

Notes on Acts 17 : 16 –34 ‘Enabling all to meet Jesus by the truth we tell’

Do you think these slogans are true? ‘Work sets you free?’ I think we would all disagree with this and especially when it was the slogan that welcomed all who entered Auschwitz concentration camp. What about Red Bull gives you wings? Well, perhaps not unless the wings are a caffeine kick. What about our church strapline of ‘Sharing God’s love’? Is this true for us as a church? Advertising grew from the propaganda industry in America after World War 1 to create aspirations, desires and a yearning for a fresh self-image within people built on their buying power. I think we would all be very sceptical to how true such claims really are. Truth continues to be a contested battleground, and we are all aware that conversations about ‘truth’ aren’t what they used to be, and how does this affect our sharing the Good News of Jesus, which we say is built on truth?

There are two ancient and contrasting accounts of what truth is whose echo we hear clearly around us. The first is the cynical and sceptical view of Pilate as described by his conversation with Jesus in John 18 where he asks ‘What is truth?’ The second is the old Buddhist story from approx. 500BC of 3 blind men who try to describe what an elephant is, but whose grasp of the truth is only partial and incomplete and they need all of the other perspectives to be truly true. It would be tempting to enter into the maze of current philosophical and cultural movements as I find this all very fascinating and stimulating, but I’m fairly sure many of you don’t share this same interest!! What we are all aware of, to quote Dorothy, is that we are no longer in Kansas and that how truth is understood and expressed is now very different.

When I say that we are no longer in Kansas, I mean that the current landscape looks very different and we need to be aware of its main features. The first is the idea that all truth claims are power grabs. What this means is that truth is no longer a neutral topic, but instead is something used by the powerful to hold onto power and to disempower everyone else. Therefore, all truth is viewed with suspicion as there is always something below the surface you can’t see. The second is that all universal explanations are therefore suspect. There is no one version of the truth which can explain everything and so different perspectives are needed to see the whole picture and thus truth become relative. The third is that reason, logic and science are tools of oppression to either, as the saying goes, ‘blind us with science’ or else they demean the perspectives of others, such as the refusal to give Māori mythology the same value as science in New Zealand or the use of medical knowledge to help the deaf as this disrespects their lived experience. The fourth is don’t question my experience. If the only truth I can rely on is my own experience, then all perspectives are equally valid and need to be equally respected. The fifth is that all authority structures are repressive. As all authority structures are built on claims of morality and justice, which limit

my actions and so my experience, thus they cannot be trusted and are therefore oppressive.

This is the very different cultural air we breathe when we speak about Jesus. It is tempting to use tried and tested ways when we speak about Jesus, such as the claim of having the 'absolute truth' about Jesus. To be faithful to Jesus is to not engage with our current cultural setting. The danger with this is that we then do not communicate who Jesus is to our culture around us. Paul chose a different path. In Acts 17 he chose to immerse himself in their cultural world, speaking their language, using their 'truth' to speak the truth about Jesus. In the latest edition of the BMS Mission Catalyst magazine she discusses what it would look like for us to respond to someone asking about the resurrection. Would we seek to 'prove' it using only the 'absolute truth' we find in the evidence for the resurrection. Or would you dare to immerse yourself in the question instead and what the questioner is thinking and then allow this to mould a conversation with them setting the boundaries for this?

As I read Paul, I want us to reimagine what the truth rooted in Christ alone looks like. I want us to focus on texts like John 3 verse 16, Ephesians 3 verses 16 – 19 and 1 John 4 verse 8 where our definition of truth, or knowing, is rooted in love itself and not in some form of 'absolute truth'. Or how about 2 Corinthians 10 verse 5 where we seek to take every thought captive in Christ because it is Christ who determines what truth is and this then shapes our telling others of who we know Jesus to be. Perhaps we need to learn a fresh form of apologetics where we come as those who listen and discuss because the church is now on the margins of our culture and society, where we are just one voice among many with no privileges either. Where we recognise that we are a minority which means that we are known as those who are humble, gracious and generous with all who hunger and thirst after truth. Does this sound dangerous? Do you think that I've compromised and conceded too much?

Well, I recognise that Paul sets before us a difficult and dangerous knife edge path to walk on as described here in Acts 17. When I read this, I see a man who is both grounded and rooted in the Old Testament experience of Exile but also one who knows and lives out the story of Jesus. May we all dare to walk this Servant hearted path, unashamed of both Jesus and the Gospel and may we live as those who know they have two ears and one mouth, but also as those whose one heart, mind and soul is filled with the love, presence and compassion of Jesus for all.