

Psalm 25
John 8:31-38

Truth

ForeWord

You can't handle the truth

Some of you will have seen the 1992 film, *A Few Good Men* – a courtroom drama turning around the accidental death of an American Marine. Two other soldiers have been charged with the death of their colleague, and their defence hinges on whether they had acted on orders to administer an irregular disciplinary action, which then went wrong, or whether they had acted of their own volition.

The film is best known for an iconic scene at the culmination of the drama – an exchange between the lead defence attorney and Colonel Jessup, the gnarly and powerful commander in charge of the military base on which the Marine died.

The courtroom exchange between the defence attorney and the colonel increases in heat until the attorney demands, “I want the truth!”. And then comes the withering response which launched a thousand memes – something of a controlled explosion delivered in a way that perhaps only Jack Nicholson could: “You can't handle the truth!”

Jessup then begins to lay the truth out for consideration: “...we live in a world that has walls, and those walls have to be guarded by men with guns.” And he continues, pointing out a few inconvenient truths about what it takes to mount the defence of such walls.

As a courtroom drama, of course, the whole story is about finding the truth – the truth surrounding the Marine’s death. It’s in the context of that enquiry that the colonel lays out his confronting account of the truth of his own existence, a truth he sees even the defence attorney relies upon for *his* own existence and well-being.

The movie poses a dilemma about conflicting truths. And yet, at the same time, the opposing parties both hold to the same *kind* of truth; both have the same sense of what kind of thing a truth is. It’s this I want us to consider briefly today. My concern is less what the truth *is* – as a given we can state and analyse – than what *kind of thing* it is – how it operates and affects us.

Handling the truth

Truth is a central theme in John’s Gospel, and many of us will recognise some of the key occurrences of the notion:

^{1.17} “The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”;

^{4.24} “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth”;

^{14.6} “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life’”;

^{16.13} “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth”;

^{18.38} “Pilate asked [Jesus], ‘What is truth?’”

What is true, and what truth is and does, is a key concern in John. And so, let's pause for a moment to hear another well-known truth-saying from John's tenth chapter. In particular, listen for what Jesus says the truth will do for those who grasp it...

Word: The Testimony of Scripture

(→ Hearing: John 8. 31-38)

Word: Proclamation

The truth that constrains

There is a stark difference between truth in the account of the colonel from the film and as it appears in the gospel. For the colonel, and indeed most of the time more generally in the wider world, the truth is something which constrains and restricts: "...we live in a world that has walls..."; a dropped apple falls with an acceleration of 9.8 meters per second per second; you owe the bank \$452,567. The truth is non-negotiable fact, expecting a prescribed response.

In the case of Colonel Jessup's truth, walls constrain. Of course, they protect and so to some extent liberate anyone *within* the walls, but the walls limit the freedom of anyone outside of them. And the need to defend the walls leads to the kind of moral compromises no one really wants to have to acknowledge. A price has to be paid, sacrifices have to be made. In the case of the narrative of the film, it seems that one such sacrifice – even if unintended – was a young man's death, the death of one of our own. The cost of truth-as-constraint can be very high.

My interest here is not quite *what is* the truth – the fact – but what *kind of thing* the truth is, how the fact is received. For the colonel, whatever the particular truth is, it is a *constraint* which requires certain things be done, however distasteful. He invokes "honour", "code" and "loyalty" as indicators of how the moral actor – each one of us – is constrained. These are all very much *binding* words, words to do with limitation. This is how one is *required* to act. Under truth-as-constraint, actions are pre-determined.

And there is, of course, much such truth around us, and necessarily so. If life is to be secure and predictable enough that we can sleep soundly at night, there are many things which *must* be done. Our manipulation of the world depends upon a basic if-then predictability to which we must conform for peace of mind.

The truth that liberates

At the same time, this is not the only, or even the definitive sense of "truth". As we've heard from Jesus, truth is not only – if at all – constraint: "...the truth shall set you free...". The truth will not bind or limit you, but will liberate. At the very beginning of John's Gospel, we heard that "[t]he law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1.17). The "grace and truth" here are not two things but one. By itself, law binds: there are walls, barriers, rules which must be observed. But grace breaks such bindings and barriers. Mercy is a setting aside of what "must" happen – of hard, pre-set truth – so that something else, indeed something fundamentally new and unexpected, can happen. Grace doesn't deny the barriers are there, but acts as if they are not.

Grace is not the "truth", in the sense of a new kind of limitation or requirement. Rather, we get closer to what's offered here if we say that grace *truth-s* – makes true. Truth as limitation, as binding and constraint, cannot release and remain itself. Such truth is always negotiated, always subject to an arrangement of give and take, of exchange, of if-then relationships. Again, such controlled exchanges in nature and in society are a crucial part of a liveable world. But if that is all the world is – walls to be acknowledged and defended, rank and status to be observed, rights to be demanded, obligations to be

met – then we are but cogs in a machine built for nobody-knows-what purpose, doing things simply because they “have to” be done.

Colonel Jessup imagines himself and those under his command to be just such cogs in the confining machinery of human politics. There is nothing to be done but maintain the dividing walls. There is nothing to be done but to destroy the enemy. There is nothing to be done but what we have always done, according to the truths by which we came into being and which, perhaps, we perpetuate in our every action.

Alongside this is laid an alternative. No *argument* can finally be made for the alternative because arguments leverage constraint and necessity – this *because of* that. And so the “alternative truth” Jesus declares is genuinely different. A truth which sets free – truly, newly free – sets argument aside and, as it were, begins again.

This is the proposal, the invitation, the gift of Jesus: that it doesn’t have to be like this. Our next action is not – or doesn’t have to be – predetermined. Or, what is the same thing, there is no final judgement to fear if we act, and act wrongly.

Once again, as seems always to be the case in John, love lurks in the background here. While Jesus hangs this truth-as-liberation on observing his word, the word he gives he characterises as the “new commandment” – to love as he has.

And we must then ask again, how did Jesus love? He loved without *necessity*. This is what we see in the optional, unnecessary cross. The cross is not forced. It is a consequence of his actions, but it need not have been; the response to Jesus’ teaching and actions is out of his hands. But those who crucify him are not free in the way Jesus promises. “We live in a world that has walls”, High Priest Caiaphas effectively says – anticipating Colonel Jessup – and so this has to be done (cf. John 11.50).

But Jesus’ love is not forced. He is not constrained by a *requirement* to love. It is gift, invitation rather than command, seeking reception but not conditional upon it.

To recall another saying of Jesus we heard a few weeks back, what will set us free is not of the world but can be in and for it. Such liberating truth will sometimes reveal a constraint or obligation as unnecessary and life-denying. Sometimes, mere obligation will be transformed into loving service. In either case, a new experience of God, the world and ourselves is at hand.

Let us, then, not be weighed down by the weight of the world. We are not built for such a load.

Let us, rather, lift up our hearts, seeking Christ – and becoming with him – the truth which sets free.

And all God’s people say...Amen.
