

## A DEEPER TRUTH

(Dedicated to the Very Revd Jeffrey John, Magdalen College Chaplain 1984 – 91)

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How do you respond to being wrong?

It's perhaps a slightly sensitive topic during this, Trinity term, but given our readings today I'd argue it's one of the most important questions we'll ever be asked.

How do we respond to being wrong? Or perhaps more pertinently – how do we respond to being *told* that we're wrong - brackets, when we know we're right?

Being wrong is not something that many of us aspire to – and quite frankly for many of us who've had the privilege of studying here, it is not something we find easy to deal with. As one of the first Student Welfare Officers at my original college in “another place”, I soon recognised that one of the greatest (but unspoken) causes of stress amongst first year students was the fact that their past record of success was being challenged severely now that they were somewhere that truly stretched them.

I'm not sure if you were able to hear the fascinating interview with Professor Fay Dowker earlier this week on BBC Radio 4's Life Scientific? As a once aspiring theoretical physicist I was keen to listen in, intrigued by the idea that there might indeed be a unifying “Theory of Everything” which the professor's Causal Set Theory might help answer. For her, the moment of breakthrough had come when she considered a revolutionary new paradigm - that rather than regarding the universe in the conventional way as a space/time continuum, we should instead think of it as granular, a universe made up of “atoms” of space time – discrete points in space and moments in time. Fascinating – but enough of the maths lesson!

For me, the most interesting part of the interview came when the presenter, Jim Al-Khalili, asked this eminent professor “What if you are proven wrong?” Without hesitation she replied “then Causal Sets would be ‘disfavoured’...(brief laughter from the presenter)...and we would have to think carefully...but there is always some wriggle room. All my instincts are that..” and she went on to explain why she *knew* she was right.

All my instincts are that...

You see, deep down we *always* believe we are right – based on the evidence that we see and the truths that we hold as foundational, often sacredly so.

It's what led the Reformed and Evangelical churches in South Africa, whose lives and values were based on scripture, to believe that apartheid was not only justified but biblically based. As pastoral theologian, the Revd David Runcorn says:

*"The disturbing fact about apartheid is that it was a doctrine that claimed biblical warrant. Within a predominantly Christian country it was rigorously applied to a whole society and backed up by highly qualified university faculties of theology, hermeneutical studies and ethics."*<sup>1</sup>

But as now all accept – including those Reformed and Evangelical churches – they were wrong. In fact, the theological and social system that they perpetrated – based on their reading and interpretation of scripture – was evil. Professor Richard Burridge of Kings College London has researched in some depth what led to this terrible misuse of scripture. In his acclaimed book, *"Imitating Jesus – An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics"*, he shares how South African scholars explained to him "that the biblical and theological justification for apartheid happened because the church leaders and authorities did not listen to the voices of 'outsiders' in the rest of the world and stifled the protests of people 'inside' the church."<sup>2</sup> Sound familiar?!

Stephen – the first Christian martyr – was stoned by an angry mob because of the way he chose to interpret scripture. Like Jesus, he had false testimony brought against him by the religious officials of the day who were deeply concerned that he was leading people astray. This wonderful man of God, who we are told was full of faith and power, was accused of blaspheming against Moses and against God. In a lengthy defence speech which is set out earlier in the chapter we had read, Stephen carefully explains how the law was indeed given to Moses. Importantly, though, he talks about a deeper truth – that the whole purpose of having the law was to help shape our relationship with God, which existed before the law was even given.

In perhaps not the most diplomatic language he tells them they are wrong:

*"You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?"* and then goes on to say that they have broken the law.<sup>3</sup>

They react badly – extremely badly in fact. We're told they are cut to the heart, gnash their teeth at him and then take it upon themselves to immediately enact the death penalty – which they had no right to do as it was strictly against Roman law.

You see Stephen, just like Jesus had done throughout his whole ministry, was trying to tell them that they were missing the point. For him, the most important factor was that the law pointed to Christ and to our relationship with God. So they needed a new paradigm, a new way of seeing things. They needed a Howker "atoms of space time" moment – a revelation of a deeper truth. Yet for that they needed to be prepared to admit that they were wrong.

And that was a step too far – and it elicited a visceral reaction.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://davidruncorn.com/Davd\\_Runcorn/And\\_how\\_do\\_I\\_know\\_when\\_I\\_am\\_wrong.html](http://davidruncorn.com/Davd_Runcorn/And_how_do_I_know_when_I_am_wrong.html)

<sup>2</sup> Richard Burridge *"Imitating Jesus – An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics"*, Eerdmans, 2007 (Page 400)

<sup>3</sup> Acts 7: 51-53

Kathryn Schulz, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, talks about this phenomenon in her highly stimulating TED talk, “On Being Wrong”<sup>4</sup>. Styling herself as a “Wrongologist” she addresses the dangerous social problem of how we tend to deal with – or explain away - people who disagree with us, who don’t see the truth as we see it.

Her theory is that we all tend to make a “series of unfortunate assumptions” about such people. The first assumption is that they are ignorant – that they just don’t have access to the same information that we do (for which read – don’t take scripture as seriously as we do), and so we think that once we’ve shared the key facts as we see it with them they will “see the light” and change their minds. When this doesn’t work - when it turns out that they have the same facts as we do but still disagree with us, then we move to our second assumption – that they must be stupid. That they have all the facts but they just can’t “put them together” properly. But when we realise they are actually pretty intelligent with access to the same facts, so then we move to our third (most dangerous) assumption – that they must be evil. Quoting her directly “they know the truth, but they are deliberately distorting it for their own malevolent purposes...which causes us to treat each other terribly.” For me this is perfectly exemplified by the stoning of Stephen, and of course the crucifixion of Jesus, or indeed the killing of each of the prophets.

And so, we move to our Gospel reading<sup>5</sup> – and this extraordinarily important passage from Jesus to his disciples during his final hours with them. I must admit I do so often find myself feeling for him. Arguably the cleverest man that has ever lived picks twelve students who, let’s face it, aren’t always the brightest stars in the sky!

At least they felt able to be vulnerable enough with him to ask questions!

*“Lord, we do not know where you are going and how can we know the way?”<sup>6</sup>*

You can almost see Jesus hitting his forehead in frustration and wanting to say: “I’m not talking about a physical destination or an actual way – change your paradigm, read into this more deeply, realise the greater truth behind what I’m saying!”

But instead we get a response to this simple, honest, searching question that provides us with one of the most profound verses in the whole Bible: *“I am the Way, the Truth and the Life, no one comes to the Father except through me.”<sup>7</sup>*

Thank you, Thomas, for having the courage to ask your question.

You see Jesus is constantly trying to get them to look more deeply at what he is saying – to change their paradigm. To recognise that it is ALL about relationship, relationship with the Father, and that he Jesus is the key to this as he is Truth, and he is Life, and he is IN the Father.

Earlier in his ministry Jesus was asked how to discern whether something was true – and he simply stated: “judge by its fruits”<sup>8</sup>. Does it bring forth good fruit or bad?

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/kathryn\\_schulz\\_on\\_being\\_wrong](https://www.ted.com/talks/kathryn_schulz_on_being_wrong)

<sup>5</sup> John 14: 1 - 14

<sup>6</sup> John 14:5

<sup>7</sup> John 14:6

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 7:16

Many of you will know that I am highly engaged in the church's debate over homosexuality, and that there is not some little disagreement over how we interpret scripture on this matter. Both sides believe – instinctively it often seems – that they are right. Both sides use scripture – the facts – to back up their arguments and so try to persuade the other that they are wrong. Both sides have a tendency to treat the other as if they are stupid, and sadly some are now demonising the other.

So how do we decide what to do?

Personally, I am convinced that we need to look at the fruit – what brings life, and life in all its fulness? Where are the fruits of love, joy, peace, hope and goodness found? In loving stable same-sex relationships? Or in the misery of enforced celibacy on those who have never been called to it and have not chosen it? We need to look to the deeper truth that Jesus, that Stephen and indeed all the prophets have constantly proclaimed – that it is all about our relationship with God, and the quality of that relationship. We need to change our paradigm – see what Christ is telling us at a deeper level – as he kept trying to tell the Pharisees and Sadducees who doggedly believed they had to keep to the letter of the law, without realising what the law was actually for. We, like them, need to recognise that the old way of seeing things might in fact be wrong.

Sadly, if we are not prepared to do this we are most likely going to want to “kill off those who disagree with us” and separate from them – such as consecrating “missionary bishops” and creating break away churches!

The bible is clear - there are long precedents of the prophets being killed off, of false testimony being brought, of the religious structures being threatened by Godly men and women who tried to tell them they were wrong. But the good news is that the deeper truth that they were prepared to die for now lives on – the fruit is there!

So how should we respond to being told we're wrong, when we “know we're right”? I would simply offer with love, grace and patience – particularly the latter, so as to enable time for the fruit to grow and be seen and prove what we know to be true.