

Post-truth

John 18:33-40; John 8:31-37; John 14:6

This week, Hugo Rifkind wrote this in *The Times*. 'For the populist, there can always be alternative facts, because there are no facts. There are only reviews.' He was commenting on the culture we live in being one where increasingly, the objective facts about something don't drive our decision making as much as popular belief does.

The phrase 'alternative facts' is a reference to something the White House Aide Kelly Anne Conway said this week. Sean Spicer, Donald Trump's Press Secretary, claimed that Donald Trump's inauguration saw the biggest crowd at a presidential inauguration ever.

Then this photo came out, demonstrating clear photographic evidence to the contrary. The left hand picture is Donald Trump's inauguration, the right hand picture is Barak Obama's inauguration in 2009. Conway said that Spicer was presenting 'alternative facts.' It was spun as a 'more people watched around the world with new technologies' thing. And that was that.

This whole incident this week is a public example of living in the 'post-truth era' where people are engaging in 'post-truth politics.' These two phrases became big last year. So much so that 'post-truth' became The Oxford Dictionary's Word of the Year for 2016.

'Post-truth' is defined in the dictionary like this: 'Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.'

It played out in politics in 2016 like this: Politicians would make a factual claim. Journalists, statisticians and others would check the facts, find them to be wrong, and point this out. But it wouldn't matter. Because as long as politicians were appealing to people's strong feelings about something, nobody would care when the fact was shown to be wrong.

Certain types of politicians used to try to hide uncomfortable truths, or spin the ones that came out. In the post-truth world, they don't have to do that. They can just present 'alternative facts.' They can just lie. And people don't care that they are lying any more. Instead, people just care that those in power are saying things that they like to hear.

So, politicians and others making big claims won't appeal any more to statistics and research (which at any rate people are now suspicious of as coming from 'so called experts' with agendas). Instead, they've found it works better to tap in to people's sense of what they *feel* is right, what *should* be true.

In his campaigning last year, Donald Trump did it by talking like this: 'A lot of people are saying that...' And if he was presented with a fact-based rebuttal, he would retort, 'well, *they* would say that, wouldn't they?' That's the kind of feelings-based, populist campaigning and claiming that works in a post-truth society. It's not that there's no such thing as truth any more. It's just that it doesn't matter as much or poll as well as what people feel strongly about.

Cultural commentators have plenty to say about where this has come from - and where it is heading. Some point to the 2008 financial crash as being a turning point where people lost faith in authorities like politicians, banks, journalists, and all manner of so called experts. And as the years have gone on, people have found that they can get along pretty well without expertise.

We can tell each other what we think is true, right and good. With the rise of social media, everyone can publish their ideas. You can be as noisy, outrageous, bold and persistent as you like online. And those that shout loud enough, if they tap into a feeling that others out there have, can start a stampede with big claims about what's real in the world.

People make claims about immigration, religion, politicians, celebrities, ways to stay healthy - a lot of them without referring to any evidence - and these claims get liked and shared by thousands or even millions in no time at all. If someone comments that this claim is factually untrue, it's too late. They get drowned out by the crowd of voices, because strong opinion can shout down evidence. As philosopher A.C. Grayling comments, 'a few claims on Twitter can have the same credibility as a library full of research.'

And since social media algorithms are designed to feed you content similar to what you've already liked, shared, retweeted - you're going to get fed more of the same. In the post-truth era, social media tends to drive modern secular people to reinforce each other's beliefs, without much reference to objective facts. Funny... that's what modern secular people used to say about the church.

And it's not just social media that reflects our 'what's most popular must be what's right' way of life. People will buy the toaster with 300 five star reviews

over the one with 3 five star reviews. Now, that might be a reasonable way to get a new toaster. But the point is, this is how we think and do life. 'What do other people think is best? That'll be the thing to go for, then.'

There might be better toasters out there than the one that 300 people were supplied for free if they'd write a review. There might be hotels that you would like better than the one that everyone on Trip Advisor is raving about because they went there because someone else went there because someone else went there... But nobody cares.

Even that photographic comparison of the number of people at respective presidents' inaugurations is an example of how we judge things by popularity. Why did Reuters News Agency publish that photo? Why does it matter how many people were there each day? Like Hugo Rifkind commented, 'there are no facts now. Only reviews.'

In this kind of cultural environment, those who shout loudest and generate the strongest feeling can rule the world. And that worries A.C. Grayling, who observes in today's international landscape a lot of parallels with the 1930s. 'Make our country great again...' The rise of nationalism in parts of Europe. Charismatic claims with no basis of truth winning popular support.

We all know what happened at the end of the 1930s, right? We're at a point where I shouldn't take that for granted. Disturbingly, I learned this week that if you type into Google 'did the...' (in fact, if you just type 'did t'), one of the first search suggestions that will come up is 'did the holocaust happen?' And that's because it's a popular enough idea that it didn't - because people who have a vested interest in denying it are making enough noise - that scores of people are questioning even this.

The post-truth era is a social reality. 'Objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.' This is not just something that mattered for an EU Referendum and for the American voting public last year. It's the world we live in. It's the way people think and choose and vote and act. It drives what people base their opinions, hopes and lives upon.

Does truth matter? Is there something that matters more?

How do people following Jesus respond to this then? Should we stop talking about Jesus' truth-claims, because nobody cares whether they're true or not these days? Well, if we're following Jesus' lead, I don't think we can go down

that path, because here's the thing - Jesus talked about truth a *lot*. In the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) you'll often find Jesus starting His sentences with, 'I tell you the truth...'

We're going to look at three passages from John's gospel where Jesus talks about truth. First we're going to look at the passage we read earlier on, John 18:33-40.

In this scene, Pontius Pilate has to weigh up what's right. He presents the charge to Jesus: 'People are saying you are claiming to be the King of the Jews. Are you?' Jesus makes Pilate squirm first by asking Pilate what he thinks, before He says, 'yes, that's who I am.' But then He says more.

Facing and almost tasting death now, Jesus wants to talk about *truth*. He says He is a King from Heaven, and that He has come to this world to *tell this truth*. He unflinchingly claims that *the truth* is what He has come to bring. And that those on the side of *truth* are only in one place - with Him. 'The truth' matters enough to Jesus to use the few words He gets before His executioner to talk about it .

Now Pilate's response, and everything that happens following that, is remarkably similar to this post-truth thing in our day. Pilate answers, 'What is truth?' as if it's not something that we can ever really know. So he bases his decision about what is right (that is, whether to let Jesus go or not) on something else. He bases it on popular opinion. On the reviews of the crowd.

'I find no reason to have Jesus killed - no evidence to base this on. But over to you. Who do you want me to release? Shall I release Jesus?'

'No!' shouts the crowd. They call for the release of Barabbas instead. They do that because, as Mark explains in his account of this in Mark 15, the chief priests with vested interests in opposing Jesus had stirred up the crowd to shout for what they felt strongly about. And so the people chose a terrorist over a King.

This account tells us a few things about relating to a post-truth society. *Firstly, if truth matters to Jesus, let's have it matter to us, too.* One practical everyday commitment of Jesus' followers should be not to promote things just because you feel strongly about them, without reference to the truth.

That means, when you see a post on Facebook or a tweet on Twitter making a particular claim, you don't blindly share it or retweet it without having any knowledge of whether it's true or not. We can share stuff and pass it on, of course! But let it never be on the basis of what we feel strongly about *apart* from any conviction about the truth of it. Truth matters to Jesus.

Secondly, there's nothing new under the sun - so don't panic. Here's a crowd 2000 years ago choosing according to who shouts the loudest rather than what the objective truth is. Although the post-truth way that life and politics is working is alarming some people, it's just the latest expression of popular human self interest being prized over truth.

So thirdly, keep listening to, and talking about, Jesus the truth. Faced with a fickle, wavering crowd and imminent death, Jesus says, 'I am the truth. And I am the King. Come bow the knee and side with me.' We need to regain confidence that making that message known to people is entirely necessary for the wellbeing of our world.

A Christian's take on post-truth isn't just to join with those who are saying, 'the world needs to remember that truth is important.' More than that, we need to be saying, 'the world needs to remember that *Jesus being the truth* is important.'

We can fear that shouting loudly about this makes us just as much a part of the problem as everyone else who is shouting loudly and stirring people up to divide the world. But Jesus speaks boldly in John 18 about the truth residing in Him. Boldly, to the powerful few with vested interests and the powerless many caught up in the tides of what was popular. His people have no reason to be less bold today.

Our message is, 'Jesus is King. A better King for you than you are.' And it's not a message about which we say, 'Just believe me, because I feel really strongly about it.' We share it, not in spite of whether it's really true or not, but *only because we're convinced it's true*. If it's not, it's a useless waste of time. Paul says as much in 1 Corinthians 15.

And so Jesus' message is one that we share and like and tweet and talk about and shout about - but that we also invite people to investigate for themselves. 'Have you actually *read* what Jesus said and did? Do you *know* what He claimed? Check it out for yourself. Check the claims, consider the message, decide how you're going to act on it - as for me, it saved my life.'

'Christians should tell the world that Jesus is King...'

How? Where? When? Why?

The next passage we'll look at where Jesus speaks of truth is John 8:31-37.

To the Jews who had believed Him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

They answered Him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"

Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. I know you are Abraham's descendants, yet you are ready to kill me, because you have no room for my word."

Here's why Jesus insists on talking about truth, and why it matters that His people still do too: *Because truth has a consequence. And the consequence of truth... is freedom.* Not for Jesus, mind. He doesn't need to be set free by truth; He's the Son of God, as free as the son in a household is.

Indeed, Jesus was acting in the *opposite* way to His self-interest in coming to talk truth with us. Doing so got Him imprisoned. Beaten up. Killed on a cross. No, here's Jesus in the world, passionately speaking about truth, because *Jesus wants us to be freed by it.*

The 'truth that sets us free,' Jesus says, is in His teaching. In John 8, Jesus teaches these things as being the truth: Sin is real. You're guilty of sin, and if you die in that, you're done for. Good news though - Jesus, uniquely the Son of God, has come *from* God, *to* us, so that those who put their lives in His hands will be set free from that sin, guilt and death. He will die - He'll be 'lifted up' on a cross to make that happen - because that's what it will take.

These truths do not poll well. They don't get five star review in the marketplace of our society's values. They didn't poll well with Jesus' audience then, either - they were about ready to kill Him over His truth-claims, which didn't fit with the story they reinforced for one another in their community that they were already alright with God because of their ancestry.

But Jesus still put these truths out there. And those who were willing to accept them - even though they maybe didn't like them - they were the ones who got set free in life, in death and in eternity.

By the way, that's a good way to spot a genuine follower of Jesus. Someone who holds to Jesus' teaching as the truth, even when it's not comfortable or convenient for them. Even when it doesn't fit with what they instinctively think is right and true - that's someone who genuinely bows the knee to Jesus.

What's leading society's thinking in post-truth society are claims that stem from a party's self-interest and blossom because the idea is popular. The truths that Jesus puts out there are exactly the opposite. They stem from Him putting aside His interests to die for ours, and He shouts the unpopular message to 'Come, pick up your cross, and follow me.' But Jesus and His people are still putting His truths out there. Because it's only His truth that sets people free.

But how does Jesus reach you if you're more governed by emotion and popular belief than by objective facts? How do we reach people today who don't know that Jesus is King, if the truth or falsehood of that doesn't even matter to them?

That's where our final (and very short) passage from John comes in. In John 14:6, Jesus declares - 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.'

Just as in the other passages, Jesus claims here to be exclusively, uniquely the truth about God, life, and the meaning of everything. And He says three things about Himself - He says that *He* is the truth. Not just that He *tells* the truth or that His *teaching* is true - but that *He is* the truth.

The truth is a *person* - a person who lives human life perfectly like nobody else ever did, and who dies for all the imperfect people who will trust in Him. To meet and know and be with Jesus is to *know* the truth - not just like we *know* facts in a book, but like we *know* a person who's got the ring of truth about who they are and what they're like.

This post-truth world might not like the statistics and figures kind of truth any more... but Jesus is bigger than that. He's a person to speak with, listen to, and discover truth and freedom in. Knowing Him, being in relationship with Him, is like the key that unlocks freedom of spirit, sense of meaning, security for eternity, why we're here, what we're for, where the love and identity we've

been looking for has always been. So let's not present Jesus to the world as a person to know facts or stories about, but as a *person we know*.

Jesus says that He is the *way*. The way to what? He goes on to say, to come to the Father - that's God - you come *through Him*. The post-truth world, in all its strong feelings and opinions and votes and reviews, is stretching out for *something*. It's stretching out for what it *instinctively feels* is the right way to go. Lots of people are living their lives that way.

But Jesus says, 'Look at me. Follow *me*. I *am* the way to what's true, good and right. To humanity's yearnings. To hope, future and identity. For I am the way to God.' Let's ask people - which way are you heading in life? Where are you going? And if anyone asks you back, tell them *who* you're going to, and *how* you're getting there. Tell them how persisting in following Jesus' lead instead of your instincts and strong feelings has been better.

Finally, Jesus says that He is the *life*. Those of us who have put our lives in His hands know that what we say in our church's vision statement is true - we've discovered that life in Jesus is infinitely better than life apart from Him. We've 'come alive' as we've found forgiveness for sin and forever life... as we've found freedom from guilt, shame, death, and boring ordinary lives... as we've been released from slavery to the past, to the future, to image, to keeping up with the Jones'.

The church has kept trying to prove truth claims about Jesus to a world which doesn't *care* about whether these things are true. People first of all need to see that all these things about Jesus in our lives are *good*, before they then discover that *they're good because they're true*.

The people around us need us to keep telling this truth about Jesus, because it's the truth that will set them free. But to want to hear the truth, they'll need to see that this way, this life, is better by far.

Better than the politics of self-interest or fear. Better than whatever's making the loudest noise on TV, in the press, or on social media. Better than whatever we instinctively feel strongly is best. We need to talk about how Jesus the way, truth and life is freeing us, thrilling us, changing us.

So here's my hope and prayer for what will define a post-post-truth society - 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts, emotion and personal belief lead public opinion to conclude that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life.'