

COVID, CONTROVERSY, AND CONSPIRACY: SEEKING “THE TRUTH THAT IS IN JESUS.”

The same time I received Richard’s request that I preach today the nation also got the news through an online post telling an outrageous story about the origins of the recent Covid outbreak in Auckland. The story was insulting and deeply damaging for the family involved, and soon after, the Health Minister himself, Chris Hipkins, went public refuting every single aspect of the story and urging us to trust only reliable official sources. Others of course want us to believe that the official sources are utterly unreliable, nothing more than part of a vast global conspiracy, lying about the Covid pandemic and planning to draw us all into a one-world dictatorship.

We live in a time of huge distrust and fragmentation, and as we talked about all this one of the people with whom we were staying asked, “well how do we work out what’s true?”

I recalled Paul’s phrase from Ephesians 4:21, concerning “the truth that is in Jesus,” and found myself thinking that is what I should preach about.

So, in the face of Covid, controversy, conspiracy theories, AND a General Election, what does it mean for us to seek “the truth that is in Jesus?”

The expression comes near the middle of the letter and in many ways is a hinge, or a doorway, leading from the first part of the book into the second. Both parts are vitally useful in enabling us to discern how to live in the truth that is in Jesus in a fragmented and conflicted world.

The first part of the letter is like a foundation plan for a grand house – the whole universe, or the entrance foyer with many rooms opening off it. Paul repeatedly writes about God’s purpose for “all things” in Christ.

Here Paul outlines some aspects of “the truth that is in Jesus,” and in the second part of the letter explores how the truth that is in Jesus will shape our attitudes, behaviour and life priorities. As John Calvin would put it, “truth (the first part) is directed towards Godliness/Christlike living (the second part).”

So what are some key things Paul has to say about “the truth that is in Jesus”? And how might they help us discern truth in this time of conflict? Here are just a few.

1...God’s great purpose is “to bring all creation together, everything in heaven and on Earth, with Christ as head (v10)” and he continues, describing how we have been called in Christ to participate in that purpose. God’s purpose is experienced as we enter into the consciousness of being God’s children (5-6), we confront the truth of our destructive sinfulness and know the gift of forgiveness (7-8). This purpose is worked out in the world as Christ breaks down the barriers of suspicion between Jews and Gentiles – and all other peoples, making reconciliation and building a new community in Christ (2:11-22). We see it in the gifted diversity of the church, which helps us grow towards maturity (4:1-16).

QUESTION TO ASK OURSELVES OF ANY ON-LINE POST: HOW DOES THIS PROMOTE TRUTH, RECONCILIATION, AND HEALED DEALINGS BETWEEN PEOPLE?

Vast amounts of what we read are set up to foster anger, distrust, resentment, and enmity. They are totally at odds with the purpose God is working out in Christ. However pretty the site, and whatever its claims, we can be pretty confident that it will not be based upon “the truth that is in Jesus,” nor helping us to find it.

2...God’s claim on the world is demonstrated by Jesus’ resurrection (1:15-23). Christ is Lord, “ruling above all heavenly rulers, authorities, powers and lords...all things are under his feet... he completes all things everywhere.” All creation is under Christ’s Lordship. This is what Paul had also written to the Colossians in the companion letter to Ephesians. “All things were created through him and for him, and he holds everything together.” The same appears in John 1 where we read of God’s Word enlightening all humankind (NOTE THAT: it’s not a mystery for Christians only!), or Hebrews 1 where Christ is God’s Word creating, ordering, sustaining, and giving life to the whole creation. All things are ordered and sustained by Christ, “who himself completes all things everywhere (1:23).”

How utterly different this is from the paganism of Ephesus with it’s cult of Diana where every tree, mountain, river, rock, or spring had its own resident gods and demons, all in constant conflict with each other; their lusts, betrayals and immoralities were legendary – an utterly immoral, random, unreliable world full of fear. This was the world Paul had confronted at Ephesus, in the conflict over the slave girl and the cult of Diana; and the whole cosmos under Christ’s lordship was the alternative truth that these first converts had learned. This was “the truth that is in Jesus.”

It was this conviction that the whole cosmos was ordered by God’s WORD, God’s LOGOS, that both gave people a degree of peace, AND gave rise to science. Because God’s Word was reliable, and the Word established order in creation, we could investigate the world with confidence. So why is science constantly changing (eg whether or not to wear masks?) It’s changing because more and more is constantly being discovered. (That’s what keeps a lot of us in jobs!)

QUESTION TO ASK OURSELVES OF ANY ON-LINE POST: HOW SERIOUSLY DOES THIS TAKE SCIENCE AS A PROCESS OF TESTING, TESTING, TESTING, SEEKING, SEEKING, ALWAYS OPEN TO ANOTHER INSIGHT?

If your site is mocking of scientific discipline, or not part of a community of scientific conversation; if it promotes opinions about the world with no basis in God’s ordering of creation, we can be pretty confident that it will not be based upon “the truth that is in Jesus,” nor helping us to find it.

3...There is more we could explore in the entrance foyer to this wonderful building but these two will do for now:

GODS PURPOSE OF RECONCILIATION, AND GOD'S FAITHFUL ORDERING OF THE WORLD WHICH CAN BE DISCERNED THROUGH SCIENCE.

We step through the door. Paul calls his readers into new styles of living in the light of "the truth that is in Jesus." Put off the old self and put on the new self created in Christ. (4:21-22)

"No more lying...no more destructive anger...no more dishonesty but work to help the poor. Do not use harmful words, but only helpful words, the kind that build up and do good...Get rid of all bitterness, passion, and anger. No more shouting or insults...instead be kind and tender-hearted to one another, and forgive one another, as God has forgiven you through Christ (4:25-32)."

This is what "The truth that is in Jesus" looks like.

QUESTION TO ASK OURSELVES OF ANY ON-LINE POST: DOES IT LOOK ANYTHING LIKE THIS?

Scroll down. How quickly do you get to the dismissive use of Cindy, or Fairy-dust, for the Prime Minister? "Crusher" is more difficult to discern because sometimes she enjoys it herself, but other times objects. How soon do you find yourself assaulted repeatedly by the F-word, insults and bitterness, and a complete absence of any kind of insight or information that aids understanding or helps to build up the things that are good? Shut it down, whatever it's grand claims might be. We can be pretty confident that it will not be based upon "the truth that is in Jesus," nor helping us to find it.

4...At the beginning of chapter 6 we are urged to "build up our strength in union with the Lord; put on the whole armour of God...(and the first piece is truth!) Do all this in prayer...keep alert, and never give up." Pray as you read. How does this compare to the truth that is in Jesus? How does this contribute to his loving purpose for the world? Above all pray, because it's in prayer that we are kept humble and open. Ask yourself: is there any openness to new learning here? Or is it an opinionated and arrogant rant, devoid of any kind of humility?

Finally (from me, not from Paul), Have you noticed, the truth that is in Jesus is nowhere described as simply data or information. The truth that is in Jesus is about relationships of love and goodness, shaped by truth about God's love for each of us, and wonderful plans for creation. That is the truth that God is offering us to see the world through, and to live in. The truth that is love.

