

Sermon: Why truth matters

There is a curious modern idea that the Christian truth is a matter of personal inclination and above all of feeling. This view nearly always comes up in any discussion of religion. Let us test it then. You will hear people say, *God for ME is* – and then they will offer a list of favourable qualities. They will do the same with Jesus or the church or the resurrection. As if these things were matters of personal opinion. Imagine the same method applied say to geography: *Well, for me Tunbridge Wells is north of Iceland*. Or arithmetic: *I do feel ever so strongly that two plus two make seven*.

Of course if you started to talk like this, your friends would send for the men in white coats. But somehow when it comes to religion the supposition is that truth is a movable feast. Running alongside this is the saying: *Everyone has a right to his own opinion*. This is true. But what they mean by it is: *So everybody's opinion is as valid as everyone else's*. Let us test this too. *The borough engineer has done the calculations for building a new bridge over the river*. That's one opinion. But Sharon, aged six, says: *We don't need calculations. We just need the bridge fairy to carry us across*. One opinion is not as good as another.

All opinions cannot be equally valid. If we want to discover which opinions we should trust, then we would be wise to consult the expert. When I wanted to get something clear about astrophysics, I had a long telephone conversation with Professor Roger Penrose. Twenty years ago when I wanted to understand how the series of overtones in music determined the different characters of the keys, I asked our village organist.

Ah but, people think this sensible method doesn't apply to religion – because they assume religion to be so nebulous that no one can know the truth about it. So you might as well put St Paul and L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of Scientology, in the same bag. And for many people, religion is just one more of the things that can be left to the feelings and to sentimentality: Tiny Tim, snow on your boots and Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer.

But there *is* such a thing as absolute truth in religion and it is the most important kind of truth: for what you believe about religion is what you believe *ultimately*. Your religion is your set of absolute presuppositions – that is what faith is. Your whole outlook, how you construct the world depends upon what you believe fundamentally: that is your religion. Truth in religion is a matter of life or death. If you think that two plus two make seven, you'll only end up out of pocket. And if you try to go to Tunbridge Wells by going to Iceland, you'll end up worse than disgusted – you'll be freezing. But if you get your religious doctrine wrong, your life will be a mess in this world and the next.

It is the doctrinal framework of Christianity which has helped us form so many good things and avoid mistakes. I showed in the first of the September sermons how Christianity made science possible. The faith also made music possible. It began in the Middle Ages in French monasteries. The faith made rational politics possible because the Incarnation gave rise to the concept of institutions as personalities beyond the prejudice and self-interest of the political parties. I want to give two examples to

show why truth matters in religion and the disastrous consequences when you get it wrong.

In the Middle Ages, there was a religious sect in southern Europe known as the Cathars or the Albigensians. Their beliefs had certain superficial resemblances to Christianity. To cut a long story short, after centuries of trouble, Christian armies suppressed the Cathars. Now when you read some modern books about this period, you find it's frequently said that the Christians were needlessly severe on the Cathars – after all it was *only a matter of doctrine*.

Yes, it was a matter of doctrine. But there's no *only* about it. Here are some of the things the Cathars believed: they rejected the Old Testament and the Fathers; they believed that God and the devil were equal; that the Body of Christ was not a real body; that the Christian Sacraments were satanic symbols; that churches were the abode of evil spirits; they rejected Baptism, because they thought water was made by the devil; they didn't believe in Original Sin; the Cathars' leaders described themselves as *The Perfect and The Good*. Clearly, the differences between the Cathars and the Christians were not trivial.

In fact, it was a fight to the death. If the Cathars had won, Europe and eventually the whole western world would have followed a path to catastrophe: because what you believe about God and the world has historical consequences that determine the very nature of your civilisation. Catharism was not a civilisation: as R.G. Collingwood says, *It was a barbarism*.

My second example is from even further back, from the 4th century, and goes by the name of Arianism. Arius was a theologian who taught that Christ was not, as St John's Gospel tells us, the Eternal Word, but was created by God and was inferior to God. Arius used to go around spreading this message in a little ditty in Greek: ην ποτε οτε ουκ ην. *There was a time when he, Christ, was not*. Whereas the Nicene Creed we sing every Sunday says that Christ was *begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father*.

Arius denied that Christ was of the same substance with the Father, saying that he was only of *similar* substance. This led to one of the most famous disputes in Christian history – all depending on the smallest Greek letter *iota*. Greek for the same substance is ομοιουσια and for similar substance ομουσια - without the *iota*. Naturally, critics of Christian orthodoxy mock this: as if the smallest letter in the Greek alphabet could make much difference!

But the difference it makes would have destroyed the Christian faith if Arius had triumphed. It would have meant that Christ was not to be worshipped; that the Sacraments were not Christ's Body and Blood; that the doctrine of the Trinity would have been abandoned. And as I showed in the September sermon on theology and science – printed first in the new booklet – the doctrine of the Trinity is the intellectual ground of western civilisation.

Truth in doctrine is not just something for nitpicking theologians to play games over. What you believe religiously is as important as what you believe in maths and geography. Ultimately what you believe religiously is *more important* than what you

believe in maths and geography – not least because *what you believe religiously will determine what sorts of maths and geography you end up with*. Christian truth, doctrine, dogma is not remote and disembodied: what we believe precisely forms what we do practically, what we are. And as it would not be polite but dangerous not to tell a child the truth about fire, so it is infinitely more dangerous not to believe the truth about religion.

G.K. Chesterton helps us understand this, and he does so in his usual vivid style. He says:

At least five times, with the Arian and the Albigensian, with the Humanist sceptic, after Voltaire and after Darwin, the Christian Faith has to all appearances gone to the dogs. But in each of these five cases, it was the dog that died...

It is easy to be a madman; it is easy to be a heretic. It is always easy to let the age have its head. The difficult thing is to keep one's own. It is always easy to be a modernist; as it is easy to be a snob. To have fallen into any of these open types of error and exaggeration which fashion after fashion and sect after sect set along the historic path of Christendom – that would have indeed been simple...

It is always simple to fall; there are an infinity of angles at which one falls, only one at which one stands. To have fallen into any of the fads from Gnosticism to Christian Science would indeed have been obvious and tame. But to avoid them all is one whirling adventure; and in my vision the heavenly chariot flies thundering through the ages, the dull heresies sprawling and prostrate: the wild truth reeling but upright.