

Along the track

Telling the Truth

When the Israelites fled from Egypt and began their long journey home, Moses came down from the holy mountain with the commandments, the foundation stones on which to base their new society, their new nation. These were to be the building blocks of a just and fair society, where people not only cared for each other but a community which encouraged all to live in harmony with God and with each other, a society where individual rights were respected.

I suppose we are all familiar with this oath, the commitment to tell the truth: "I swear to tell the Truth, the whole Truth, and nothing but the Truth, so help me God." Not alternative facts or opinion, rumour or hearsay. It is an official recognition of our obligation to be honest, to be truthful. Truth was considered to be so important that it took its place in the commandments – you shall not bear false witness against your neighbour. In other words, we have a responsibility to protect others' reputations, their good name. That's a very basic human right, one that ought not be treated lightly. We all deserve that, in fact we need it. It is crippling to have that taken away, the right to be who we want to be, who we are gifted to be, the right to live out our dreams, finding where we belong without seeking the approval of "the crowd," the right to our good name. Of course that has limits but not those imposed by others expectations, so that we can live without pretence, without the need to lie about our lives or anyone else's.

Moses followed the commandments up later by adding:

"Do not spread false reports. Do not help a guilty person by being a malicious witness. Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd. Exodus 23 1-2

So what? Much of what is reported today comes from someone's imagination rather than solid research, assembling the facts to make a conclusion. It is hard to decipher what is true and what is false in today's media. Much of it is driven by anger, by jealousy, by refusing to accept that other people may hold a different point of view, that they live in a different way. Sometimes we are just told what we want to hear. Why is it that we feel we need to know so much about other people's lives, even though it be fantasy and made up facts? What does that say about us? Where does the presumption of innocence lie in today's world?

In many magazines, celebrities are breaking up at the same time as making up, pregnant or having twins when they are not, having affairs when they are not, overweight at the same time as being underweight, and so on and so on. People's lives, their reputation have been ruined by a casual remark, a bit of speculation not necessarily based on fact or just malicious and salacious rumour. No-one is called to account for this 'reporting'.

Recently in one of the daily newspapers, over a period of four weeks, the Aussie dollar was reported to be about to drop to a low of 63 cents, then rise to a high of 83 cents, then to a low of 66 cents to a high of 86 cents and so on and so on. The markets may be volatile but really! These were not opinion pieces but represented as factual reports. The dollar stayed pretty much as it was, around the mid seventies. But are these minor examples of much greater fantasy, the desire to create our own stories, our own reality? The philosopher Nietzsche wrote that there are no facts, only interpretations. Our opinion, then, becomes reality, the truth! Surely a good and decent society is one that respects the good name of others and their right to privacy in the way they try to live their lives. Don't we want that for ourselves? A good and decent society is made up of people who are not malicious but are prepared to give others a fair go; even the benefit of the doubt.

Are we no longer accountable for what we say, what we write, what we think? Is anyone 'called to account' for the mistruths or reporting of false stories, for the outlandish predictions that simply don't happen? What has changed is not the prevalence of mistruths or lies, the rather silly predictions, but our response to them. If the sales of popular magazines are anything to go by, we love all this! But print media pales into almost insignificance when we are fronted with what can only be described as the awesome force of social media. Its power to create stories, to create reputations and just as quickly destroy them is frightening. Such a powerful force brings with it a correspondingly awesome responsibility to the truth!

So this year, why not resolve that when we hear or read something, when we talk about it to others, we try to ensure that it is the truth, the whole truth and nothing else but!

Regards

Jim Quillinan

Email: jquillinan@dcsi.net.au