Seeking truth or willful blindness

The predicament of the Church

Stephen Pickard

On loving truth above all else

He who begins by loving Christianity, better than truth, will proceed by loving his own sect or church better than Christianity, and end in loving himself better than all.1

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

These well-known words of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, penned almost two hundred years ago, continue to haunt and challenge us.2

At first sight the notion of loving the truth above Christianity might seem a recipe for disaster. After all, when the notion of truth has been evacuated of any content beyond the self, then loving the truth might simply be a means for self-assertion of one’s most treasured prejudices—an exercise

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in self-justification. Of course this is the logic of the Enlightenment ‘turn to the subject’. This ‘turn to the subject’ involved the displacement of God from the centre. Indeed God had to die in order for the human being to achieve his or her true place in the world. The consequence was that the free, autonomous individual became ‘the plenitude of being and truth’.

Loving the truth could easily become another way of loving oneself better than anything or anyone else. Truth collapses into mere self-assertion. Everything is autobiography; there is no possibility of shared communication and any residual notion of truth beyond the self is denied. The ‘turn to the subject’ is more accurately the ‘turned-in subject’, hermetically sealed and twisted in on oneself (as Martin Luther might have described it in an earlier age).

Coleridge could see the writing on the wall, so to speak. He rightly discerned that to begin by loving Christianity better than truth was already to be on the slippery slope to a self-indulgent individualism: from Christianity in general one moved to a particular form, which came to its pure expression in the love of self beyond all else.

Coleridge struck out on a different course. The faculty of reason was, as he termed it, ‘the organ of the supersensuous’: that faculty which opened the human being to the fullness of truth beyond the self. Against the tide of the ‘turn to the subject’, Coleridge focused on the subject’s turn towards the divine, located from the human side via the faculty of reason and will. But such a turn had its origin in a divine attraction of all things to God that correlated to God’s drawing of all things towards God-self. The fullness of being and truth belonged to the divine being, to whom all things in heaven and earth were drawn.

From this fundamental perspective, loving the truth was the way through which human beings participated in the logos of God through the Spirit—it was nothing less than a participation in the triune life of God. Self-love was displaced by reference to the truth of God. In this context, loving the truth was a way of properly referring everything to the triune God.

**From truth to power**

Of course when we abandon the possibility of loving truth—as derived from the logos of God in creation and redemption—and settle for some notion of the human being as self-enclosed constructor of truth, the result is, as Coleridge noted, love of self before all else. The individual becomes the
ultimate criterion for truth. At this point love of truth has been displaced by the exercise of power.

The well-known, fascinating and frightening exchange between Jesus and Pilate in John’s Gospel sharpens our reflections. The purpose of Jesus’ life in the world is ‘to testify to the truth’ (John 18:37). The follower is the one who ‘listens’ to Jesus. Pilate is affronted that Jesus refuses to attend to him, for Pilate’s words do not accord with the truth. Pilate shifts the ground of the exchange to a matter of power. ‘Don’t you realise I have power either to free or crucify you?’ (John 19:10). Pilate does not need to be attentive to anyone: power is its own justification; listening contributes nothing. Love of truth has been abandoned; the will to power is all that is left.

**Distortions of truth**

The reflections above translate into some very practical issues in personal and communal life. Take, for example, the Anglican Church. Distortions in Anglican life arise when conflict is resolved through appeals to power or attempts to grab power. Truth is the first casualty. Redistribution and sharing of power is a truthful way to live together. A distortion arises when we move from a concern for truth-seeking to a desire to exercise power. Such a move sets in train a dangerous dynamic which replaces high quality face-to-face relations with relationships governed by power differentials based on political and economic superiority. Current Anglican conflicts often mask unresolved tensions between truth-seeking and political manipulation through appeals to power.

From this perspective we might say that renewal in the Church will necessarily require a radical turning from the self-interested subject (be it an individual or group) to the truth as it is in God.

The late Anglican theologian, Daniel Hardy, once observed that the: greatest threat to Anglicanism today is that ... the personal will (what each person wants), and the will of sectional interests in the Church are displacing love for the truth ... What is needed is to move radically in the opposite direction: attentiveness to the truth, to the infinite identity of God in acting (in Christ through the Holy Spirit) in the world to bring it to its final end: attentiveness to God for God-self. All will depend on whether we can ‘place’ everything
in relation to the truth of God’s own life, as that is found through the right kind of attentiveness to the richness of God’s presence and blessing as they are found in worship and corporate life when they respond to God’s purposes for the world.⁵

Placing everything in relation to the truth of God’s life involves a purposive effort, commitment and a manner of disposing ourselves to one another in accordance with the character and work of the Spirit of Christ (Galatians 5:22–23). It requires constancy of conversation, at all points taking counsel that seeks the wisdom of God. As the Church follows this pattern it will be led by the Spirit of Truth into the paschal mystery of Christ. Loving the truth is a costly human project.

Wilful blindness as resistance to truth

There is of course significant resistance to loving truth better than everything else. We too readily ignore the truth precisely because it is too uncomfortable or may jeopardise some project or diminish our reputation or status. We resist, hide and ignore the truth for many reasons. Usually it has something to do with the destabilising of the self—our place, position and power in the world. As a result we often choose to ignore the truth—what one philosopher calls ‘active ignorance’.⁶ It is a vice to which the privileged and powerful are particularly susceptible. Jose Medina names it ‘epistemic arrogance’ and notes that this vice arises from the fact that those in power can be easily ‘spoiled’ because they enjoy ‘the privilege of knowing (or always being presumed to know), of always being heard as a credible speaker, of always commanding cognitive authority.’⁷ The epistemic arrogance Medina refers to can breed conceit and an overestimation of one’s powers. Such people ‘have but rare opportunities to find out their own limitations, they have a hard time learning from their mistakes, their biases, and the constraints and presuppositions of their position in the world and their perspective; they are in danger of becoming ‘know-it-alls’, ‘cognitively superior’ and manifesting a kind of ‘epistemic arrogance’. It generates ‘undetectable and incorrigible blind spots’ which are embedded in the structure of their world.

Of course this condition has a long pedigree. Witness the scathing response of Jesus to those elite teachers and religious who claimed to see but in fact were blind (John 9:40–41). As a result they proved themselves
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blind guides for the people (Matthew 23:16–24). They ought to have known better; they could have known better. They were culpable in their blindness.

Author Margaret Heffernan cites a recent and very public example:

On July 19, 2011, Adrian Sanders, a Member of the British parliament, asked James and Rupert Murdoch a question that temporarily silenced them both: ‘Are you familiar with the term “wilful blindness”?8

The legal principle of wilful blindness means ‘you are responsible if you could have known, and should have known, something that instead you strove not to see. A case in point was the Enron disaster wherein the CEO and Chair of the Board were found guilty of wilful blindness; since they could have known, they were responsible.

Heffernan’s book is a remarkable exposé of the many different contexts in which ignoring and filtering the truth plays an influential part in our personal lives and society, its institutions and politics. And we might add religion. The structural and systemic nature of wilful blindness is a key reason for the current Royal Commission into child sexual abuse in Australian society.

Heffernan suggests that there is no single driver for wilful blindness, although fear of conflict and fear of change are important. She notes that:

an unconscious (and much denied) impulse to obey and conform shields us from confrontation and crowds provide friendly alibis for our inertia. And money has the power to blind us, even to our better selves.9

Wilful blindness is not always disastrous and it may seem innocuous or ‘feel efficient’. ‘Ignoring political differences’, for example, ‘may contribute to office calm.’ Heffernan concludes thus: ‘we may think being blind makes us safer, when in fact it leaves us crippled, vulnerable, and powerless.’ The pervasiveness of wilful blindness ‘does not mean that it is inevitable.’10 Yet overcoming this deeply entrenched human default requires courage and will always be costly, often in terms of reputational damage or jeopardised career prospects. Loving the truth runs up against the wall of wilful blindness.

The predicament of the Church

The gospel at the heart of the Church’s proclamation is the good news of ‘the truth as it is in Jesus’ (Ephesians 4:21b). This is crisply stated in John’s
Gospel: ‘You will know the truth and the truth will set you free’ (John 8:32). And later in that same Gospel Jesus declares: ‘I am the way the truth and the life’ (John 14:6). Living into this truth, and loving this truth above all else, proved costly for Jesus. Through the centuries followers of Christ have lived and died for this truth, and so many continue to suffer great persecution throughout the world. This is recognised throughout the Anglican Church calendar and on the occasion of this valedictory service as we celebrate the saints, martyrs, missionaries and teachers of the Anglican Communion.

And as we have already seen in the reading from John’s Gospel, when truth is so glibly and easily dismissed (Pilate’s ‘what is truth?’ falls into this category), the only thing left is brute power. ‘Don’t you know,’ asks Pilate of Jesus, ‘I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?’ (John 19:10b). Pilate could have known the truth had he listened—his wife had some inkling but she was ignored. Was Pilate guilty of wilful blindness? He washed his hands, a symbol of his silent acquiescence. The Russian poet, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, puts it sharply: ‘when truth is replaced by silence, the silence is a lie’.

So on the one hand the Christian Church has a mandate and a solemn and sacred calling to bear witness to the truth. This cannot be restricted to some notion of a pure gospel, a set of propositions disconnected from human life on this planet. The truth of Jesus filters into every place and heart; it is the light that shines through the cracks of human frailty and foolishness. Canadian singer/songwriter Leonard Cohen captures it well in his song, Anthem: ‘There is a crack in everything, that’s where the light gets in’. The light of God’s truth in the face of Jesus Christ exposes the darkness, even as the light steams in (John 3:19–21).

We do not have a licence to pick and choose the bits of truth we shall follow and tell, and what we shall ignore. Yet the fact is that we are mortal, we can’t notice and know everything, we filter or edit what we take in. As a result we are inevitably caught up in acts of wilful blindness, self-constructed cages that restrict our freedom and the freedom of others. As Heffernan points out, this ‘leaves us crippled, vulnerable and powerless’.

This belongs to the human predicament: called to be lovers of the truth, we are yet blind and wilfully so. Precisely because this is our predicament as human beings, this is necessarily a predicament that afflicts the body of Christ. In the latter case, however, the problem is intensified. For those who rejoice in the light of the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ, the
tension between loving this truth above and before all else, and the repeated experience of fleeing from the truth, is felt most keenly. Christian discipleship and ecclesial witness is always costly, and the extent to which we seek the cheap, pain-free option is the extent to which we remain wilfully blind to the truth of God. It is captured nicely in the statement: ‘I am all for the truth; it’s being honest that seems to be the problem.’ It is a common enough sentiment but it points to a deep fracture in the human spirit; nothing less than the sin which clings so closely. Clearly it is not a new problem. Otherwise why would it be necessary for an ancient writer of Proverbs to reiterate thus: ‘Whoever speaks the truth gives honest evidence, but a false witness speaks deceitfully’ (Proverbs 12:17).

Conclusion
We have travelled some distance from Coleridge’s aphorism on truth and Christianity. We have arrived at a place that esteems the cultivation of a habit of honesty. Yet Coleridge’s call to be lovers of the truth and an ethics of honesty belong together. Indeed they press their claims upon us personally and in our social and institutional life. We are called to be lovers of truth, to confess our wilful blindness and cultivate honesty in word and deed. It can be the hardest thing to do. And the most costly. But it belongs to the vocation of the theologian and it is appropriate to honour that vocation on the occasion of a valedictory service for students of the Most High God. It is not a self-generated vocation but rather one to which we are continually drawn by the eternal Word made flesh, the One ‘full of grace and truth’ (John 1:14).

Endnotes


2. This article was originally delivered at St Paul’s Anglican Church, Manuka, ACT, on 8 November 2013 at the annual valedictory service for St Mark’s National Theological Centre.
3. Hardy, ‘Created and Redeemed Sociality’ p. 23.
10. Heffernan, *Wilful Blindness*, p. 4