

Twisting truth

1 Kings 21:1-10, 15-21a; Luke 7:36 – 8:3

One of the advantages of fleeing the country next Friday to go to the American Presbyterian Church's General Assembly is I will be able to avoid the last week of the European Referendum campaign. Not to endure the airwaves assaulted David and Boris and Nicola and Nigel will be more than a relief. Do let me know how it all turns out!

Mind you, going to the United States with Hillary and Donald slogging it out might not be much of an exchange.

In these political campaigns, as in every other, there seems to me to be a mounting frustration with politicians who won't or can't say what they mean. They twist and they turn and they give answers to questions that were not asked. I would always encourage people to vote; democracy is a privilege and a responsibility. But in the sinking sands of political waffle, half-truths, prejudice and in some instances down-right misinformation, how do we discern the truth?

"What is truth? said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer", wrote Francis Bacon in his C17th essay. Truth is not always easy. Few of us are comfortable with being told the unvarnished truth about ourselves, or situations in which we are involved. There can be a tendency to tidy things up to make them more presentable, or palatable.

Yet we also have Jesus telling us in John's gospel that the truth shall set us free. Tough though truth is, it is ultimately better than its alternative. Truth brings light, and light brings healing, and healing brings wholeness.

When truth is twisted, there is darkness; where there is darkness, there is hurt; and where there is hurt, there is brokenness.

Twisted truth, darkness, hurt and brokenness characterise the sordid, nasty tale of Naboth's vineyard. In this story from ancient Israel, King Ahab is made sick by his greed for a vineyard he cannot have. Ahab's obsession is toxic: he takes to his bed and will not eat, so poisoned

by his own covetousness that he would rather die than fail to acquire the object of his desire. The King has much more than he needed, the hapless vineyard owner, Naboth, simply wanted to keep his family's heritage, a small vineyard.

Ahab gains the vineyard at a tragic cost. His wife Jezebel, one of the most infamous women in the Bible, twists the truth. Naboth is 'set up' with false letters, betrayed on a trumped up charge, and stoned to death. On hearing the news, Jezebel tells Ahab he can take the vineyard.ⁱ

However deeds one in darkness are always brought into the light of God's truth. Elijah the prophet hears of this story of truth twisted, and denounces Ahab and Jezebel, who in time come to particularly unpleasant ends. Elijah brings light into the darkness. Elijah confronts the evil. The oppression of Ahab and Jezebel will come to an end. The moral is clear: do not oppress your weaker neighbour, for divine judgment will fall on those who pervert justice for their own ends. A warning not only to ancient Israelite kings and queens, but also to governments today, and presidential candidates in the US.

God will not countenance or tolerate cruelty against the defenceless. Elijah untwists the truth and gives it straight to Ahab and Jezebel. There will be consequences to their actions.

What Ahab and Jezebel did, annexing neighbouring land, building walls around it, protecting it for their own purposes, has been repeated again and again in history. The Empires of Spain, Portugal, the Belgians and French, the Chinese and Japanese, and the British, were built on these principles. It is what Napoleon did in the C18th and C19th. It's what Hitler did in Poland. Contemporary commentators say the same about the policies of the United States in Latin America, and one might argue in Iraq in recent years. It is what Israel has been doing to the native Palestinians for decades in the troubled Holy Land. Political justification for land-grabbing may be couched in economic, military, or security reasons. Nearer to home, ongoing austerity having effects on our economy, our National Health Service, our education system? Edinburgh City Council's decision to start charging for parking in the city centre on

Sundays, despite 80% of a consultation response being opposed to the introduction; so that, according to the city transport convener Lesley Hinds, we can be a, “seven day a week city.” With no guarantee of improved public transport.

We read the story of Naboth’s vineyard and we should read our newspapers and watch and listen to our news bulletins. Who are the Ahabs and Jezebels today? Who are the Naboths? What is the shape of the conspiracy this time? Where is truth being twisted to suit a politician’s perception, or goals, not shared by others? Who will win, and who will lose?

If we are asked to wonder who the Ahabs and Jezebels and Naboths are, who are the Elijah’s speaking out? Do we, not just as a body the Church, but as individuals the Church, bring God’s word to governments and councils, and keep bringing it even when we are ignored or side-lined? Or do we sit in permissive silence and quietism, saying nothing when we should be speaking out?

There is no easy answer. Even if we do speak out, we cannot guarantee a hearing. Even if we get a hearing, we may not win our cause. But the arc of God is long and bends towards justice, and in the end, I believe, the downtrodden, the unjustly treated, the oppressed, the ignored, the side-lined and the mocked will have their cause vindicated by God.

If the principle of being a good neighbour is to welcome and accept; if the example of Jesus is to embrace the stranger and to get alongside the widow and orphan; then anything that twists truth away from that with arguments of economic self-preservation, or national security, need at least to be rigorously examined. In the ongoing European debate, and in the Presidential debate in the United States – are we really going back to a time of walls and barriers, and is there no way to argue robustly about internal support, safety and inclusion? We live at a time when the kind of city, country, continent and world we want to live in is being shaped, by what we do, and by what we fail to do.

Will we place self-interest over common good; will we prize national protection over international co-operation; will we condone the stealing of vineyards by our silence, or speak

out about the injustices in our own and other countries, and be prepared to pay the price for speaking the truth that no-one else might want to hear? There are no easy answers; there are plenty of arguments that will take us one way or another.

At the end of this troubling Bible story, God says to Ahab through the prophet Elijah, “You will reap what you have sown. You have brought disaster, you will suffer disaster.” A commentator asks, is this a satisfactory ending? Do God’s words make Naboth’s family feel any better? Is there any honourable way to atone for what happened to Naboth? Is there any way to correct this miscarriage of justice? Even God’s promises of justice ring a little hollow. The story ends with Elijah and Ahab in stolen vineyard, pondering God’s words, aware that something terrible has happened, aware that nothing can make it right.

We are left to wrestle with its meaning. In our world today, with justice and injustice balanced; with remain and exit balanced; with competing claims on how we define truth balanced; we ask where is God, and how would God act?

And God trusts us to make up our own mind, and act truthfully.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ Carolyn J Sharp, Feasting on the Word, Year C vol 3 p122ff