

MADE IN THE IMAGE OF GOD (3rd of 3 Sermons)

Lent 3 2016 – Rev Deryck Collingwood

CONSECRATED IN THE TRUTH.

Very recently, in another context, I was asked to nominate a book that had inspired me. That's quite hard, just one, but I settled on 'The Gospel according to Barnabas' (Graham Jeffery, 1975), a series of cartoons, especially the one where Jesus calls his disciples...

"Come on Andrew, and bring Peter with you. We need people like him: weak, boastful, always biting off more than they can chew and making absolute fools of themselves.

"And that goes to you too, James, and bring Johnny as well. Your fierce temper and his inexperience could be very useful. And you Mary – with your nervous disorders and emotional instability, and everyone despising you because of your bad life. We should get on famously together." ...

Most of us are here because of our shortcomings. If we think we are here out of righteousness, well... maybe that was part of Judas' problem.

Having thus far considered our being made in the image of God as male and female (even when things go awry) and as stewards of creation (caretakers, one might say, rather than simply 'takers' of all that we care for), now we turn to that 'new creation' in Christ bestowed upon the disciples as bearers of the Word, "consecrated in truth".

In that wonderful prayer of John 17, Jesus prays that they may be sanctified, or consecrated, in the truth. As he is sent into the world, so he sends them. He consecrates himself, so that they also may be consecrated in the truth.

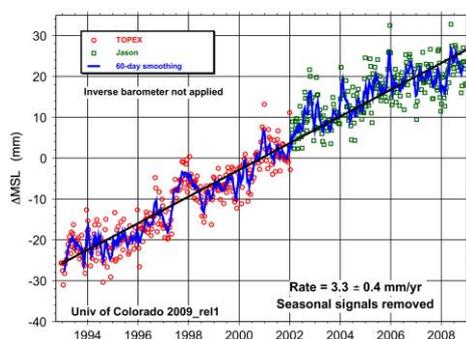
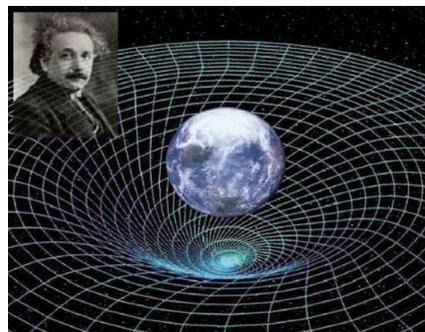
What Is Truth?



Your truth and
my truth may
not be the
same.

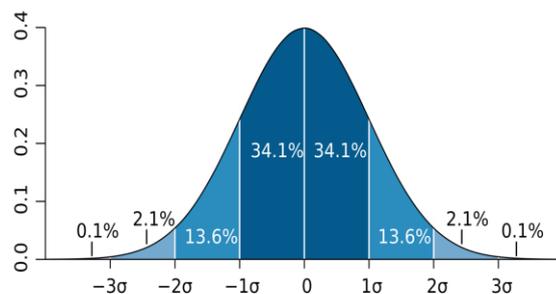
But a little later, when Pilate then asks 'What is truth?', we probably find ourselves in some sympathy with the man. Truth is not always so easy to get at.

As a youngster I was fascinated by the apparent beauty in the laws of physics and maths. But the best laid theories are nonetheless based upon imperfect data within an unpredictable and inevitably messy reality.



Even where a trend is clear, few examples exactly fit what we settle on as the norm. Many near misses may be close to the line but rarely right on it.

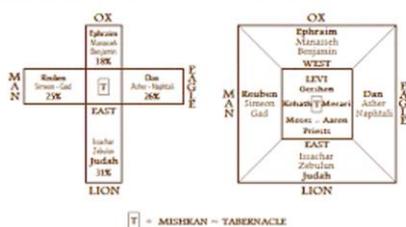
Likewise with normal distribution or standard deviation curves. A slight majority of us, of data gathered, fit into the central 'norm' but a significant number lie towards one extreme or the other. Little more than half of us fit the 'norm' in that sense. Thankfully many are a bunch of deviants at heart!



And theories, even convincing theories, are always only the best possible interpretation of available data – until more information becomes available and new ideas or ways of looking at things come to light.

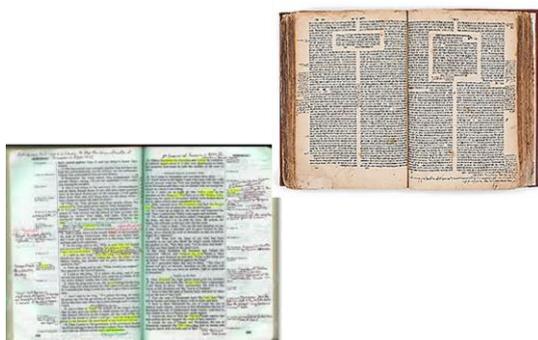
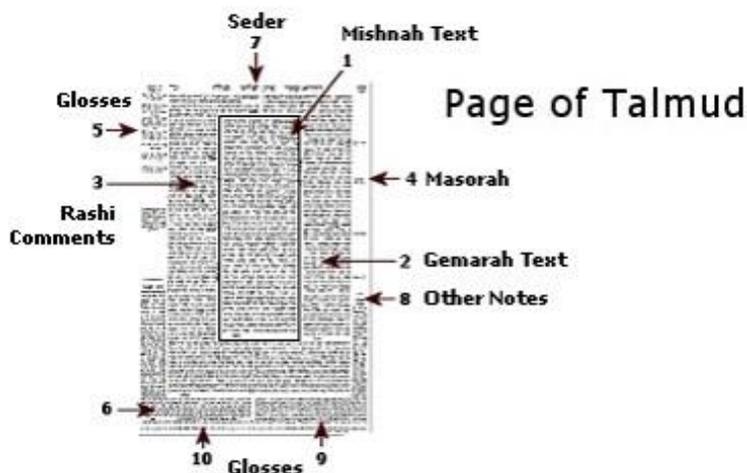


Wilderness Encampment



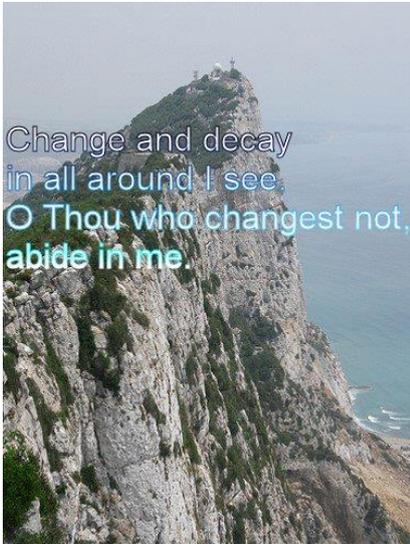
Something similar can be said about theological truth. What we hope to understand by that phrase changes down through the years. We hold to the best of the variety of information and interpretation handed down to us – the documents of scripture, the traditions of our forebears – and make the best sense we can of life and faith in the light of other learning open to us in our own day.

And this has always been the way. The Jewish rabbis had a wonderful tradition of adding little notes in the margins around scripture – they needed big margins! – so as to debate with one another what the scripture might mean and where there might be errors in the text for that matter too.



But inevitably we generate one or two problems. Constant re-interpretation of scripture and perception of truth means *my* truth may be different to *your* truth, so good natured little comments in margins may develop into mega-arguments, schisms, hostilities, even war.

Good on Pilate for asking, “What is truth?”! Perhaps he looked at the religious world and despaired at the cycle of discontent and bitterness that it appears to generate. We might well do the same.



We sing in our hymn, “Change and decay in all around I see... O thou who changest not, abide in me!” The words may be written as a cry from a heart seeking truth and goodness in a confusing world; but they could just as easily be applied by the cynic to the discontented religious communities each trying to establish their superiority over rival factions. “I wash my hands of it!” says Pilate.

Of course this is not the kind of ‘abiding’ that Jesus speaks of when he refers to the image of the vine and branches that bear fruit. It is not the kind that St Paul speaks of when he affirms those three qualities that *do* abide: faith, hope and love – the greatest of which is *Agape*, that self-sacrificial love which I referred to last time in citing Sally McFague.



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The image contains a circular diagram with various religious symbols (cross, crescent, star of David, etc.) and text boxes for different faiths: CHRISTIANITY, ISLAM, HINDUISM, BUDDHISM, JUDAISM, SIKHISM, and BANAI TRUTH. Each box contains a brief description of the faith's stance on debt and justice.

She holds that all interesting theology these days focusses on *process* rather than the more static, traditional ideas of who we are or who God is in philosophical debate. She would focus on the process of *becoming* the creatures God would have us be rather than enter arguments that accept we are who we are by nature; she would look for the way things might work for greater good in the world rather than say, ‘this is the way the world works’.

It is all too easy to look at the way things seem to work us and think, “This is the way it is!” The seasons come and go. If God wants us to be good stewards, we will do the best we can to help our little patch to do as well as it might. But basically, there is little we can do to change the cycle: “change and decay in all around I see” can become a cry of despair.

To think and speak in those terms is to be sucked into the realm of desolation. But this is far from what Jesus prays for his disciples in being consecrated in the truth – something much more akin to that realm of ‘consolation’, of freedom from despair – even if for them, as for him, it may lead to a cross.



To be consecrated – set apart – in truth, is to be set apart from that cycle of life experience and invited into an unending opportunity for growth and new life. It is to see ourselves in that process of growth *into* him who *is* Life.



So, not a growth as the ‘world’ may know and expect, which will drive us to seek our own benefit, advantage or preferment, through the sweat of our brow; something that will lead us to forget that God’s image is to be found in every other person around us; lead us to forget our charge as stewards of this earth, care-takers of God’s creation.

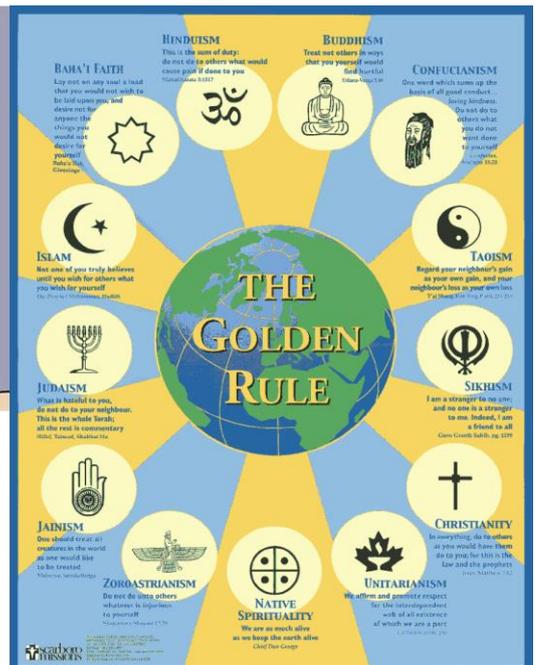


Rather, we are consecrated into truth that is planted in this world but not *of* this world, offering ourselves in service of him who is Servant of all; a service of

others that *is* nonetheless our benefit, in coming to discover *his* life within our own true selves – not, however, by seeking this in itself, but by losing ourselves in him.

And ultimately we might dare to say the same of formalised religion, in that quote attributed to William Temple that, **“The greatest contribution of Jesus Christ to religion was to do away with it.”**

There are inevitably events in the history of every religion and aspects of the diversity of religious practice that are hard for us to swallow. There are also things of great beauty that, in common humanity, we share. One of them is of course the Golden Rule: do to others as you would have others do to you, there in one form or other in nigh on every faith tradition.



It might be said that as soon as the call simply to follow Jesus was turned into another Religion, a rival religion competing for people’s attentions and affections in a religious market place, we were leading ourselves up a very risky path on which to hope to continue to meet the One who calls us.

We may feel very imperfect; we may feel utterly inadequate. We may struggle with the thought of seeing any semblance of God's image reflected in our own. But in the power of God we come, in this 'tent of meeting' to share his gift of a meal that is consecrated in Christ's self-giving as his body and blood, to enter again and again into that journey of grace and transformation with him.



And all of us may hope, together with those disciples of Corinth to who Paul wrote, to see the glory of the Lord even as though reflected in a mirror, and be transformed into that same image of the One who formed us, from one degree of glory to another, for this comes, says Paul, from the Lord, the Spirit. We are made in the image of God and we bear that image in our lives. It is a most extraordinary thing that God is doing.