

TRUTH OF THE HEART

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2 Samuel 18:24-33; Psalm 102; John 6:51-58; Ephesians 5:15-20

Last Sunday, Daniella spoke about truth, the power of speaking the truth and the catastrophic consequences of keeping silent. Was in relation to the OT account of the rape of Tamar and the Gospel account of the healing of the woman who suffered haemorrhaging.

Pick up on some of themes on which she touched.

Specifically – TRUTH, SPEAKING THE TRUTH and LANGUAGE.

Topics close to my heart, not just because I am a journalist and language teacher. Also mother of two-year olds. Like having two parrots in house. My idiosyncrasies of language are echoed at me constantly – sometimes in stereo! Not only my expressions, but also intonation patterns - “I love you SO much!” “It’s a lovely day outside!” also... “I said NO, Joshua!” “Stop that, Hannah!”

OT today continues story of consequences of Amnon’s rape of his half-sister Tamar. Focus more specifically on failure of Absalom and David to acknowledge the offence and deal with it. Absalom has conspired against David and challenged him for leadership of the kingdom. He has now been killed by David’s loyal troops and a messenger is dispatched to tell David.

The nature of the news defines choice of a messenger, since this is bad news, a foreigner is chosen, a Cushite. However, Ahimaaz, son of Zadok priest insists on going, believing that the news is not that bad, it’s actually good, since the rebels have been defeated. He fails to realise how Absalom’s death will affect David. Ahimaaz outruns the Cushite and reaches David first, but does not tell him Absalom is dead. He leaves that to the Cushite.

It is a painful truth he has to deliver. The Cushite says, “May the enemies of my Lord the king and all who rise up to harm you be like that young man.” I find this expression of a terrible truth very moving. I think it displays immense compassion from a perhaps unexpected quarter – a foreigner, while the king’s own man, Ahimaaz, fails to appreciate the anguish Absalom’s death will cause David.

The Cushite does not say simply, “Absalom is dead”. Or “Your son is dead.” Couches news in a metaphor, in poetic language.

Although the truth he has to communicate is an historical fact, which can be scientifically verified, though not repeated, it is also a truth that will be received, and needs to be communicated at an emotional level. **It is a truth of the heart.**

David’s beloved son is dead. His response is one of the most moving expressions of love in the Bible – “Oh my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you – O Absalom, my son, my son!”

I think that this story is one of the most poignant in the scriptures – despite what Absalom has done, David’s love, the love of a father, is unchanged.

Truth of the heart, which touches us emotionally and spiritually, requires a particular style of communication. It must speak to our hearts and our souls as well as, if not instead of, our heads.

The power of the word, of language and of speaking – themes echo through OT right from Genesis 1: God said, “Let there be light” and there was light. And God said, “Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water.”... And it was so. And God said: “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.” And it was so.

So Creation story continues. Merely by speaking, by saying the words, God brought everything that exists into being. God’s power was exercised through the spoken word. This idea of the power of the spoken word is still current in contemporary Jewish culture. Worked with several Jewish women in Jo’burg – Two sayings – “From your mouth to God’s ear” – if said something positive

“God forbid” – if said something negative, just in case your speaking it caused to it occur.

Power of imagery also recognised in Scripture and culture of the day – of simile, metaphor, allegory and so on. What makes Scripture such a rich piece of literature so that even non-believers who study English Literature are sometimes required to study the Bible as a literary text. It contains a wide range of different types of literary styles – poetry, history, letters, narrative, allegory, songs, psalms, wisdom and so on. Scripture writers recognise that spiritual truth is a truth of the heart that needs to be communicated in a particular way in order to speak to our hearts and souls – language of imagery plays large part in that.

Gospel lesson another e.g. of communication of a profound truth, this time spiritual truth. Jesus has been conversing with the crowd, speaking in metaphors about the bread life and need to eat flesh and drink blood of Son of Man. Many of his hearers interpret his words literally so miss the real meaning of his words, which is a central truth of the Gospel. That is, that we must take Christ into our innermost being – in Jesus’ words, eat him and drink him – must be in closest most intimate relationship with him in order to be restored to right relationship with God, in words of Jesus here, “to have eternal life” or “live forever”.

Here is another **truth of the heart**, couched in the language of the heart. However, it is more than truth of heart, **it is truth of the soul and spirit too**. It is powerful, life-giving, saving truth presented in deceptively simple word pictures. Understanding of this type of truth is possible only through faith, which many of Jesus’ listeners do not have, hence their failure to grasp it.

The fires of controversy are burning all over the church about what constitutes truth. Is the virgin birth “true”? Did Jesus really provide evidence to support the doctrine of Trinity? Is the resurrection “True”? These debates may interest you, they may not. You may wrestle with these or similar issues in your own faith, you may not. I

certainly do. However, these debates and these struggles do not and **should** not allow us to evade facing up to the central truth – and I use that word deliberately – central truth of all religions – the divine, God’s encounter with us and our response. We are unwise indeed, if we use uncertainty as an excuse for not pursuing relationship with God and not opening ourselves to God’s pursuance of friendship with us.

I said at the start that I wanted to pick up some of the themes Daniella began to explore last week – themes TRUTH, SPEAKING THE TRUTH and LANGUAGE. In drawing these ideas from the OT and Gospel together, I want to pose some questions in order to answer the question “So how does all this apply to us?”

Cushite’s moving words to David, the bereaved father begs the question “Do we speak the truth?”, but also, and even more importantly, “How do we speak the truth, particularly truth of the heart?” Do we speak it carefully, sometimes even reverently? Do we do it with gentleness and compassion as the Cushite did? Do we communicate in the language of the heart?

Share with you an experience that will haunt me always. Having to break news of a death is not easy, my first experience – member student leadership at University, had to go and tell male student that his girlfriend had been knocked over and killed by a car while hitchhiking. Precisely what I did – knocked on door said, “I don’t know how to say this, so I’ll just say it. Anne is dead.” I had to convince him it was true then he went inside and shut the door and that was that.

I am mortified by this memory. With age and experience I know now of so many ways I could have said it differently. In essence, I could have communicated this gut-piercing truth in the language of the heart.

This leads to another question, perhaps harder to answer. Language has the power not only to communicate, but more fundamentally, to construct reality in a process that reflects the way God originally spoke all of creation into being. Language is the medium through which we think and experience the world. Thus, we create reality for others and ourselves through our speaking. There is a sense in which we too “speak what is into being”. So, what kind of reality do we create?

This is a question I ask myself constantly as the twins build their worldview, their experience of reality through us and the building blox of language that we give them. It is an awe-inspiring responsibility for parents, but it affects everyone. What kind of reality do you create for yourself and others through your words?

Communication requires not only a sender of a message, but also a receiver. So the final question I want to pose is about our listening.

Are we listening to and for God? Are we receptive to hear the language in which truths of the heart and spirit are communicated? Or, like many of Jesus’ audience, are we perhaps missing the truth because we want to interpret everything literally in black and white, simple, cut and dried, finished and klaar?

It has been said that some of the best sermons are those we preach to ourselves. As someone who tends to function with my head rather than my heart, I am certainly

preaching to myself here! We need to give ourselves heart space and heart time in order to be open and receptive to God, in order to hear the truth of the heart and soul. There is a lovely old phrase, which is now horribly politically incorrect and gender insensitive but still tells a truth: it says that “God is a gentleman” i.e. that God does not force godself upon us. We have to invite God in and give God space and time to speak to us and work in us.

I want to conclude with a poem that may be helpful. Will read it then put it on overhead projector and allow brief time quiet to allow us to ponder what God may be saying to each of us.

Be careful with your words
Do not spend them lightly.
Be careful with your silence
It holds power to heal or to harm.
Be careful with your speaking –
daily chances to love.
Take care in your listening.
Sensitive and finely-tuned
are the ears of the heart.
Take care to hear the language
of silence: a smile, a teardrop,
an open hand.
Take care to listen for love’s small change.
Do not let it fall.
Gather it. Cherish it.
Be sure to listen
and to speak
with your heart.

Adapted from Gunilla Norris *Becoming Bread*