

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUTH AND OF LIVING TRUTHFULLY

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This talk has been prepared for Holy Father's Day, Sunday, 22 February, 2009.

If you are building or maintaining anything foundations are crucial, as the Gospel reminds us. One builds a house on rock, not on sand. To build on sand is to invite disaster. To build on rock is to have solidity and permanence. From the outside the two houses may look the same. The difference is to be found in what underlies them. The truth of the Church's teaching is the rock-like foundation on which everything we believe depends. Our first loyalty is to the truth; this leads us to the teaching of the Church. We seek the truth, submit to the truth, hold to the truth, follow the truth. This is the only course that is worthy of God and leads to God. To be in any way indifferent to the truth, to manipulate the truth, to play fast and loose with it in any way, is to undermine everything; hence, the enormous effort over the centuries to express the truths of the faith as clearly and unambiguously as possible. When there was disagreement on a doctrine, controversy and dialogue were possible only because both sides were committed to seeking the truth. Without this, there could be only senseless chaos.

So commitment to the truth has been absolutely basic in relation to the doctrines of the Church. But that does not mean that how truth is treated, or what happens to it outside the doctrinal sphere, is of minor importance, that the Church is concerned only with clarifying doctrine. To be truthful is to have a fundamental trait of character that you hold to, and which runs through your whole existence. It is not something that one can turn on and off. To say, I will be truthful in dealing with this but indifferent to truth in dealing with that, is to betray truth, and to lose all claim to being truthful. A certain philosopher spoke of going out into the night where all cows are black. To desert or betray the truth is to opt for universal darkness.

But there is something else of prime importance built into our Christian tradition. It comes immediately from the mystery of the Incarnation. Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God; as members of Christ, we share in that image. To distort or pervert the truth in ourselves, in our own lives, is to violate that divine imprint. The same holds if we lead others into falsity, or tell lies about them. Christ is the way, the truth and the life for us. He is the truth of the human. As we shall see, we are called not only to hold to the truth in our heads, but to live in the truth. Truth is to pervade our whole

existence. One of the things that we have become more conscious of in recent times is that it is not enough to simply tell the truth; we have the much bigger task of living the truth and living in the truth.

Now there are two approaches to dealing with moral issues. One, in effect, holds that all we have to do is to open our eyes, as it were, and see what is before us; then we deal with it rationally. It assumes that, apart from some strange people, we are all open to the truth and welcome it. If we are counting trees on a hilltop we usually get it right. But moral judgment generally requires that we grasp relationships and situations aright, that we do not misinterpret people, that personal factors do not come in to distort our reading of the picture. Imagine, for instance, a boy tagger who has been caught at work on someone's wall; I think that we should be surprised if his mother, the judge, the police-person, and the youth worker all saw it alike. Reaching the truth here and holding to it is much more of a challenge. And if one thinks of the ways in which vast groups of people have been interpreted generally in the past, the point becomes clearer. Slavery was justified by great numbers of Christians. Women were falsified and cramped by the way that they were stereotyped. There is reason to say that the way the emotionally disturbed were interpreted had more to do with the fear of the public and the 'experts' than the actual condition of the people involved. Non-European people, workers, children and so on have all been falsely stereotyped, usually with a view of taking advantage of them in some way. It is for this reason that a prominent thinker has said that the first moral task is to see aright, to do justice to what we are dealing with. Another has suggested that the eyes of our eyes need to be opened. And we shall not be far from the mind of the Gospel if we say that only an active genuine love can purify our hearts so as to open them to the truth.

We find a sort of warning in St. Luke's Gospel related to this. It is in the parable of the Good Samaritan. A lawyer asks Jesus who his neighbour is. It seems a very fair and harmless question. St. Luke remarks that he wanted to justify himself and this should make us alert. But Jesus does not answer that question. He comes back to the lawyer with a very different question, Who was a neighbour to the man who had been left half-dead? Jesus is conveying to him that, as the theologians used to say, he was asking the wrong question. The real question is the one that was answered in a practical way by the Samaritan. It suggests to me how evasion and self-deception enter, and become established, in our lives, and insinuate themselves in subtle ways into our dealings. The Gospel makes the point that we are much better at seeing the splinter in the other person's eye than in seeing the plank in our own. The other person's headlight is always stronger than one's own; it is always the other person who is in the way.

One writer describes a scene in a restaurant in which two diners notice the movements and actions of a waiter. They notice that he does all the things that waiters do, but that he overdoes them. He carries the tray higher than is necessary; he puts the dishes on the table with exaggerated precision. The psychologist of the two says to the other, Do you know what he is doing? He is playing a part. And do you know what part he is playing? He is playing the part of a waiter! If one is the owner of the restaurant this may seem not to make much difference. But if one is interested in the person, one sees that he has adopted make-believe at the heart of his working life. In my view this is serious, if for no other reason that the real worker never gets out, has never been discovered. But one needed to be a psychologist to recognise what was really happening.

The fact is that in recent times a form of popular psychology has become commonplace, at least in a simplified form. What was considered just strange in the distant past can now be 'read' and recognised by ordinary people. The result is that we have been saved from a great deal of injustice to other people, and a great deal of self-deception. Today when a teacher goes into a classroom and finds a class of teen-age pupils that will not respond or cooperate, he or she suspects it is a case of passive aggression. There is the story of the two religious who met, one was wearing a habit, the other was not. A, the one who was not wearing the habit said to the other, Do you know why you are wearing that habit? You feel inadequate. B, the other, said to A, Do you know why you are not wearing your habit? You feel inadequate. And one does not have to be very knowledgeable to see popularised versions of psychological insight not only in programmes like the Simpsons, but in almost any popular drama. So we have the means of reaching a deeper level of honesty with ourselves and with others. After a fashion we are all pop psychologists. Unfortunately we can be too confident and over-estimate our own wisdom. There was the religious priest who had a reputation as a psychologist, and who had a simple solution for depression. Tell them to snap out of it, he said. Now one understands that the problem with serious depression is that the person is so immersed that they cannot begin to see beyond.

So honesty has been, as it were, forced upon us at the individual level. But there has been a corresponding development where awareness of what is happening in society is concerned. The forms and systems of society affect everything we do as members of society. If the educational system is biased, some groups will be favoured, others will be disadvantaged. As we tend to interpret ourselves favourably as individuals, so we see ourselves in a good light as countries and communities and groups, frequently in too good a

light. Some of those who study society have seen it as their task to uncover the illusions, blind spots, that we form for ourselves; in particular they underline the distinction between what the official position is and what the real position is. To use a famous expression, the official position may be that we are all equal, but the fact is that some are more equal than others. Even in the time of Queen Victoria a judge made the remark that the law-courts, like the Ritz Hotel, were open to rich and poor alike. In American surveys it was shown that the number of psychiatrists available or of operations performed had more to do with the affluence of the residents than with their number. Efforts have been made and are being made to iron out these discrepancies, but to a great extent it is because the truth about them has been brought into clear light. It would be too much to say that the prejudices against women, or non-Europeans, or particular ethnic groups have disappeared, but they certainly have diminished. At this stage there has been too much evidence to the contrary to make them acceptable in their worst form. A major difficulty in the past has been that the victims were deprived of any effective voice. Women were without the vote, they could not enter parliament, they were denied higher education; they were at the mercy of male interpretation. Again until the very end of the slave trade as it was there was no document written by a slave, expressing how the slave felt or experienced their lot. Virtually all we have got with the odd exception of some religious or priest came from people with a vested interest in slavery, and who were generally quite happy with it.

That is the good side of the ledger. But there is also the bad side that has emerged with the development of psychology and sociology, and through that greater awareness of what is really happening in our own lives and in society. The better you understand how people function as individuals and in society the better position you are to take advantage of them and manipulate them. If you want people to buy something, or support something, you may appeal to their reason and good sense. But you can also flatter them, associate your product with what will appeal to them, threaten them, implicitly promise them something, and do all this without them being aware of what you are about. Generally speaking there are no blatant lies. It is the subtle hint, insinuation, line of presentation that carries people along that is the problem. One suspects that it is not by accident that the new car is being driven some well-dressed, good-looking young person, so that the ad seems to be at least as much about the person driving as it is about the car. I suspect too that it is not through a lapse of memory that the price is seldom mentioned. That sense of living somewhere between honesty and deceit is strong when it comes to the preoccupation with images. There are people worried about the purity of water and atmosphere, and the avoidance of pollution in its many forms; but one hears much more about the clean and

green image of New Zealand than about the real issue. It is difficult to see how focusing on images and preoccupation with them has not got an element of deceit in it. And what about the reshaping of a politician or a public figure by public relations experts? Is it merely a question of her or him becoming more courteous and more diligent or improving his English diction? There was the American Senator who objected to being branded and sold like detergent. Personally I should prefer public figures in their unvarnished state.

There was a time when the question of truth and falsehood seemed simple and clear. If you said what you knew in your mind you were telling the truth; if what you said did not correspond with what you knew you were telling a lie. It is not that we have left all this behind; by no means. But we have come to see more clearly what we sensed all along that the issue is much more complex. There is truthfulness in relationships that is not satisfied by simply telling the obvious facts as they are. For a relationship to be truthful it is necessary for both parties to be committed to honesty about themselves and about how they stand in relation to the other. To engage in a relationship with anyone is to commit oneself to the truth in so far as it affects this relationship. The degree of commitment will be greater between husband and wife than between casual acquaintances. But there is in every dealing this promise of truthfulness; no human existence is possible except on this basis. We have seen that in presenting ourselves before others there can be a great temptation not only to deceive the other person but to deceive oneself. Living a lie is more far-reaching than telling a lie. When one lives a lie, it pervades one's whole existence, and, of course, one's relationships.

The main reason that I am trying to offer a few ideas on this topic today is that it has been a neglected topic, with remarkably little on it in theology books or in catechetical programmes. This seems strange at a time when, on the one hand we have been reaching new levels of honesty on many fronts, and on the other a greater potential for deception is being developed. If there be a problem with boy racers it is one in which we see clearly what is happening. One sees them and can certainly hear them. But when one is dealing with falsehood and deception one is dealing with something that is generally disguised, hidden and denied. And since, to a degree, it runs through the whole social fabric, those who deceive and those who are deceived are not always easy to distinguish. We are all to some degree at fault.

There is one factor that goes a long way towards explaining how deception and evasion enter our personal and social lives systematically, so that they are already there before we waken up to the fact. Our first and spontaneous

inclination is to put ourselves at the centre of the universe. The young child can be very forceful when it says, I want. It comes very easy, almost natural, to us to favour ourselves, to ensure that we have our way and that all turns out to our advantage. Others are expected to adapt to this. It is the other person who is in the way. There was the European teacher in the Aborigine school who explained to the children that Captain Cook discovered Australia. When I went to school it was taken for granted that Christopher Columbus discovered America. It certainly was not a simple discovery, and the Indians have been trying to come to terms with the result ever since. The Europeans took for granted that their understanding and ways were normal and they quickly imposed them. And they exploited the situation for their own advantage. The point I am making is that we are accustomed to thinking of colonies in a political sense only; in fact colonisation of this kind is only one expression of that spontaneous attitude into which we fall without even adverting to this. To see the world as revolving around ourselves is necessarily to do an injustice to other people, and to falsify our perception of them. We can go effectively against this only when we really discover that there are other people in the world. It is essential to pay sufficient attention to other people, to gain real insight into their mystery and dignity. Again and again in the Gospels we find Jesus giving his attention to the individual person, and drawing our attention to him or her. One can think of the leper, the poor widow with the small coins, the man with the withered hand. In each case he was dealing with somebody who was being overlooked, or treated with contempt. In our highly-organised and very busy world, in which enormously complex systems rule our lives it is precisely this that tends to be overlooked. This is saying that truth cannot be separated from love. Only in love do we see the truth of others or our own truth. There is the prayer ascribed to St. Teresa in which she speaks of our eyes now being the only eyes through which Jesus can look out with compassion on the world. We do not see people at a distance, but people we share life with in sharing their joys and hopes, their griefs and anxieties.

In the Book of Deuteronomy the Jews were forbidden to oppress the stranger; the reason given is that they themselves had been strangers in the land of Egypt. God saved them because he had regard for their oppressed state as strangers in Egypt. They knew the heart of the stranger from their own experience. A Jewish writer makes the point that it is by knowing the heart of the stranger that we know the stranger in ourselves, the part that we try to avoid, and our own need of salvation. In knowing that need and in setting out together, knowing that salvation is ours in Christ, we are living in the truth.