

'A picture of truth in our post-truth world'

John Chapter 1 verse 14: The Word became flesh...and we have seen his glory full of grace and truth.

Question: what do the words 'Simples', 'Selfie' and 'Post-truth' have in common?

Answer: They have all been a 'Word of the Year' – words judged by the Oxford Dictionary authorities to be the most frequently used new words of a particular year, needing to be included in new editions of the Dictionary.

An interesting feature they share is that they are all easy to portray in visual, worked out form. So if I say, for instance the 2009 Word of the Year 'Simples' I have a strong suspicion an image of an animal will come into your mind – this animal...



.. a talking meerkat.

That's because 'Simples' was the catchphrase for the Russian-accented meerkat at the heart of the insurance comparison website comparethemarket.com's advertising campaign.

And the 2013 Word of the Year 'Selfie' can claim to be epitomised by this picture:



where the then little knownbut good looking Prime Minister of Denmark accidentally found herself sitting between Barak Obama and David Cameron at Nelson Mandela's funeral. Her teenage children had apparently teased her for never having taken a selfie – s o she took the opportunity to take her first one when seated next to the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of Great Britain!

Interestingly, pictures of another President of the United States – the President-elect rather than the soon to be retiring incumbent – crop up again if you put the 2016 Word of the Year 'Post-truth' into Google Images. The first picture of a person you get is this:



closely followed by a well-known British politician who bears comparison with the President elect not just because they share an interesting relationship with telling the truth but because they share some notable physical characteristics - as portrayed in these pictures:



... and



While Donald Trump and Boris Johnson may, in some senses, embody the 2016 Word of the Year 'Post-truth', it's going to be important as we move into 2017 and find the word increasingly used to have an idea of what it means. So here goes.

'Post-truth' according to the Oxford Dictionary is: 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'.

At its heart then post-truth is about objective facts being less important than emotional feelings and personal beliefs.

What worries commentators is that this can result in some very serious imbalances not only in public debate but also in important decision making. The pattern in 'post-truthers' of emotion and individual belief trumping the checkable facts worries people about the appropriately named Donald Trump as he takes the helm of the United States of America. What is going to happen when the President of the largest economy and military in the world is someone who, when campaigning for the job, said things which, more than 70% of the time, were independently judged to be wrong in relation to verifiable facts?

The problem is that this departure from attachment to verifiable facts isn't just a feature of Trump's pre-election campaign. There are grounds for belief and concern that this is a mode of life that Trump lives and revels in permanently. 'Post-truth' may be the Word of the Year for 2016: but it may well shape and define the world of 2017 as well.

So: what is the connection between the Word of the Year 'post-truth' and this service of Christian worship?

It's this: Christianity contends that it offers an embodiment, a personal representation of truth which the whole world needs to guide itself by every day of every year, whether the year is 2016, 2017 or any other year you care to choose.

The Gospel of John chapter 1 makes the case in verse 14: 'The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth' and, very specifically, in verse 17: 'The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ'.

The really interesting question to ask at this point is this: **'to what extent is God verifiable?'** And who can verify the more specific Christian contention that God has appeared on earth and shared our experience in the person of Jesus Christ?

Critics of religion and of Christianity in particular claim that arguing for God's existence and, in the Christian tradition, for God's loving involvement in the world as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is an early, historic expression of a post-truth attitude. And yes, it cannot be denied: the claim that the universe we know has been made by God and that that God lovingly shares our life in this world through Jesus Christ is not an objectively verifiable

fact. It is a matter of belief. The fact is, however, that the opposite contention – that there is no God and that the universe has an origin which is not dependent on a Creator – is not objectively verifiable either. Both approaches – the theistic and the non-theistic – rest fundamentally on a system of belief. Both approaches to the source of the universe – that it has a purposeful, loving creator and that it has no external creator – are, in the end and until proven otherwise, matters of personal belief. In the sense that the origins of our universe remain a matter of debate and belief, our very existence rests on what we are now calling a post-truth claim.

We are all living now and, I suggest, always have lived in something of a post-truth world i.e. in a world where not all facts believed to be true are verifiable. Some things can be checked and verified as true. Some things – including some modern, exhaustively researched scientific theories about the origins of the universe – cannot be verified. They are fundamentally a matter of belief and have to be taken on trust.

I suggest what makes 2016 feel different from 2015 and the years before it is that the balance of post-truth and the scales of trust have tipped and are now out of kilter. Expert opinion and verifiable facts are now being disparaged and ignored and preference is being given to emotion and belief, flying in the face of verifiable facts and affecting huge and sometimes vulnerable swathes of the population not just by vocal groups but by people wielding huge political power – including the President of the USA.

The challenge and responsibility before Christians across the world, whatever their involvement with the current, deepening post-truth culture, remains constant. Our responsibility is to respond to God's call to follow the person and the teachings of Jesus Christ who is the truth of God's love for the world incarnate; our privilege is to embody the love and care we see Christ extending to the lame and outcast of his own time to the lame and outcast of our own time. Our joy remains to worship and pray faithfully to God in our time as Jesus worshipped and prayed faithfully to God in his time. The challenge before us is 'Can we turn the other cheek, love our enemies and subvert other people's expectations in relation to taking revenge just as we see Jesus doing – to the point, amazingly, of sacrificing his own life?' Our task, in short, is to embody and mediate the grace and truth of God we see in Jesus Christ throughout the post-truth world of 2017.

Being constant in this activity throughout our lives is undeniably a tough call. It's one thing to be loving to your neighbour when you are surrounded by loved ones around Christmas and New Year. It's another thing to keep the disciplines of love and forgiveness going when the pressures of work have resumed, when you are back in contact with that person who really gets on your nerves, when you reckon you have been mistreated or exploited by someone else once too often.

Let's return to the verse I quoted earlier to help us engage with the challenges ahead. Christians believe that 'the Word became flesh' and that they, the 'Word-made-flesh's followers, are to speak Christ's words and work into the world today – no matter how sceptical or post-truth it might be in style and orientation. Christians, then, are called to be God's little 'words'.

In the same way at the 'Words of the Year' Simples, Selfie and Post Truth can be readily expressed in pictures, so Christians have the opportunity and responsibility to express their role as God's 'words' in sight and sound today.

What Christmas and the Prologue to John's Gospel is all about, in the end, is making God's Word seen – in the person of Jesus Christ. I'll end now by offering some pictures that flesh out, in this post-truth world, the truth that Christians throughout history and still today live and die for: 'grace and truth came in Jesus Christ'. This Midnight Mass we celebrate the Christian belief...

That God's Word made flesh in Jesus Christ was born in times of turmoil and political unrest:



That he taught prophetically and against the grain of those in power.



That he broke bread and shared his life sacrificially:



That he gave up his life at an early age:



and that he revealed the path to new life in relation to God, our own and our universe's divine Creator.



May we all be pictures of God's Word, revealing the truth and grace of Christ - throughout the year ahead.

Happy Christmas!