existential truth. Persons are more than reasoning faculties, and Reason is not an autonomous agent. The truth of Christ, on the terms of Christ, has to do with persons.

3.

Possibly we are listening to a sceptical Pilate. 'What is truth? How can anyone know?' As Madeira is a place where an amazing range of botanical specimens can be transplanted and flourish, so scepticism is a specimen that can flourish within several regimes, scorning the difficulty of making transitions from antiquity to modernity and to postmodernity. Historically, it is significant that the republication of texts from classical Graeco-Roman pre-Christian sceptical philosophers was going on while sixteenth and seventeenth century Christian Europe was tearing itself apart as Catholics and Protestants and various kinds of Protestants all claimed to have the truth and all had different truths. The high-point of scepticism initially seems to be the claim that nothing can be known. But sceptics in the tradition of Pyrrho of Elis thought that this position was not nearly sceptical enough. For if you say that nothing can be known, you are dogmatically committing yourself to a claim to know something: you know that nothing can be known. Pyrrho and his epigones averred that we can not know whether anything can be known or not. It would take us too far afield, and induce Spring madness, if we pursued this question here on its own terms. But Pyrrho's position, wherever it positively leaves us, was a fair response to so-called 'Academic' Scepticism.

Rumination on scepticism is illuminating when we turn our thoughts to the question of religious truth-claims. On one analysis, even if there is a supreme reality underlying or transcending the world of appearances, one that can be called 'God' or 'Brahman' or known by some other title, we can not know its nature. The Real can appear to some of us as personal, to others as impersonal. Her or his or its proper nature is strictly unknowable. But consider the dogmatism involved here. On the surface, this makes belief in a Jewish, Christian or Muslim deity optional. On the surface; but not in fact. In fact, it makes it impossible. Why? Well, no one is entitled to say: 'I *know* that there is a

personal God'. That is to say, there has been no revelation. For had there been a revelation, someone, somewhere, might be entitled to say: 'I know that there is a personal God'. So what accounts for the fact that there has been no clear revelation of a personal deity? There are two possibilities. Either it has not happened because there is no deity there for it to happen. Or it has not happened because there is a deity who wills not to reveal himself or even lacks the power or the means to do so. But in neither case is theism allowed. If there is no God to reveal himself, then theism is wrong. If there is something akin to a personal deity that lacks will or power or something, theism is still wrong. In any case, theism is not really an option. Absence of revelation equals absence of God, on the theistic scheme of things, and our sceptic is logically committed to the absence, not the possibility, of revelation. If a sceptic in relation to religious knowledge is actually denying theism, we have a piece of dogmatism.

It might be added that scepticism, as it is popularly appropriated, conjures up a misleading idea of the question of knowledge and its justification. A sceptic must, like all of us, live, unless drastic and tragic measures are taken. To live is to be committed to action or choose inaction, so far as healthy adulthood goes. Two seconds before the express train from Aberystwyth to Carmarthen (I take this opportunity of announcing the train of the future) I may be evenly divided in mind as to whether or not to jump aboard the train. It does not matter that the reasons for or against travel are equally strong. I must choose or choose to let someone else take the decision for me. So on what basis does the sceptic make choices? Some account, however meagre, can be requested in principle. If, as a sceptic, you ask me how on earth I can claim to know things, I, as a religious believer, will ask how on earth you make your choices. At first glance, the exchange is unequal - the sceptic's task is far easier. However, start getting down to some of the more serious situations in which you find yourself in life, and it all looks rather different. Be all this as it may, a sceptical Pilate must explain to us his commitments just as a captive Jesus must explain to Pilate how he can stand for what he stands for.

4.

Possibly, Pilate was something of a post-modernist. Pressing beyond a coolly sceptical view of truth-claims, his question might have implied that these are not only intellectually dubious, but socially and culturally oppressive. Talk of truth can, and characteristically does, function as a legitimisation of power. And the power in question is oppressive, totalising and totalitarian in direction. Postmodernity is sufficiently diffuse for us to beware the use of labels here. By the time we have

worked out whether there is such a thing as postmodernity, and, if there is, what it is, it - whatever it was - might already be a thing of the past. Labels aside, there is no doubt that many strongly connect discourse about truth with aspiration to the exercise of exclusive socio-political or socio-cultural power. What are we to say to that? Two things, I think.

Firstly, while the association of truth and power has, indeed, often been detrimental and sly, the problem of power is exacerbated, rather than relieved, if we try to marginalise or eliminate talk of truth in anything like a traditional sense. Take the debate on abortion. On one moral scheme, it is to be prohibited except *in extremis* on the ground that the embryo has a moral right not to have its life taken. On another moral scheme, it is to be permitted under specified conditions on the ground that the woman has a moral right to choose how her body should be disposed of. Society does not just lack moral consensus; it lacks any grounds on which to have a consensus. The claims of neither revelation nor reason compel. As Tristram Engelhardt put it: '...God is silent and reason impotent.'⁴ So moral argument seems hopeless. Yet, law and public policy exist. Abortion is prohibited or permitted. If I prohibit it, I violate the perceived moral right of the woman to choose. If I permit it, I violate the perceived moral right of the embryo to live. In democracies we say that might does not constitute a legitimate basis nor custom a sufficient basis of good law. So what alternative is there to moral debate? It seems futile, since there is no common ground. Yet, it seems inevitable, since there is a practical necessity for law and policy and a political profession that we do not do things by sheer force or mere tradition. Now to import questions of truth into the public place here need not be, in principle, to assume a totalising power. On the contrary, it can be an attempt to make sure that things are *not* resolved by the sheer exercise of power which, in the absence of talk of truth, they will be.

Secondly, the one who testified to the truth was significantly powerless. Hauled up before Pilate, he did not cut an oppressive figure. Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously observed as follows:

God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matthew 8.17 [telling how a healing incident shows Jesus bearing our weaknesses] makes it quite clear that Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering...The Bible directs man to God's powerlessness and suffering; only the suffering God can help.⁵

Bonhoeffer exaggerates here, for the accounts of healing display a less monochrome form of power than he admits, and talk of power should be connected also with talk of resurrection. Yet, what he says is importantly right. Christian talk of truth must be riveted to the revelation of powerlessness in the ministry of Jesus. Those who regard discourse about truth as a form of oppression must regard Jesus as oppressive, and a church that stays close to Jesus is bound to conjoin truth and powerlessness. A postmodern Pilate needs to confront the relations of truth and power exhibited in the reported ministry of Jesus, just as the original Pilate found himself musing on the vocabulary of truth and authority which crossed Jesus' lips during their interview.

5.

But finally, it is possible that Pilate had gone beyond indifference, beyond argument, beyond cool scepticism, beyond postmodern expostulation on power. Perhaps he found truth to be a tasteless commodity. In 1882, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote the following in a work customarily translated under the title: *The Gay Science*. 'What is now decisive against Christianity is our taste, no longer our reasons.'⁶ The intellectual rejection of Christianity has been followed by a consciousness that finds it distasteful. And that consciousness is not reversed by arguing out the intellectual pretensions of Christianity. Nietzsche has surely spoken for much of modernity and postmodernity in these words.

What is distasteful? Most evidently, Christian morality.

After Buddha was dead, his shadow was still shown for centuries in a cave - a tremendous, gruesome shadow. God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. - And we - we still have to vanquish his shadow, too.⁷

The manifest shadow of Christian morality is cast by its whole view of human nature. Its morality is the morality of the weakling, its teaching about love and compassion expressing a profound and pathological sickness. For it is predicated upon the denial of actual, raw humanity. Instead of viewing humanity as an organism that expresses the will-to-power, it views humanity as sinful and unworthy. The values that emerge from this kind of regime must be transformed, re-valued. Meanwhile, Christianity is a revolting phenomenon, fit to vomit. Now there are many who baulk at Nietzsche's strictures against compassion and who positively laud the virtue of compassion, who find the main tenets of Christian morality distastefully repugnant. For these presume a moral order which is given by a Creator and Judge who is the foe of

human freedom and who frowns threateningly at the expression of human pleasure, especially sexual, unless under severely circumscribed conditions. God is the archetype of Puritanism, once defined by Nathaniel Micklem as the 'haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.' We have started moving beyond Nietzsche, but whether from Nietzschean or non-Nietzschean angle, Christianity is widely rejected as distasteful because it is constitutionally anti-human, anti-humanistic. Its 'Truth' should carry health warnings before you approach it.

Now *de gustibus non disputandum est*: questions of taste are off the limits of argument, according to the ancient adage. We are into an area where discussion may avail little and, in any case, we should need to distinguish between opponents of Christian morality that find compassion tasteless and those who do not. But at least it should be made clear that Christianity is concerned with the law of our being, not the law *under which* our being must be placed. A fish does not have imposed on it the law of being restricted to water; to be a fish is to be constituted by such a law. A cheetah does not have imposed on it the law of terrestrial pace; to be a cheetah is to be constituted by a capacity for land-speed. It is misleading to suppose that Christianity preaches the heteronomous imposition of moral law on raw humanity. Humanity, like any species, is constituted as such by law. Its law differs from that of other species in that there is not the same strict determination of its being. An element of freedom is constitutive of its normal functioning. Now, in its proper place, all this might be argued and not asserted. The point at the moment is that at the heart of Christianity is a proposal about human fulfilment, not human frustration. Indeed 'proposal' is weak; we have truth-talk.

The question of truth, considered under this aspect, is precisely the one raised in the opening chapters of the Bible, and well antedates the appearance of Jesus. There is only one being to whom humans must be subject; only one prohibition enjoined. According to the account in Genesis, the prohibition was not so much incredible as undesirable. The devil did not seek to prove directly that God's word was untrustworthy, but rather to cloud judgement on the issue by subtly drawing attention to what was desirable. Desire skewed judgement, energising the will to resolution and the body to action. At issue is whether or not God constitutes or God's word declares the human good. If so, divine law is the guidance of the creature into its own goodness by disclosing the law of its own being. Ultimately, the creature is meant to perceive, not just to believe, that the external word is the gateway to the realisation of our proper nature. The devil is a liar: having failed to invent things like colours, music, sexual enjoyment or

the Welsh hills, each of which is divine creation, he insists that the objective of the creator is to dictate intolerably restrictive terms for their enjoyment and fetter his creatures. Redemption, like creation, is the work of a perfect killjoy. As the one who made the starry constellations is the opponent of human pleasure, so the one who humbled himself as a servant is a tyrannical lawgiver. Thus we often believe, having fallen for the lie big-time. We take the immediate experience of our tastebuds as a guide to healthy living. So the biblical story goes.

We have wandered a little distance from Pilate. But not far. Two thousand years on, the question of truth does not seem all that different from what it was then. Of course, there are some differences. The one which probably commands most attention when the vocabulary of 'truth' comes up is postmodernity. Postmodernity invites reconsideration of what Bonhoeffer said in a different, though not completely alien, context. Mulling over the possibility of a 'religionless Christianity', he wrote that '[t]he time when people could be told things by means of words, pious or otherwise, is over.'⁸ I shall be continuing to use words - a responsibility hard to avoid if you are delivering a lecture. And there is no space here to muse on postmodern discussions of language. Nor, indeed, is it possible, except by implication, to counter the suggestion that I am trading in a 'master-narrative' which is totalising and destructive of difference. Without detracting from what force there is in many postmodern suggestions, we should say that it is in the encounter with evil (whether or not so named) or with suffering, that our personality can be shaken to the core so that, unless we are paralysed by pessimism or despair, a grim willingness sets in to heed the language of truth on the lips of the Nazarene. The biblical narrative is, after all, told entirely under the shadow of its perception of evil and the reality of a brutal world. Innocence and fall, bondage and deliverance form ground-motifs. The question of truth arises on its (biblical) terms in that context. Jesus ministers in that context. The demons have no trouble figuring out the propriety of God-talk, the elemental logic of religious discourse. Anyone who has glimpsed even a fraction of the intensity of the struggle between the Messiah and evil will know something of what the question of truth is all about. This is not to dismiss problems of religious language, just to contextualise them.

Unless we contextualise Christian talk of truth, we shall not get at its meaning. Emil Brunner said things on this point many decades ago that remain valid.⁹ He was opposing a conception of truth which had dominated Western thought until Kierkegaard attacked it in the nineteenth century, the conception of truth as something objective to

which we, as subjects, should be oriented. It is not that 'truth' denotes something lacking in all objectivity. Rather, it is not a subject-object relation. It is a personal matter, a person-to-person encounter with God. To know the truth is to be related to a person. Truth is not primarily about propositions or impersonal states of affairs. The universe is grounded in personal reality, the being of God revealed in the historical person of Jesus. Truth is known in encounter. Its location is inter-personal space.

As far as his constructive point goes, Brunner is correct. What, then, shall we say about the 'encounter'? There is a connection between the readiness for encounter with Jesus (or, in principle, the Buddha, or Zoroaster for that matter) and the way we dispose ourselves in personal relationships. On a powerful modern analysis of relationships (I am thinking particularly of the work of Emmanuel Levinas) our obligation not to harm others is immediately given in the face-to-face encounter with the 'other'. More positively, to encounter the 'other' is to come implicitly up against the love commandment. Any who are seriously disposed to encounter others and concern themselves rather deeply with them, discriminating as much according to need as according to preference, will be open to encounter with those exemplars of love and service who have influenced the human race, whatever form our 'encounter' takes with figures of the past. If there is such a thing as a word from God, it can, for all we know, break in on any one at any time under any conditions. But if we are going to *inquire* about truth, including those cases where talk of God is bound up with it, we must be *disposed* in certain ways, intellectually and spiritually positioning ourselves, just as you can only see certain sights from a particular vantage-point, even though you do not control what you see. Baron Hugel put it well:

We get to know such realities [of the highest kind] slowly, laboriously, intermittently, partially; we get to know them, not inevitably nor altogether apart from our dispositions, but only if we are sufficiently awake to care to know them, sufficiently humble to welcome them, and sufficiently generous to pay the price continuously which is strictly necessary if this knowledge and love are not to shrink, but grow. We indeed get to know realities in proportion as we become worthy to know them - in proportion as we become less self-occupied, less self-centred, more outward-moving, less obstinate and insistent, more gladly lost in the crowd, more rich in giving all we have, and especially all we are, our very selves.¹⁰

This is stipulated as some kind of universal rule, applicable to religious and non-religious, Christian and atheist. The question of truth is an idle one if it is presumed that we can dispense with conditions for addressing it. That is not a particularly religious proposition; an irreligious moralist, for example, might endorse it. If Christianity now tables the question of truth by positively discoursing about it, it must answer three questions: about its meaning, its grounds and the credibility of our talk. On meaning: Brunner has taken us some way towards understanding matters. The Greek word 'truth', as it is used in the New Testament, can bear a relatively straightforward meaning. For Jesus to speak the truth is to tell things as they are, to describe what is the case in relation to God, the self and the world. It is, in many cases, a rather straightforward matter of correspondence between what Jesus says and the way things are. But the pivotal claim: 'I am the truth' is of a somewhat different order. It is an invitation to encounter, as Brunner says. Whatever we find here; whatever Jesus turns out to be; whatever he says; whatever befalls him in terms of God's action towards the world - this constitutes truth.

On grounds: grounds for the assertion are supposed to lie in the ultimate identity of the speaker with that which is spoken of. It is the witness of truth to itself. Simply speaking, the ultimate reality is a personal existence capable of self-disclosure, and this is embodied in Jesus. In terms of epistemological structure, the New Testament appeals to the person and history of Jesus of Nazareth against the background of the religious experience of the people of Israel. But while experience of and belief in Yahweh is the background to the New Testament, its witness is not meant to be persuasive only to those who share that background. Exposure to the story of Jesus might generate confidence in the framework within which it is told, the messianic religion of the Hebrew people. And in the history of philosophical theology, attempts have been made - for better or for worse - to support the theological framework of the New Testament accounts by arguments in favour of the existence of God or the reliability of historical report. This takes us on to the third question: is any or all of this credible? All I can do here is to lay out what we might call the logic of the claim at the heart of our matter: that Jesus embodies truth.

When all is said and done, a question which some regard as *passé*, an Enlightenment question, still haunts the traditional Christian view of things which has long seemed incredible to the Western majority. It concerns the activities of a deity whose concerns are supposedly universal but whose self-disclosure is particular and unrepeatable. Why does a universal Creator resort to the essentially tribal, or at least provincial, practice of smuggling his light into one

small patch on the earth's surface in a Palestinian package? The question can be met by juxtaposing to it another, which generates a conflicting puzzle. This is about God and suffering. Many questions surround this theme, of course, but the relevant one for us concerns the identification of God with suffering, assuming God cares. Twentieth century Christian theology has often, and rightly, been peculiarly insistent on ascribing to God the capacity to suffer. It has found this actualised in Jesus in whom God is present and can be encountered. The object is to secure a God who identifies. But what is the cost of identification? The highest conceivable, and its extreme case, is incarnation. Yet what is incarnation but confinement to one space, time and culture. In that case, the requirement that God show his love by extreme identification in incarnation, which means the occupancy of one particular space and time, conflicts with the requirement that God show his love by not privileging any one particular, time and space with a special presence.

To be human, on a Christian view of things, is to be an embodied individual in a particular space and time. The concept of reincarnation has usually not found a place in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, because it entails that individuals are not bound to one body and one life. Inasmuch as there is talk of life after death, it is in a different form of embodiment, radically inconceivable; it is not a return to this earth in physical flesh and blood. If God, then, is to experience the human condition from the inside, as it were, it can only be by assuming human identity under human conditions, if it is at all possible for that to happen. Even if one could conceive of multiple incarnations in different epochs, reincarnation in different times, it would remain the case that at any one time, the incarnate one would be confined to one space, one human body, so that most spaces, cultures and territories would, at any one time, be deprived of the incarnate presence.¹¹ From one perspective, then, divine impartiality requires that God does not privilege any one space, time and culture. From another, divine love requires that he does privilege a particular space, time and culture, by the extreme of identification, by incarnation.

It was judged important by John, in particular, and by Church Fathers like Justin Martyr (whether or not they got John quite right) to emphasise that there was a connection between incarnation and creation. Incarnation is meant to accomplish something as universal in its intention, scope and reach, as creation itself. Hence the concept of the Word that is from all eternity, the Logos, the Word who is made flesh. Incarnation thus serves a literally universal function. When Abraham is called to serve God and the people of Israel consequently elected, it is for the sake of the world outside Israel, for the nations that do not share in the privilege of election. As Adam and Eve are told to be

fruitful and multiply, but head up a tangled humanity, so Abraham is told that he will be fruitful and his descendants will multiply. The Messiah who is to come from the Jewish nation is destined for a kingship over those who are not Jews. There is no exclusivism here. Particular calling serves an inclusive purpose.

In relation to the church, both the phenomenon of Scripture and that of mission aims at the same inclusivism. Scripture is not written in a private language, not even in a sacred language. It is written in known languages, including the language of a (Greek) people whose story is not the story of Hebrew election. Translation is not only permitted; it is mandated by the logic of the Scriptural message. So the alleged intention of God is that no particular time should be privileged, but that all times and cultures should be equally so. Mission is not a declaration of ethnic, racial, national or group superiority. It is a declaration that Jew and Gentile, those inside and those outside the Church, are summoned to a common faith in the Word made flesh. Mission reports the discovery of a bridge of life flung down over a river of death to a land cut off from requisite supplies. Such a bridge is earthed in a particular place, but the particular turf is a point of access to the universal, not a privileged possession of those who happen to be at or near the spot. So, in mission, the intention is that no particular space should be privileged, but that all spaces and cultures should be equally privileged.

Here I am only rehearsing the familiar, but I hope it is clear that the assumption or assertion that Christianity pretends to an unhealthy exclusivism arises from a misunderstanding of the logic of particular revelation. Particular revelation is the function of incarnation, and incarnation logically means particularity. Incarnation itself has a saving purpose and when, in the early Christian centuries, the doctrines of Trinity and Incarnation were thrashed out, this soteriological context was always in mind. We can not here go into the question of the logic of atonement, which goes to the very heart of truth, and so I have done nothing more in this lecture than to chart the precincts of and outline a route towards the domicile of truth, as Christians regard it. But it is worth remembering and noting how Athanasius and his kin, in those early centuries, hammered home an insistence that, at the very least, it was *fitting* that he through whom all things were made should be the exemplar of human obedience, the sacrificial giver of his own life, the resurrected one destined, as we may put it, to occupy the messianic throne. Any truth, goodness or beauty that attend this scheme of things derive from the truth, goodness and beauty of the person at its centre.

In his recent volume on John's Gospel, *Truth on Trial*, Andrew Lincoln writes: 'This narrative, then, invites its readers to see the world as a cosmic courtroom, to see history as the locus of God's judicial process, and to see the created cosmos of heaven and earth as the setting in which God conducts this lawsuit.¹² This does not sound very enticing and he refers to that superb novel by Kafka, *The Trial*, which suggests how this take on life can get pathological. Nevertheless, Jesus of Nazareth appeared in history and was put on trial. He could hardly do other than convey that truth is on trial in this world. Self-searching and self-scrutiny can be painful in the extreme. Is it worth the candle? According to Jesus, everything is at stake here. Other religious and non-religious figures will agree and the bond between them all is real. But in claiming to embody truth in the cosmic context, Jesus marked out for himself a peculiar space. It is a piece of deluded egotism, if not true, and the early witnesses must have rudely subverted what he really stood for, if they misread him here.

We turn to two figures to conclude this lecture, both of whom we have met before, both of whose thought repays close study. The first is Pascal. In his famous 'wager argument', Pascal, threw down the gauntlet to the gambling fraternity of his day. In terms of the odds, the gambling man ought to wager on Christianity. If he turns out to be right, he gains everything and loses nothing. If he is wrong, he loses nothing and gains something: such is the intrinsic worth of a Christian life. The difficulties with Pascal's suggestion are obvious enough but its force really lies in the demonstration of what is at stake. Life is action: we are committed. Life, for the free and thoughtful, must also be, on their own terms, a wager. How did we work out the odds when the stakes are so high?

The second is Bonhoeffer. Confronted with the reign of Adolf Hitler, under which he lived, Bonhoeffer could see the West disintegrating around him. This was not just an extrapolation from the fate of Germany.

Everything established is threatened with annihilation. This is not a crisis among other crises...The void towards which the west is drifting is not the natural end, the dying away and decline of a once flourishing history of nations...It is the void made god. No one knows its goal or measure. Its dominion is absolute...The void engulfs life, history, family, nation, language, faith. The list is prolonged indefinitely, for the void spares nothing.¹³

So Bonhoeffer recalls Soloviev's story of the Antichrist where,

...in the last days before Christ's return the heads of the persecuted churches discuss the question of what is for each of them the most precious thing in Christianity; the decisive answer is that the most precious thing in Christianity is Jesus Christ Himself...He is the centre and strength of the Bible, of the Church, and of theology, but also of humanity, of reason, of justice and of culture. Everything must return to Him; it is only under His protection that it can live. There seems to be a general unconscious knowledge which, in the hour of ultimate peril, leads everything which desires not to fall victim to the Antichrist to take refuge with Christ.¹⁴

Three observations on this to conclude. Firstly, there is no question of apocalyptically scaring people so that they run in the direction of Christian religion. Bonhoeffer completely rejected, even disdained, this. He just called things as he saw them. Secondly, in Bonhoeffer's experience, the dividing line when it comes to grim matters of truth under grim regimes of untruth, does not lie between church and world. His realisation of this steered much of his later theology. The criterion of truth is Jesus. Finally, he is dated when he says that 'there seems to be a general unconscious knowledge which, in the hour of ultimate peril, leads everything which desires not to fall victim to the Antichrist to take refuge with Christ'. The question is whether it is also, and hopelessly, dated to confess the lordship of Jesus Christ, whether or not we acutely sense peril. Two thousand years on, Pilate's question to Jesus leaves its sober impression on the serious mind. What is truth?

'Two Thousand Years On: What is Truth?'

- 1 Pascal, *Pensees* (London: Penguin, 1966) section 149, p. 50.
- 2 Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Princeton: Princeton University Press) p.55.
- 3 *Op.cit.*, p.204.
- 4 T. Engelhardt, *Bioethics and Secular Humanism: the Search for a Common Morality* (London: SCM, 1991) p.119.
- 5 Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM, 1971) p.360f.
- 6 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (New York: Vintage, 1974) III.132. In another work, Nietzsche quotes 'What is truth' in the context of saying 'that in the entire New Testament there is only *one* solitary figure one is obliged to respect...Pilate, the Roman governor', *The Antichrist in Twilight of the Idols/Antichrist* (London: Penguin, 1990) section 46.
- 7 *Op.cit.*, III.108.
- 8 *Op.cit.*, p.279.
- 9 See especially *The Divine-Human Encounter* (London; SCM, 1944).
- 10 F. von Hugel, *Essays and Addresses on the Philosophy of Religion* (London: Dent, 1924) p.104.
- 11 Discussion of the possibility of multiple incarnations in any case frequently contains a misunderstanding: Jesus is part of a single world history with a specific *telos*, not the embodiment of a figure who can pop in and out of it.
- 12 A. Lincoln, *Truth on Trial: the Lawsuit Motif in John's Gospel* (Peabody, Ma: Hendrickson, 2000).
- 13 Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1965) p.105f.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p.56.

DJ JAMES LECTURES

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**Darlith Pantyfedwen
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