

Truth and Justice

St. Brandon's

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15; Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31

14th October 2018

You may recall the incident, a couple of weeks or so ago now, of Brett Kavanaugh's nomination by President Trump to be appointed to the Supreme Court of the USA; of the accusation of sexual assault by Christine Blasey Ford when they were both teenagers at a drunken party in Maryland; and the live coverage of them both testifying before the US Senate.¹ Judge Kavanaugh has, of course, now been confirmed as a justice of the Supreme Court and was sworn in last week.

It's easy to put this down as just another rather unfortunate and unpleasant incident in the course of Donald Trump's presidency. The issue is out of the headlines, there's nothing to be done – so let's forget about it and move on. But it might repay some further reflection before we do.

While the facts will probably never be clear about whether sexual assault did occur – so the truth may never 'out' – it was interesting that the two sides, Republicans and Democrats pretty much sided on party lines. Democrats, for example, claimed they had broader evidence which revealed that Brett Kavanaugh had a rather casual relationship with the truth (apposite, we might think, for someone nominated by a President who, it's been calculated, lies on average eight times a day), while Republicans generally backed Kavanaugh. Interestingly, a Jesuit magazine *America* which had supported Kavanaugh because of his anti-abortion views, withdrew its support for him, despite him being a Roman Catholic, saying his nomination had become "a bellweather of the way the country treats women when their reports of harassment, assault, and abuse threaten to derail the careers of powerful men". Their decision was presumably also influenced by the #MeToo campaign.

But what seems to be going on here is that there is no longer any real concern for 'truth' as such. Truth is what you make it, it depends on your views, on your party political affiliation. 'Facts' can be found in support of either side, and, if someone is lying but it's in the party's interest, well we can take a few white lies now and again. Truth as such doesn't really matter, perhaps doesn't even exist.

It would have been very interesting if the prophet Amos had been there! What would Amos have said? Well he wouldn't have pulled his punches, that's for sure! "Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness [things as they should be, including upholding the truth] to the ground! ... [you who] abhor the one who speaks the truth". In other words, Amos held to there being such a thing as truth. And, of course, he held that this truth could be found only in God. "Seek the Lord and live ... Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, The God of hosts, will be with you." There is truth, and this truth is to be found in God, and seeking it leads to good and not evil, and ultimately to life and not death. In other words, truth exists and it really does matter. And so it should matter to us, and in situations such as the Kavanaugh nomination we perhaps should at least pray that truth may out.

But, of course, Amos' other concern is with the injustice that sits as an easy bedfellow to falsifying the truth – "You who trample on the poor ... who afflict the righteous [those who are trying to live lives which honour God and His truth], who take a bribe, and push aside the needy". Judge Kavanaugh is, of course, now part of the US Supreme Court which oversees justice in the land. Will there be justice? Will we hear the kind of judgment and justice from the US Supreme Court that Amos proclaimed to those who trampled on the poor in his day – that they would not live in the fine stone houses they had built, or drink the wine from their own vineyards? Or is justice again, like the truth, simply what you make it, it depends on your views, on your party political affiliation perhaps? Whose justice?

¹ Much of this section is taken from Paul Vallely, '#MeToo looms over Brett Kavanaugh', Church Times, 5th October 2018.

Now I don't want to make out that this is completely straightforward, that it's all black and white, that we all know what the truth is in every situation, that we all know what justice is in every case, that we will all agree all of the time on matters of truth and justice. That we could thereby call any decision made by a court of law as to whether it upholds truth and justice. That, at the opposite end of the scale, we would be able to work out where truth and justice lay in a messy divorce, for example. The point is not that we are always able to discern where right and wrong, truth and justice, lie, but that we hold to the belief that there are such things as truth and justice, and that they can be found in God, and that therefore they matter.

And I'm afraid that this means that we will also need to hold to the rather uncomfortable belief that, as our reading in Hebrews put it, "The word of God [who is ultimately Jesus, the way, *the truth* and the life], is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it [He] is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart [to reveal truth as such]. And before *him* [note the personal rather than impersonal suddenly] no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account." There will be a just judgment and it will expose whether we did or did not tell the truth, whether we did or did not uphold justice. I hope Judge Kavanaugh, and Christine Blasey Ford, reflected on those words before they gave their testimony before the US Senate, though it seems unlikely that they both did.

If you'd like this in slightly more philosophical language (and I know some of you wouldn't!), we would do well to turn back to Thomas Aquinas, the medieval theologian, who explains it a bit like this: "Every human being has by nature a desire for that happiness which is achieved only in union with God, integral to which is a recognition of God as the truth and of all truth as from God, so that the progress through truths [as we might experience them in this present life] to the truth is itself one part of the ascent of the mind and heart to God."²

Now, so far, most of this, though not all, has been nicely at one remove from us. We can go home comfortable in the knowledge that it's all in the past (Amos), or it's a peculiarly American problem, so it's not one that means we need to do anything in particular. Well, let's just have a brief look at our gospel reading.

A man approaches Jesus and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. He asks it not as a general question, but as a personal question – "What must I do?" In effect he is asking Jesus about the truth of the matter *for him*, not for everyone. But Jesus starts not by addressing his question directly, but by giving general teaching about the commandments: "You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery" and so on, although interestingly He adds one which isn't there in the Ten Commandments but which links back to our Amos reading and the concern for economic justice: "You shall not defraud".

The man defends and justifies himself: "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth", at which point Jesus moves, out of love for him, from the general to the personal. The truth for this rich man was that he was so attached to his possessions (however they may have been obtained, and perhaps by defrauding others), that he could not conceive of giving them up if that was what it meant for him to follow Jesus.

There's a lovely poem written by Emily Dickinson, a 19th Century American poet, which starts:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant –
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise.

² This is a précis of Aquinas' position in Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Truth as a good: a reflection on *Fides et Ratio*', in *The tasks of Philosophy*, Cambridge: CUP, p. 212.

In other words, you sometimes need to work your way round to the truth if it is to be apprehended. And that's exactly what we see Jesus doing here. Jesus starts with the general, starts slant (not yet telling all the truth), but working His way round to all the truth, all the truth for this man which, it turns out, is too bright for him to accept.

Now Jesus goes on from there to proclaim a general truth about wealth and possessions – that they are dangerous for our spiritual health, that we all need to sit light to them. But He doesn't ask all His disciples to sell their possessions and give the money to the poor – later on in Mark's gospel we get a typical snippet about the women from Galilee who supported Jesus' ministry and who continued to have access to their material resources (15:41). Jesus tells all the truth, He *is* all the truth, but there is truth which applies to all, and there is truth that applies to the individual.

So my point is that while there is truth as such (and justice as such), and that this is to be found ultimately in God, there is both truth in general – truth that applies to all of humanity at all times – and there may also be, as for the rich man, truth for me. Truth that applies to me, truth about me, truth that I may only be able to receive if it's told slant, worked round to, but which if I am open to God's truth for my life, I need to both ask for, and then with God's help, hear and respond to.

Amen