

## KNOW THE TRUTH

⇒ How on earth do any of us get to know the truth of any given situation these days when a great deal of what we hear about in the political world is later discovered to be “spin,” and the world of advertising subjects us to exaggerated claims about whatever product is being promoted and is flavour of the month at the moment. The people behind all of this would claim that what they say or what they present is the truth, but of course it is the truth from their perspective and with their particular slant and emphasis put upon it!

.....Television programmes like the Jeremy Kyle show wouldn't exist if it wasn't for the fact that so many people feel deceived and betrayed. They seek to discover the truth about their relationships or the behaviour of their partners or family members through lie detector tests and DNA tests because they can no longer believe what they are being told by particular people.

.....Others may find themselves in the Police Station being questioned about a particular incident, and when someone is being interviewed in that kind of environment, then it is the job of the person doing the questioning to establish the truth. In order to do that, they:

- ask questions, and use the answers they are given to build up a picture of what happened, and
- they listen to the stories of other people, witnesses, and compare the stories to see if there are any differences or deviations.

.....But of course, all the time that such interviews are going on, the questioner will be well aware, that in many cases, the person answering the questions will not always be telling the truth. Many criminals will be old hands at lying, covering their tracks, creating alibis, and generally deceiving those who are trying to uncover the truth. And as we know, despite all the questioning, weighing up and cross examination, there are still miscarriages of justice where the guilty go free, or the innocent are needlessly punished, all because we cannot always uncover the entire truth.

.....And yes, even within the church, a few weeks into a new year, ministers may be discovering and churches may be discovering too, that not everything that was written on the minister's profile or indeed the church's profile means exactly what they had understood it to mean when they first read it!

⇒ Sad as it is that we live in this kind of world, it will come as no surprise to you I know, to discover that this environment of deceit, “spin”, and exaggeration is not new. In the life of the church there has always been a need for discernment about what is true and what is not, what is genuine and what is not, what is of God and what is not. The writer of 1 John warns, “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God because many false prophets have gone out into the world.”

.....In the early Church there was a great deal of spiritual activity, and it was vital that the believers tested whether the things that they saw happening were “of God” or originated from some other spiritual power. If we look a little more closely at what was going on in the church and in the world at that time, it may help us to understand why these tests were such a necessary part of their life.

⇒ In the days of the early church, almost everybody believed in a universe that was full of demons and spirits. Every rock, every tree, every river, every lake and every mountain were believed to have their own spiritual power, powers that they believed would also try to enter the minds and bodies of individuals. People lived in a haunted world and they were very conscious of being surrounded by spiritual powers. They were also conscious of the people of evil which they believed could take over people's lives and so people's minds became the battleground for the conflict between the powers of good and evil.

.....But, as well as all of that going on, there was also a great deal of spiritual activity within the church, with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, like speaking in tongues, words of knowledge, prophecies and the ability to discern, all being very evident; all being part of the normal activity of the faith community.

.....So both inside and outside of the Church there was a great deal of spiritual activity, some of which was due to the Holy Spirit, some of which was the work of evil spirits. And you can imagine that the writer of 1 John had that on his mind when he set out the criteria for telling the difference between the two. He didn't want the Christian believers to be misled by false teaching and so he was trying to help them recognise those who were telling them the truth.

⇒ First of all John suggests that anyone who does not acknowledge that Jesus is the Christ, the promised Messiah, is not "of God." As far as John was concerned failure to claim that truth was to deny that Jesus was a fulfilment of God's promises.

.....Secondly, John suggests that anyone who is not prepared to say that Jesus came to this world in human form is not "of God." To deny that fact is to strike at the very root of the Christian faith, the very thing that makes the Christian faith unique.

.....If Jesus had never come in human form and experienced earthly conditions, how could he ever have given us the example of how the human life could and should be lived. If he had never come in the flesh he could not be our Saviour, for to be that he needed to identify with those he came to save, and understand our temptations and our weaknesses and every aspect of what it means to be a human being.

⇒ This fact of God becoming human is central to our faith and I recently came across a story that illustrates it very well. The story is told of *"a father, walking stick in hand, taking his young son for a walk. The lad asked his father to let him have the stick for a while and when his father eventually agreed, the lad began to use the stick to play golf with the stones, and to swipe the shrubs growing by the roadside. Eventually, he poked the stick into a nest of ants that, of course, all scurried off in all directions because they were terrified."*

.....*When the lad saw what happened, he felt sorry about it, and said as much to his Father. He went on to ask his Father, "Dad, won't you tell them I'm sorry, and that I care about them really."*

.....*The father looked back at his son with an amused smile and said, "I'm really glad you feel like that, but I really can't give them your message. In order to do that I would have to be born an ant and speak to them in their language because they don't understand ours."* That's just how it was for God. To show us and tell us how much he loved us, he had to become a human. He had to share our life and our experiences and speak our language.

⇒ But what about today? We too live in a world where there is a tremendous and possibly growing interest in spiritual things. People are becoming very aware of the spiritual aspect of their being, and are finding what they think they need in all kinds of pursuits, but often ones that are not linked with the Christian church. So, given that there is all this spiritual activity and spiritual awareness around us today, just as there was when 1 John was written, it must still be vital that we are able to discern those things that are "of God" and those that are not. How do we do it when there are plenty of folk who like to confuse the issue for us?

.....Well, it's probably quite important for us to a pretty good knowledge of what God's word has to say. If we do, then on those occasions when we see some action being made, or hear something said in the name of the Christian faith which causes us to question, then the ability to go to the word of God and see how it lines up is a necessary thing. We need to be like the questioner in the police station. We need to dig, and cross-examine and compare, in order to establish the truth. If we are firmly grounded in the word of God, then we will be less likely to be deceived or led in wrong ways of thinking or behaving.

.....That may be so, but perhaps one of the biggest problems we face is that the truth is not always what we want to hear or discover, because it can be very hard to swallow, and there may be times when we prefer to listen to something which is a little more appealing and a little more acceptable. By that I mean that sometimes we prefer:

- to listen to those who tell us things that help us feel that we're doing alright in our Christian lives, rather than those who encourage us to seek higher things
- to listen to those who preach the bits of the gospel that we like to hear, rather than remind us of the difficult bits that we'd rather forget about
- to listen to those who choose to remind us of those parts of the gospel that fit in with how we want to live our lives rather than having to accept the full discipline of the faith.

.....Sometimes we actually allow ourselves to be deceived because it makes us feel better about ourselves, but what that really means is that if we only listen to or find half of the truth, we miss out on so much that God wants to say to us and do in our lives. Someone once said "beware of a half-truth; you may have got hold of the wrong half."

⇒ The conflict between the powers of good and evil is as evident in our world today as it was in the days of the early Church. When we look around the world and even around our own brothers and sisters in this church we still see:

- Christian people who are confused and bewildered as the edges between the Christian gospel and other spiritual teaching becomes blurred
- Christians being ineffective in their lives because they aren't really sure what they believe and neither are they earnestly seeking to learn and grow

- The Christian church weakened and divided as its members disagree amongst themselves about what they believe to be the truth

.....May all of us be seekers after the truth, encouraging one another to read and study the scriptures, to ask questions so that we might learn and grow together, to pray for one another when there are tough challenges or decisions to be faced, always remembering that we will never know the whole truth, because there is always more to discover about God and his ways. May all of us be seekers after the truth, not in an arrogant way that closes our minds completely to other people's views and thoughts, but in a way that enables us to know God so well through prayer and reading his word, that we will not be deceived by those who try to tell us that the gospel is something other than what we know it to be – good news for all.