

Sermon on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2018 by Canon David Hodgson  
Gospel: Mark 3: 20 -35

When it was announced last week that Paul Dacre was retiring as editor of the Daily Mail there have been few retirement announcements that have provoked such a wide range of reactions. To some he was a “true icon”. To Lord Rothermere he was “the greatest Fleet Street editor of his generation” – but then Rothermere owns the Daily Mail! To Labour Lord Adonis “it seems like a moment of national liberation. This influence has been so negative on our public life for 25 years.” To Conservative MP Nicholas Soames “It’s impossible to overestimate Dacre’s poison at The Mail - no man can be called a ‘great’ editor who permits the headline that the Judges are the ‘Enemies of the People’”.

Those reactions to Paul Dacre’s retirement are a useful reminder that the idea of news as neutral – or that news media simply report the facts of events- is definitely a fantasy. The same events can be presented with very different meanings depending on who is telling the story.

Before the story of Paul Dacre, we were assailed – and still are – by the whole story of what the likes of Cambridge Analytica were doing with data shared by users on Facebook in good faith; and how social media platforms like Facebook are allowing the distinction between true and fake news to become completely blurred. Some commentators have said that by side-lining the role of professional journalists, Facebook and other platforms are undermining the very possibility of a democratic society. A democratic society is not one in which “the people” have a voice but one in which many different people have a voice, a society which is not merely an instrument of its most powerful players. And such a democratic society needs to have the ability and the means to evaluate and to debate what claims might be true or at least how they might be true and what claims might be false; and whose actions can be shown to be good and whose can be shown to be malign.

So, is there any kind of Christian perspective on this? Where do we turn as Christians? Do we have any responsibilities in this as followers of Christ? Is there any kind of different story we can be telling? Or do we give up, wash our hands of the problem and say everyone is just out for their own interests, like Pontius Pilate before Jesus simply say with a dismissive and cynical shrug: “What is truth?” Well you won’t be surprised when I say no – I don’t think we should give up and shrug cynically. We believe and trust in the Lord who is the truth. I am the way the truth and the life Jesus said. Yet is all too easy under the barrage of contrary messages for us to come to accept a widespread prevailing opinion that there is no such thing as truth, only different opinions, perspectives and power interests when it comes to the life of our society.

Let’s turn to today’s gospel - I think there is wisdom there on this question.

These opening chapters of Mark’s gospel describe how, as Jesus begins to make more and more of a difference to the people, through his healing and preaching of God’s forgiveness, so also his opponents begin to ratchet up their efforts to suppress him.

The incident we read this morning from Mark’s Gospel Chapter 3 has Jesus accused of doing evil under the guise of doing good; of being an agent of the evil one, of being possessed by demons.

It’s one of the oldest ploys in the play book of scheming and corrupt political manoeuvres – accuse your opponent of being some form of undercover operator for the enemy; of using deceit to pursue a hidden agenda which is ultimately very different and harmful. That’s what the Jerusalem religious elite – Jesus’ opponents – were doing. Persuading people that Jesus was really working on behalf not of God but of Satan, the Accuser, the Evil One. That way if they could get people to believe their story about Jesus, then of course the more successful Jesus was, and the more good Jesus did, then the more evidence they had that he was dangerous. They were trying to turn truth on its head and paint good as bad.

And what could be more perfect for Jesus' opponents than to get the family involved too. Even his relatives were so believing this story that Jesus was out of his mind that they had come to restrain him.

Jesus resisted this story and challenged his opponents directly. First Jesus exposed the nonsense of their argument by appealing to common sense. How could Satan cast out Satan? How could evil pursue its agenda by doing good and by getting rid of evil? It doesn't make sense. He used the two examples - of a kingdom and of a household. If they are divided and working against themselves, they will destroy themselves. He used the example of robbers entering a strong man's house – if they don't tie him up they won't get his property – so it makes no sense to say that Jesus really had come to do evil and yet would continue to let the goodness of God be shown in healings and setting people free from the power of evil over them. In making these arguments Mark's gospel shows Jesus trusting and believing that an appeal can be made to people's wider experience and knowledge to show up the flaws in the arguments of powerful interests. The biblical narrative demonstrates a belief that we who seek true life, we do have valid knowledge, we do have valid experiences, we do have power in ourselves to evaluate and to reframe the stories of the powerful. Jesus' teaching method of parables, of telling other stories to cast new light, encourages us as his followers to do the same, to trust the sense and the experiences of our lives and those we have shared in the lives of others, to resist the narratives imposed on us by powerful and malign influences in the world.

Secondly, Jesus also had a strong warning for his opponents too. All human sins are forgivable by God, but to oppose the Holy Spirit cannot be forgiven. It's a strong saying but not very clear to understand. I take it to mean in the context of this argument, that if you not only oppose what is good and the goodness of God, but also paint it as evil; then how could you receive any forgiveness from what you believe to be bad? There can be no forgiveness in a world where you and your perspective are the determinant of all that is true - you have put yourself in the place of God in effect, so why need forgiveness from any one, let alone God, whom you have replaced with yourself.

It is a terrifying vision. Yet it is one which we have seen in history and in recent decades; it touches at the extreme into the depths of the twisted deceits spun by those who had the power and control over the stories being told in their society, that allowed the extermination of Jews, other minorities and the disabled by the Nazis; that has allowed the violations and genocides in other conflicts since and still ongoing. At its extreme it requires the utter demonization of other human beings, so that being re-categorised as non-human, there is no human sympathy for them in their opponents which would prevent their extermination. At its less extreme but still shocking it is deliberately and knowingly spreading lies about other people or groups of people so that others no longer respect them or trust them; in order finally to exclude them, deny them a voice, a place a home in the community, in the world even.

Here in these verses Jesus speaks in the mode of a prophet rather than a teacher. He speaks truth to power. He warns in this case that there is indeed such a thing as truth. To operate as if there is not, to deny that the Spirit of truth has any truth in it, to replace that with one's own interest so that "truth" becomes nothing other than what you say, what you want, is the unforgivable sin.

So, the story that we want to tell as disciples of Christ is that there is truth in this life; and that there is value in looking for the truth and exploring the truth which is over and beyond our own perspectives. There is a flawed Christian version of this idea that we have to be wary of. This is the idea that as Christians we know already the whole of God's truth based on what we think the Bible means, that our version of what the bible means is the truth, and anyone who questions that version is questioning "the truth". But to say that there is truth, and that God is truth, is not the same as saying that what we know now or think we know is the truth for all time. There is much in the bible and our Christian tradition and experience which tells us that we are being led by the

Holy Spirit into truth as a continuous process; the truth which is the Word of God continues to be unfolded.

Time has run out now for me to explore examples of what practical implications these two messages have for us as citizens today and as disciples of Jesus – over to you for your thoughts. What does it mean for the way we respond to the stories we receive and the stories we tell about situations either in the wider world or in our own work or family situations to apply this wisdom of Jesus – that we can trust our sense and experience, which includes our experience of who God is of course and how God works, to resist and to reframe the stories imposed upon us by powerful and malign influences; and secondly to stand up and stay strong in knowing and believing that there is such a thing as truth, the Spirit of God is the Spirit of truth, and truth is something to be looked for, because it is calling us to seek it and to find it; and as Jesus said according to John's gospel,, you will know the truth and the truth will make you free.

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