

“In the light of truth” - a sermon following the terrorist attacks in Paris and Mali

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“Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice. What is truth?, asked Pilate.”

A few years ago the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain and the Commonwealth, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, wrote a book which contained the sentence, “In heaven there is Truth (capital-T truth), but on earth there are truths (small-t truths).” It was the Chief Rabbi's way of saying that the truth of God, the sacred, the eternal – choose your expression – exceeds anything which can be captured in words or the experience or any religious tradition. Even the venerability of Judaism could not contain God. Some of us involved in interfaith work were pleased, if also surprised, that the Chief Rabbi had written this. But not everyone was pleased, especially some in the orthodox movement. Quickly the book went to an immediate reprint of the book in which the offending sentence (plus some others) was replaced. Replaced with what I'm not sure, because I only have the first edition of the book! The point of the story though is to illustrate the difficulty, the touchiness of religions when it comes to talking about 'truth'. The French Republic believes it has the truth, Islamic State believes it has the truth, Certain Buddhists, Hindus, Christians and Humanists, Stop the War campaigners, and Climate Change activists, all believe they have the truth.

“What is truth?”, asked Pilate. “And did not stay for an answer,” says the famous line of the early modern philosopher, Francis Bacon in the 16/17C. Perhaps Pilate was wise to walk away, for the quagmire of defining 'truth' has been with us since the year dot.

Part of the difficulty in talking about 'truth' is that it depends on the sense in which you are asking about it. Factual truth – for example, how many of people are sat listening to this sermon this morning can be solved by counting. But the value of a true friend is going to require a different calculation. And the truth about the state of the world is even more elusive: historians will say that only from some point in the future can we tell what the truth of the present really is. Truth, it seems, depends on many factors – where you come from, what your experience and education has been, the beliefs you hold about human beings and the world generally, whom you trust in terms of the analysis you receive about the meaning of things, and so on. It seems that there is a spectrum about truth – ranging from reasonably hard facts at one end to largely impressions at the other.

We can illustrate the problem about truth with reference to the terrible events of the last week, first in Paris and then in Mali. Piecing together the movements of the perpetrators has been painstaking detective work but a number of facts are emerging, facts about who the leading offenders were and facts about their movements. These things are hard enough to establish as it is, because full clarity is not yet available, but harder is the analysis of why these acts took place. You might ask, 'What is the truth about what has happened?' Is the truth the French president's assertion that what has been declared by ISIS is war and the Republic needs to respond accordingly? This is startling language. But is it war on people or an ideology called terrorism that is being declared? And does that make sense? Normally one state declares war on another

state. Clearly that can't be the case in the new circumstances which face the world as we have come to experience it. Yet violation has happened and some reaction must be given.

I have tried to follow the events and the commentary quite closely this week, a very fast-moving week. And I have to say, I don't think we can really pin-point one motivation for terrorist actions of the kind we have seen. There are polar opposites in what commentators say. For example:

- the desire on part of ISIS to create a caliphate, that is, a territorial rule presided over by a religiously appointed ruler according to some version of an ideal Islamic past
- versus
- the accusation that ISIS has only arisen because of western foreign policy and western intervention, particularly in Iraq.

or:

- the outrage against the killing of the innocent in Paris and Mali
- versus
- the outrage against the killing of the innocent by-stander with every drone and air strike by the west from a safe place in the sky.

I could go on. The more analyses are offered, the more differences of opinion emerge. What is truth? If only for this reason alone, we have a duty to pray for political leaders who are faced with impossible choices at this time.

In the meantime, my own response incorporates at least the following 3 points:

1. Keep repeating the claim, made by many, that ISIS attackers know next to nothing about the Islamic religion and especially about its historic traditions of how to interpret Qur'anic scriptures so that the one who is called Compassionate and Merciful truly shines through.
2. Be wary about the language of war. I came across this comment from a counter-terrorist analyst:

“The [terror] group calculates that a small number of attackers can profoundly shift the way that European society views its 44 million Muslim members and, as a result, the way European Muslims view themselves. Through this provocation, it seeks to set conditions for an apocalyptic war with the West”

In other words, the language of war gives the attackers what they want. The same article borrowed the following words from Martin Luther King:

“Through violence you may murder a liar, but you can't establish truth.”

If it's truth in the dock this morning you don't arrive at it through violence, either as a perpetrator or a retaliator. One TV interview with a relative of one of the victims of the Paris attack said that she would not speak of the attackers as legitimate targets for retaliatory violence, because that would give them what they crave, and it would not really improve the minds of relatives of the victims. The justice of the law is what is really required.

3. Remember that Syrian refugees are also fleeing ISIS and that refugees are enemies of the attackers as well, because they have failed to stay and failed to join in the fight against the infidel west. Syrian refugees are already stigmatised as unwanted outsiders; to link them with ISIS stigmatises them twice over.

What is truth? In Heaven there is Truth, on earth there are only truths – your truth and my truth; the ideologues’ truth and the victims’ truth; truth portrayed by the media and truth hidden behind the closed doors of our political masters and mistresses.

Perhaps there is another kind of truth as well, which I will call the truth of witness, and with this I will bring my words this morning to an end. At the gathering of 10,000 people from the world’s religions, called the Parliament of the World’s Religions, which I attended last month in Salt Lake City, one of the most powerful addresses was given by a young Muslim woman about 30 years old. She spoke of helping her brother, whom she clearly loved deeply, prepare for his wedding. Then a short time after the wedding there was a minor altercation in a car park, but tempers flared and he, together with his wife and her sister, ended up dead through gun fire. She described it as hate-crime, though what she meant but did not say was crime against a Muslim. In the following months she had refused to join the clamour for vengeance and instead set up an organisation to struggle against hate crime and the stigmatisation of different groups in society. This was what her life was now dedicated to. In addressing us, her whole demeanour was impressive, passionate, non-violent and reconciling. It didn’t remove the deep anguish she felt at what had happened to her brother and his wife and sister-in-law but it was a response from the well-springs of her faith and her humanity. It represented a response which came from a different place than vengeance or like-for-like hatred. Looking back now, a month after the Parliament, I would say that what I heard was a most stunning witness to truth.
Amen.