

TRUTH VERSUS ILLUSION – REV'D JOHN GOLDSWORTHY - WEDNESDAY 23 JUNE 2010.

READINGS: 2 Kings 22:8-13; 23:1-3. Matthew 7:15-21.

If you use the internet, it's my opinion that you will do well to be aware of a website called snopes.com. Snopes is dedicated to exposing hoaxes, scams, myths and viruses. So if you get an email warning you of a virus that will burn your hard drive clean of all your data, and this email is attached to a greeting card, you can check out with Snopes. You will find that there have been dozens of variations of this Greeting Card warning. It has been circulating for years and is part hoax and part true. There has been a virus attached to a greeting card but it cannot do anything like the damage threatened in the warning.

Snopes, then, is dedicated to getting to the truth and spreading the word on the internet. There is an element of godliness in the efforts of Snopes.com. Truth is one of the virtues that springs from the heart of God. Getting to the truth is at the basis of our justice system. Anyone standing in the witness box must swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Jesus declared himself to be the way, the truth and the life...He called the Holy Spirit the Spirit of truth. When he stood before Pontius Pilate, he said, "...for this purpose I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." Earlier in his ministry, Jesus had a heated argument with the Pharisees in which he said of them, "You are of your father, the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and has nothing to do with the truth because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me."

Life, then, is a constant battle between truth and falsehood, reality and illusion. When Jesus declares himself to be the way to God, the truth and the life he is, in fact, declaring himself to be the ultimate reality. This being so, he stands against all that is not real. When God gave Moses the 10 Commandments, He was commanding his people to avoid all deception and unreality. The first commandment to have not other gods but YHWY was a requirement to stay with reality because all other so called gods were only figments of men's imagination. They had no basis in reality. The belief systems based around them were futile and often ugly. EG, after King Josiah made the covenant to obey to the letter the rediscovered law of YHWH he embarked on a vigorous campaign to destroy the pagan shrines and idols across the land. On Ch 23:10 we read that he "defiled the Topheth, which is in the Valley of Hinnom, so that no-one might burn his son or daughter as an offering to Molech"

2.

The Lord made his mind very clear on the matter of human sacrifice as he promises severe judgement upon the people of Judah for their return to idolatry. In part he says judgement will come because, "they have built the high places to Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree, **nor did it come into my mind.**" For us this means that the church has a responsibility to do what it can to protect children from abuse and neglect. The people who sacrificed their children as burnt offerings to the pagan gods may have been sincere but this did not absolve them from such cruel disregard for the law of the Lord.

What of us? We who are gathered here will not go home and place food offerings in little Hindu shrine at the bottom of the garden as the housemaid does where Shirley is now staying in Bali. But it does not follow that we have it all together. We need to remain seekers after the truth. As Paul reminds us, in the days before glass mirrors had been invented, "Now we see a dim distorted image in a polished metal mirror..." It's not that we don't believe in the one and only God. We do. But I doubt that we can ever be totally free of having false, or at least inadequate, concepts of the character of God as he is revealed in the word written and in the Word made flesh. We may well have a cartoonist's picture of God.

The newspaper cartoonists have had a ball since Tony Abbott came to prominence. Kevin Rudd's appearance is bland but not so Mr Abbott's. So what is it that the cartoonists overemphasise in drawing Tony Abbott? #1 – his prominent ears. What else?? -----

God, I believe, went to great lengths to help us to a balanced understanding of his person, his character and purposes. He does not intend us to do a cartoonists job on him as many non-church people do, such as dismissing Him as "the old man in the sky". Let me explain. The most prominent attribute of God revealed in the New Testament is His boundless love. From childhood we may well have learnt John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life". And John, in his first letter proclaims that "God is love".

But my understanding of the broad drift of scripture is that God spent a couple of thousand years trying to bang into the collective Jewish consciousness that he was a God of inviolable justice. And we all cherish justice. We are offended when we see people suffering cruel injustice. We are not happy when we consider ourselves to have been unjustly treated. Does any one of us want to live in a universe where justice will not finally be upheld? If God's justice was capable of being compromised we would not be here today sharing in the Lord's Supper in remembrance that He died for us because then Jesus need not have died.

3.

Jesus did not die merely to demonstrate in some bizarre way that God loves us. Plenty of people have suffered as much, or more, physical pain as Jesus did. The real agony, which we cannot begin to fathom, was the pain of carrying our sins in his body on the cross and enduring that mysterious separation from the Father who is of purer eyes than to look upon sin. It was this that drew from the Saviour that terrible cry, "My God, My God, why have you deserted me – why have you left me so alone?"

Another false cartoon version of crucifixion is that Jesus died to satisfy the nasty requirements of a vindictive God. No – he died because there was no other way that God's infinite love could provide forgiveness and eternal life for sinners and at the same time not compromise to the slightest degree the infinite justice of God in the face of sin.

What some well meaning Christians don't seem to want to face is that when people reject the loving provision of God in Christ then they must face the justice of God for themselves. And we need to be clear that it will be justice – pure and faultless justice. With God a miscarriage of justice is impossible. And God alone is the final arbiter, otherwise God would not be God. Way back in Genesis we find Abraham pleading with God out of the expectation that justice would be done with regard to threatened destruction of the abominably evil city of Sodom.

So Abraham begins, "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous in the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked so that the righteous fare as the wicked. Far be that from you! Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just?"

The question often is asked, "But what about the people who have never heard of Jesus and have never had the chance to accept or reject him?" In one sense, that is none of our business. All humans are part of God's creation and are answerable to him. Abraham's question applies here, "Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just?" – to which the answer is a resounding "Yes". We can argue about what happens to those who die never having heard the gospel till the cows come home. In the process we may generate a lot more heat than light. What is our business is do what we can to assist the church universal, and our little church here, to obey the Lord's command to Go and Make disciples of all nations. When someone becomes a true disciple of Jesus, the saying of Isaiah is individualised, "The person who sat in darkness has seen a great light." Or, in the terminology I have been using today, Rejoice, for another person has moved from illusion to reality, from misconception to truth.
