**Truth- URC talk 29th October 2023 Simon Redman**

My history teacher spent our lessons writing his next book and so for our lessons he would say, read chapter 15 in my book on the French Revolution and in the last 5 minutes unpack everything about the events we had read about in a pithy summary of the key influences, and aspirations of all the people involved.

Here you have asked me to speak about the wonderful subject of Truth with reference to Alice’s excellent book Treasures in the Darkness. I could adopt the same approach and say read chapter 3 and sum it up in 5 minutes at the end, and if you haven’t read Alice’s book, I encourage you to get it.

I would like to speak about the biblical underpinning of truth which is so clear and attractive that we can then ask…well, why doesn’t everyone follow this? and touch on the philosophical influences that have shaped the ‘world thinking’ from the 5th century to the present day, and then consider how this should call us to respond.

**Jesus cared about truth**..he used the term ‘I tell you the truth’ nearly seventy times; in Greek the word for truth is translated as amen which we use to close our prayers.

At the beginning of his gospel, John describes the word of God, through whom all creation came into being, as becoming human in the form of Jesus.

Jesus described himself as the way, **the truth** and the life( John 14.6) and when he was about to ascend to the Father he told the Disciples that **he would send the Spirit of truth** to guide us into all truth (John 14.17).

Alice reminds us that the Hebrew word for truth is ‘emeth’ meaning stability and that in a world where we are bombarded with information, opinions, speculation, and reports delivered with authority, the word of God… the truth… stabilises us.

The names God gives himself are all positive, Jehovah Rapha ( healer), I am, truth…

The name the enemy goes by is the deceiver and that is what he does.

**The question we need to ask ourselves is what and who are we going to believe?**

We all think we can detect lies, but deceit, which contains an element of truth is more beguiling and ultimately corrosive, and Satan likes to sow seeds of doubt. What lies have we absorbed about ourselves this morning?

If we remember the garden of Eden, God had provided everything that Adam and Eve need, and he wants to protect them from the horrors of evil. He says don’t eat of the tree of knowledge, that is the only restriction he puts on them.

Satan says to Eve in Genesis 3 4-5 ‘you will surely not die, for God knows that in the day you eat of it you will be like God’. Note Satan did not frighten Eve, he is subtle, drawing her in with a little truth, (for she would not die eating the apple), but not the whole truth!..

When Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days and was tempted by the devil, Satan tried to question the identity of Jesus, to tempt him to test God’s ability to rescue him and to promise him all of the kingdoms of earth when they already belonged to Jesus.

**Satan wanted Jesus to sin in some way to prevent him redeeming humanity. In the same way he wants us to sin to sour our relationship with God.**

So we know that the word of scripture is the truth. We cannot lose our salvation once we are in Christ, but we can be enslaved in bondage by sin, temptation, legalism, compromise, apathy, and disinterest in things that matter to God.

Jesus said in John 8 that **the truth will set us free** and so we can live the purposeful, fruitful , joyful life that we were created for; Paul adds to this in Galatians 5.1 by saying

‘Stand fast in the liberty by which Christ has made us free and do not be entangled again with the yoke of bondage’.

 Indeed Christ encourages us to yoke with him, ( Mtthew 11.28) and find rest for our souls, for his yoke is easy and his burden light.

So referring to the passages read today, Paul encourages us to take up the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God, **to preserve us, and to empower us**.

**Our weapon is truth and our battle is spiritual** and we are encouraged to put on the belt of truth as part of our spiritual armour.

*SO… if this is the good news which is that the gospel has the power to transform our lives, why don’t we all believe this and apply it?*

*And .. if we understand it, how do we share this good news with others so that God does not appear a fictious character akin to Peter Pan or Superman that people have no knowledge of..?*

*If we do not share this truth, it will become the best kept secret that no-one hears.*

God has created mankind to be inherently spiritual, to search for meaning and significance to our lives and to have a measure of what is good and what is evil?

**Without the truth of the scriptures, who or how do we determine our moral laws?**

The enemy we are told is like a prowling lion seeking to devour. He does not care if we set up theological colleges, sing hymns, meet together in church as long as we don’t pray and form a relationship with the Holy Spirit such that the power of God is released. **So Satan is working to stop as many people accessing the truth as possible.**

Even in ‘the church’, Satan works to deny God’s power by encouraging sin and spreading contention and disbelief. In what is termed the liberal church, the existence of the devil is often not recognised, the power of the Holy Spirit is not called upon, the time spent on programs can exceed that spent on prayer and there can be little expectation that prayers will yield results. Some churches have embraced the gender confusion and through a desire to attract more attendees, have made their churches indistinctive from the world.

In some churches which have moved powerfully in the Holy Spirit, the leaders are ‘taken out’ through sexual or financial sin.

**So what is the background to the world thinking about God?**

In the 5th Century, Augustine was searching for how he could discern what is true from what is false and was looking for a power that made a difference in his life. The Romans favoured a mixture of occult practices and Gnosticism, we would call it New Age religion perhaps.

Importantly he found those writing the gospels to be unpretentious, full of humility, written by simple people who were not trying to gain a reputation for themselves and their writings permeated with the integrity of Holy character, the character of God. Moreover the prophecies had come true, history had validated them.

Augustine was looking for a power that made a difference in his life and knew current beliefs did not do so.

Augustine was troubled by the savagery of the reign of Claudius and by his own lustful desires for women. ‘Give me chastity… but not yet’ is often quoted!

Augustine heard a child calling ‘Take up and read, take up and read’. He did so and he realised immediately that the answer to the savagery, lust and greed of man was in the word and the power of God and not in the Greek philosophies, gnostic cults and sceptical sciences of his time . His ministry was foundational in spreading the good news.

Fast forward to the beginning of the 17th century and we meet the French philosopher Descartes, (Father of the Enlightenment movement) a catholic who lived a Christian life, but who wanted to present rational proof of God to unbelievers **using two tools, of experience and deduction**. *He tried to* ***reason*** *that God existed, but in doing so moved away from the Spiritual encounter and birthed others who were not Christians to build on his work.*

The work of Descartes contributed to the French Revolution where Religion and State were separated and to the rationalist thinking that still permeates our current times.

**Paul saw the folly of this approach as we see in 1 Corinthians 2 4-5**

**My message and my teaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on man’s wisdom, but on God’s power.**

Jesus spoke to his Father( in Luke 10.21)

**You have hidden these things from the wise and the learned and revealed them to little children.**

Jesus said that we have to be like little children to enter the Kingdom of God, that means the faithful trust children have for their parents.

**SO here is the crux of all the thinking that has taken place since… If we try to reason that God exists, then whatever cannot be rationally understood is regarded as an illusion and this meant for many that God was an illusion.**

As we place our understanding of our existence and meaning in the hands of scientists and medicine and Philosophers, we lose the wonder of God’s truth and will be sadly disappointed that it does not give us the answers and we are not happy.

**It is said that science explains the how but not the why we were created.**

Freud used Descartes methods… but kicked out God from his explanations for why things happened as Freud had not experienced the power of God in his life.

Whereas Augustine believed the rational mind had no power over savagery, lust and greed, Freud believed that the rational mind alone could overcome these urges. Science is based on empirical evidence and predictability, but God cannot be put in a box.

Peter had to get out of the boat in order to experience the supernatural ability to walk on the water and this is how God works, he looks to see a germ of Faith and responds. In Mark (9;24), a father appeals to Jesus to caste demons out of his son ( IF HE CAN) after the Disciples had failed to do so. Jesus says anything is possible if a person believes and the man says…

 ‘I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief’

**This summarises a situation where the extent of our belief is determined by our experiences of God’s power. We understand what is written is true, but we are struggling to believe it will happen when… perhaps we pray for healing, or to stop wars or change cruel leaders.**

The power of searching for and sharing testimonies will increase our Faith. The people that see more of God’s power ( and therefore the full truth of the word) are those who are persistent and expectant in prayer.

Marx and Engels carried on the baton of replacing God with man’s intellect, and built communism, rejecting the authority of God, the Church the Bible or any previous philosophies.

Communism would be the determinant of what was right or wrong….NOT the word of God and in truth this meant power was held by a few people…. Much like the Pharisees in the time of Jesus used legalism to maintain their own positions of power.

Communism failed…but the truth of Christ would live on. Marx died consumed with hate and Freud could not be comforted after his daughter’s death, unable to make sense of a life without God.

Then came Darwin, a man of Christian faith, but a careful scientist who was unable to comprehend creation as an event and developed the theory of evolution, in the world appeared and developed through natural laws. The implication of this is that man’s increasing knowledge of science and medicine were proof that man himself was evolving.

**This idea is used by some Christians to change scripture by saying that ‘that was for then but we have evolved in our knowledge and cultures so we should also discard some scriptures or reinterpret them from what was said by Jesus and the Disciples.**

Deists ( whose ideas were based on those of Descartes) say that God ( whoever or whatever that means) created natural laws and then retired from the universe.

Atheists have used evolution to demonstrate that all the solutions to the problems of the world lie not in a supernatural relationship but in human reasoning.

Luther agreed with Augustine and commented that the enemy is content when men tie themselves up in human vices and philosophical reasoning, anything that keeps them away from truly believing in the truth of the scriptures and a belief in the power of God.

Incidentally, Satan believes in the power of God and we see in the scriptures many times when Jesus meets demon possessed people, that the spirits recognise him as the son of God.

Luther concluded that it is prayer that defeats ‘that wicked and pernicious spirit!’

In Germany in the first and second world wars, we saw the rise of Aryan supremacy linked to demonic powers and Egyptian Gods and symbolized by the swastika; Hitler spoke of replacing the cross with the swastika and this led Dietrich Bonhoeffer ( from his prison camp) to conclude that

‘ man had learned to cope with all questions without recourse to God’

Recent trends are built on the philosophies of the Age of Reason and Descartes, but in our multi cultural world we add on the belief systems of other religions such as Buddhism ( I would argue it is more commonplace to see a Buddhist statue than a cross on trips out), people becoming increasingly unfamiliar with scripture, the decline in the moral standards and values of politicians, the lack of public trust in politicians and journalists, the busyness of social media making it difficult to ascertain the truth of news, made worse by A1, the short attention span of the emerging generations, the growth of individualism and self, and a reluctance to obey laws and adhere to rules that benefit the community rather than self. My truth… your truth… what is truth asked Pilot of Jesus?

Special interest groups can hold a voice that exceeds their number. Conspiracy theorists paid by Governments and businessmen can influence many without being held to account.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to know what the truth is and to decide what is right and wrong. Those who plead for more individual freedoms think this will make us happier, but in truth it will not.

Think of a football game where the tram lines, goalposts and referee are removed, the footballers will not have an independent arbiter judge when they are offside or foul their opponents and no-one will know how to play the game or who has won. The players will not be happier!

The world is full of terrible events and without a scriptural mindset, and the ability to see joy in all circumstances and have hope as Jesus taught us, to live in the light not the darkness, we will not be able to make sense of the world and our place in it.

We are all designed to be spiritual beings and we are living in a world obsessed by material and physical gratification. The byproducts of the path we have chosen are dramatic increases in addictions, pornography, gender dysphoria, mental health problems, debt, increases in violence, marriage breakdowns and fatherless children. By looking to science and medicine for the solutions we replace moral teaching from scripture about say sexual abstinence with physical solutions like the morning after pill(?) for accidental pregnancies.

**Most people do not believe that the spiritual world influences our physical world and so we look for physical solutions to our problems, science, medicine, government spending, laws….**

**What is the solution?**

Christians need to rediscover their love of scripture, it’s truth, and commit it to their hearts so that it influences our behaviour, we become better disciples..the church must once again offer something different/better to the world ( too often it does NOT).

We need to share that the good news is not only that there is more to life than this time on earth, but that our time on earth can be more fruitful and fulfilling and that God will not remove the challenges of life but he will go ahead of us and guide us through them.

We need to operate in power, through more prayer time and working with the Holy Spirit

Then others will notice how we flourish and that we have meaning and purpose in our lives and yes joy in all circumstances and like the Acts Church, the numbers of believers will grow each day.

We are now going to sing the hymn Guide thee oh my great redeemer, to remind us of the truth of God’s grace and our dependency on him, not the ways of man.