

## Truth, Light, Glory

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### What is truth?

“What is truth?” is a key question for scientists. Harvard University, where Jennifer Wiseman studied, has *veritas*, the Latin word for truth, as its motto. Jennifer tells me that the earlier version of its logo had two open books and a closed book, implying that there are some truths that we as humans should not pursue. I have been unable to verify (*veritas*!) that. The logo now shows three open books.

As scientists we are familiar with Francis Bacon’s observation of the two books,<sup>1</sup> the book of Scripture and the book of nature, the book of the Word, and the book of the world, and that these two books are complementary. God speaks truth through both books. I would like to add a third book, the book of history and to suggest that Scripture is partly a book of the acts of God. Discerning God’s activity in history is the task of the prophet who interprets the meaning of contemporary events for God’s people today.

Francis Bacon stated that science is but an image of the truth, implying that truth is larger than what we scientists know and understand. There is a lot out there we don’t know. His statement also indirectly challenges the Cartesian ideal of truth being based on the foundation of axioms - self-evident truths - and developed through a series of logical steps to arrive at a logically consistent summary based on objective disengaged reason. As scientists we believe our tentative conclusions need to be continually tested in new situations to see whether our understanding holds up. Truth is much more subtle, wider, and richer than that which our logic can master.

### Let there be light

*Fiat Lux* is the motto of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research in Melbourne, and also the motto of Emmanuel College, Brisbane where our COSAC is being held. *Fiat lux*, is of course God’s first word in the Bible, commanding light to be, and separating light from darkness. The creation of light is God’s first act of creation. God is the source of both light and life. For modern researchers, like those at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute, *fiat lux* implies that the search for truth is the search for enlightenment. Prometheus, the Greek Titan, a semi-god, is famous for snatching fire from the gods and giving it to humankind. He is a revered figure of the enlightenment because the enlightenment believed that science would bring enlightenment and truth to a world previously in darkness from the myths and superstition of the religious establishment. This is one of the strands of the myth that science and the Christian faith are opposed rather than complementary. It represents the pride of some modern scientific researchers.

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<sup>1</sup> Since giving this talk, I realise that the discussion about the two books, attributed to Francis Bacon by Charles Darwin in the frontispiece of the early editions of his *Origin of Species*, is actually a much older and more nuanced discussion going right back to Augustine in the fifth century and developing during the renaissance and reformation. This discussion is brilliantly expounded by Peter Harrison in his *The Bible, Protestantism and the Rise of Science*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.

## Light, life and logos

In this talk I want to explore what is truth by looking particularly at John's Gospel. John's prologue starts with:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (John 1:1-5, NIV)

This passage, with echoes of the first chapter of Genesis, describes John's witness to Jesus, the source of light and life. That light of Christ is the light both of truth against falsehood, and the light of goodness against evil. The coming light clashes with darkness, for the darkness neither understood the light (an alternative rendering of the last statement of our text) nor overcame the light. We shall see how light and truth relate as we go on.

## Light and glory

John's testimony tells us the disciples did not just see a tiny light, they saw a blaze of glory. He says:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, ... full of grace and truth. (v. 14)

The truth Jesus brings is not a mere set of propositions but has substance. It is embodied in a person. It is not the mere truth of legalism, but an outgoing life-giving truth. It is not a mere truth of sterile statements, but a truth with substantial grace. This is how John puts it:

From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. (v. 16-18)

Here we have the gracious, substantial, life-giving, glorious truth seen in the person of Jesus Christ, which is in stark contrast to the Pharisaic legalism of the day. The clash of Jesus with the Jews is a prominent theme of John's Gospel. This must not be construed as anti-Semitism, for Jesus himself was a Jew. Lesslie Newbigin wisely comments that the religious legalism criticised here also occurs within Christianity. Any religious system can degenerate into sterile, graceless legalism.

Karl Barth once said: "The word became flesh and then through theologians it became words again." Those of you who have struggled with his very wordy writings will enjoy the irony, but the point is well made. All our theological statements are abstractions from the greater reality of the truth found in the incarnate Son of God who lived among us and graciously embodied the fulness of God's truth. Bacon's statement about science quoted above states a similar thing: our worlds and models only partly reflect the greater reality.

## Nicodemus

But how is this truth apprehended? As we read through John's Gospel we find case studies and comments which flesh out various encounters with Jesus, the Word (Logos) of God. One such encounter occurred at night (John 3:1-14). Nicodemus comes out of the darkness to inquire after Jesus. He asks who Jesus is, commenting that he must be from God, for no one can do what he has done unless he has come from God. This is an interesting observation, for the controversy later in John particularly centres on who Jesus is and where he has come from, and how the Pharisees reject Jesus' origins.



Jesus, however, abruptly cuts across all this and tells Nicodemus quite bluntly, "Unless you are born anew (or from above) you cannot see the kingdom of God," (v. 3). Nicodemus is puzzled, but Jesus' subsequent responses barely expand the statement, talking about being born of water and the spirit and calling on Nicodemus to believe. He needs to believe in the cross, just as the Israelites believe in the snake in the wilderness, for, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life," (v. 14).

Puzzled, Nicodemus fades from view at this point. We wonder what will happen to him. John leaves us in suspense. The narrator's commentary takes over. The comments are a crucial part of John's Gospel:

And this is the verdict: light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light, for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God. (John 3:19-21)

So Nicodemus' actions illustrate a process of coming out of darkness into the presence of Jesus, the light, where he is challenged to put his faith in the Son of Man and so be born anew/from above by the power of the Spirit of God, the breath of God, which gave life to humankind at the beginning of time.

Would Nicodemus come further into the light or return to the darkness? We will have to wait and see.

## Nicodemites

John Calvin, from the comfort of his study in exile from France in Geneva, critiqued "hidden believers," the Huguenots, still living in France. He called them Nicodemites, and the term was disparaging. I first learnt about Nicodemites from Diarmaid MacCulloch in his book *Silence: a Christian History*. Unlike Calvin, MacCulloch is more sympathetic to Nicodemites and he proceeds to describe a number of groups who have chosen to privately practice a faith different from the one publicly demanded. MacCulloch singles out ongoing Catholics in Elizabethan England, who, against what he so tellingly describes as "magisterial Christianity," continued to say mass privately, although it is unclear whether their allegiance was still to Rome or to the English church. The term "magisterial" well-describes churches whose power and influence is enhanced by the power of the state—power indeed that Calvin was able to assert in Geneva.

MacCulloch, who is openly gay, movingly describes gay, high Anglo-Catholics in Victorian England who with their clean-shaven faces and robed in cassocks and surplices, were treated suspiciously by vigorous bewhiskered Victorian clergy. But they provided clandestine support for each other and

became a network of “Those in The Know” who understood the “Love That Cannot Be Named.” They had their coded words and their private meetings. My review of MacCulloch’s book on the ISCAST website suggests all may not be well with such an organisation.

Evolutionists in Christian colleges in the US have had to be very careful in what they taught for fear of being hounded out by more conservative Christians who make life very difficult for them. We have had a couple of them as guests of ISCAST: Professors Darrell Falk and Richard Colling. Their stories are available on the Internet. Even some of our own ISCASTians have preferred to have a low profile in their local churches, as they feel their scientific position would be misunderstood by those embracing young-earth creationism.

On the other hand, Christians in secular universities in the USA have found that their scientific credibility is undermined if their scientific colleagues find out they are Christians. So they prefer to make a name for themselves as scientists before declaring their Christian commitment. It is all part of the broader toxic conservative/liberal war waged so vehemently especially in the United States but also in parts of Europe. So we still have Nicodemites today.

### The light of the world

Some of the moves from hiddenness to openness are seen in the way in which John’s Gospel progresses. Jesus, is initially reluctant to go to the feast of the Tabernacles. The story occurs immediately after the debate about who he really is. In that debate the Pharisees challenge Nicodemus’ defence of Jesus with them taunting Nicodemus, “Are you from Galilee too?” (John 7:52). When the feast of the Tabernacles is in full swing, Jesus publicly declares:

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12. I take the story of the woman caught in adultery as a later insertion.)

What is truth? Jesus says, “I am the light. Do not continue in darkness but follow me.” The subsequent debate is mired in evidence for and against Jesus’ assertion. This is a difficult section asking Jesus to prove himself. But by what criteria? By what other lights can you prove he is the light of God, the true light? How can the fuller truth be evaluated by lesser truths? As the debate continues, those who believe can see the desperation of the unbeliever to continue in the darkness.

### Light, truth and the words of Jesus

Jesus continues to press the link between himself, the light and the truth. He says to those who believed in him,

If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free. (John 8:31 NRSV)

Light and truth are coming together. The link this time is to continue in the words of the Word, the Logos. Barth’s quote earlier, where the Word became flesh and we have turned it into words again, implies that we apprehend God’s Word personally. However, the Word of God speaks words from God and we are called here to hear these words, to continue in these words so that we will know the truth and experience the liberation the truth brings. The contrast between the liberty of truth and the convolutions of the Pharisees and those who do not believe is stark. There is freedom in the truth.

## The blind man sees and the seeing declared blind



This feud between the Pharisees and Jesus is beautifully enacted in the story of Jesus healing the man born blind. Again, the question to the fore is, who is Jesus? Jesus sees himself as the light of the world and that he must do the works the Father has sent him to do. There is a direct link in the text between Jesus' commitment to the light and his healing of a blind man, which Jesus provocatively does on the Sabbath. After the healing, when the Pharisees ask the man, he can only stick to his story, "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see" (John 9:15, NRSV). The Pharisees are divided over

who this Jesus could be. There were those who claimed he is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath, whereas others ask, how can a man who is a sinner perform such a miracle?

When the blind man is asked, his initial response is that Jesus is a prophet. The Jews are unconvinced and call in the man's parents. They are cautious and vacillate. He is our son; he was born blind; but we do not know how he now sees and who opened his eyes. They refuse to become involved and take refuge in the hand-ball,<sup>2</sup> "Ask him; he is of age." John observes that they were afraid of the Jews, and fear prevented them committing themselves to Jesus. Truth is obscured by fear of the consequences.

So the Pharisees again confront the man born blind. He knows what happened and he is becoming more certain of its implications. He is on a journey towards the light. The Pharisees see that he is behaving like a disciple of Jesus. The man born blind challenges the Pharisees, "If this man were not from God, he could do nothing." At this, they retort that the man born blind was born in sin, so how could he teach them? They threw him out of the synagogue. Preserving their Sabbath and closing their minds to Jesus is more important than the fact that a blind man sees, and is coming to faith.

Jesus meets him and challenges him to a deeper commitment. "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" he asks. The man responds to Jesus' revelation of himself with the confession, "Lord I believe," and worships Jesus.

Jesus then summarises, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind."

We too have observed this process. There is a choice and a journey, the choice is to commit yourself to the truth, the process is to continue to journey into the truth. The blind man goes on that journey; his parents vacillate; the Pharisees refuse to see. They are the professionally religious and they are not easily dismissed. They have their truth; surely they are not blind? So they ask him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains."

In my clinical practice with addiction, I see this blindness, this lack of insight all the time, and part of the journey of recovery is for my patients (and me too!) to be open to the truth about themselves and to go on a journey into insight together.

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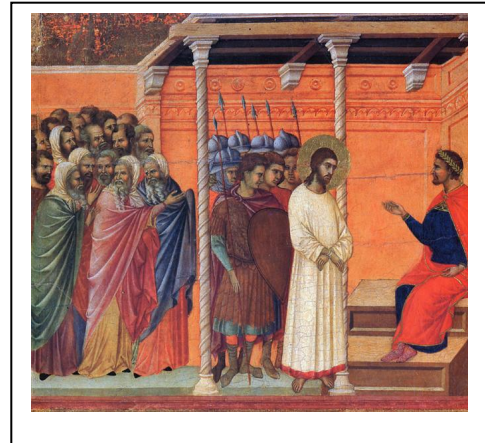
<sup>2</sup> Australian Rules Football in which the ball is passed on to the next player. Colloquially it means to pass responsibility on to someone else.



## Truth and the political process

The story of Jesus is the ongoing story of the Pharisees and rulers of the Jews confronting Jesus. Light comes into darkness. The darkness neither comprehends the light nor can it conquer the light. It is devastating when the best religion of the day, confronted by the best man that ever lived should choose to execute that good man. Not only are the Pharisees blind but they are on a journey into greater darkness. He has come to his own, but his own have not received him. So they capture Jesus and take him before the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate.

For Pilate this is just one of many trials that he has conducted in Judea, he has no idea how pivotal this event is in the history of the world. Jesus is just another incidental criminal, caught in the vicious politics of this turbulent nation. From the kingdom of God's point of view this shows the essence of the kingdom, speaking the truth to power, without exercising secular power.



It is interesting that the trial of Jesus centres as much on who he is as it does on the crime he is alleged to have committed. But the Pharisees have to somehow adjust the charge to secure an execution. The charge of blasphemy, and doing good on the Sabbath, has to be adjusted to the charge of treason against Rome. And Jesus claims to usher in the kingdom of God. Is that not an alternative kingdom and a threat to the established order? And many followers of Jesus, who have read this story over the centuries have been so accused of treason. Jesus' disciples are not committed to a single ideology or to a single ruler. We are committed to truth. And if that clashes with the established order, then we are still on the side of truth, no matter how uncomfortable or how uncooperative this may be.

So Pilate confronts Jesus with the direct question, "Are you the King of the Jews?" (John 18:33). Jesus recognises there are deeper motives here than just a simple interest in the truth. Jesus asks, "Do you ask this on your own, or did others tell you about me?" Pilate's frustration is evident as he feels he is entering into an in-house dispute over the finer points of Jewish religion. "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus does not address the actions that have brought him to Pilate but replies to the earlier question, "Are you a king?" Jesus replies that his kingdom is not like other kingdoms, it is "not from here." Pilate presses him. "So you are a king?" to which Jesus replies, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice."

So here it is. The light is shining, the truth is there, and the truth challenges a response. Will the one confronted come to the truth or will he scurry back into darkness? Pilate asks the key question, the question of this talk: "What is truth?" And the question is left hanging.

I would love to have been there to find the tone with which Pilate asked the question. Was it a cynical question, entirely rhetorical because there is no answer? Was it a wistful question, if only things were simpler, if only there was not this political pressure, if only I could clear myself from the dilemma I find myself in. Was this a complex metaphysical question that philosophers and scientists have pored over, not finding an answer?

And yet in one sense the answer is simple. This man is innocent. He should be released. If you had committed yourself fully to that, you would have found yourself on a journey into truth; light would have dawned, you would have moved from blindness to insight and your life would have been changed. But Pilate chose the opposite, and after a weak declaration of innocence he still continues

to enter into darkness. This leads to Christ's death and to our salvation, for the Son of Man will now be lifted up. And Pontius Pilate is now commemorated in history for just this one act of compromise.

### The glory of the Son of Man

So the judgment is given. Innocent but condemned to death. The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. He himself sees this in telling his disciples, "Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him" (John 13:31). Humiliated, mocked, tortured and crucified. The Son of Man is lifted up, and the glory of God is revealed in the shame of the cross. John, who was there, witnessed to that glory, seen in the agony and pain, in the seeming triumph of light over



darkness the triumph of political expediency over truth and the triumph of religious rigidity over spiritual freedom. John testifies, "We have seen his glory ... full of grace and truth ... of that fulness we have all received, grace upon grace ... the only Son who is intimate with the Father, he has made him known" (John 1:14-18). The full blaze of Christ's glory is seen on the cross, and we are incapable of seeing that glory directly; it is too intense, too bright. Glory in humiliation, glory in the surrender to the powers of darkness, glory in the triumph over death and the glory of the resurrection that follows.

### Concluding reflections

We can draw the following conclusions from our study of truth, light and glory in John's Gospel.

First, truth is personal/relational—not just abstract disengaged reason. Secondly, truth is found in whole-self commitment to Jesus Christ. Thirdly, truth is a moral commitment, not just an intellectual assent. It may be costly. Fourthly, truth is a journey, from darkness to light and from blindness to insight. Further as you commit; you will see further, but without that commitment, you will fail to progress. Fifthly, truth is a journey into freedom, however costly that journey may be.

We in ISCAST are all pilgrims on this journey, challenged each time we encounter new truth to respond to that challenge with deeper understanding and insight, or else to scurry back again into the familiar darkness of expedience.