

## Telling the Truth: a retrospect on the Institute's autumn programme

As philosopher Bernard Williams has pointed out in his book *Truth and Truthfulness*, we are culturally more and more committed to sincerity and truthfulness. We are keen to see through deception, spin, mere appearance. In that sense we feel under the authority of truth. But at the same time we are increasingly sceptical of the idea of truth itself. We doubt that we *can* reach anything which is absolutely and purely 'true', whether in religion, history, philosophy, or even science. The two points are connected. Because the quest for truthfulness keeps sharpening our suspicions, the possibility of finding absolute truth keeps receding. Yet the same two points also expose a paradox. What is the point of pursuing truthfulness if there is no truth at the end of it? Does it matter if there is no pure truth?

These issues all broke surface in some way in the rich range of discussion opened up in this autumn programme. 'Telling the truth about the Lords Spiritual' (a paper for the Faith and Public Policy Forum) gently but firmly punctured the idea of pure truth in the political representation. Society is best served when a liberal humanism is maintained and informed by a range of virtues: but in practice that is best achieved by a mixed political constitution with some privileged representation within it, rather than by an ideologically pure or 'absolute' democracy. In similar vein, 'Faith and Truth in Public Ethics' (a paper for Theological Educators) suggested a realist approach when Christians engage in ethical debate with secular bodies. Where possible, people of faith should draw on resources of natural law and virtue ethics which are more or less common to secularists, rather than appealing to an absolute or 'pure' source of religious authority. The latter will simply trigger suspicion - and is unlikely to connect with contemporary dilemmas anyway. This sort of realism may not seem a sufficient approach for a Christian, but it is still a necessary ingredient.

A sense of realism about claims to pure truth was also marked in the public debate between a politician, journalist, poet, and scientist ('Anatomy of Truth'). They all stressed the value of striving towards truth - but they also all accepted there were circumstances in which the 'full' truth was arguable, elusive, or inappropriate to express. To be sure, a distinction was made between truths of judgement and factual truths, also emphasized in a later lecture surveying how British people define their own religious identity ('Telling the Truth about Religious Identity in Britain'): so this means some attempt could still be made to preserve the purity of truth in factual matters. But even facts can be slippery, so the general tenor of realism and relativity still dominated. Ethical purity or absoluteness, especially in the matter truth telling, is not easily maintained, it seems! Yet, equally, the passion for truthfulness remained: for even when truth itself was elusive, truthfulness still seemed to *matter* - for all speakers. So the paradox remained too. Truth has to be tempered with realism (or even scepticism), yet still matters. Why is this?

In fact this question of why truth matters was not really tackled head-on in any of the events. For example, the issue of trust might have been pursued: trust is eroded when exceptions or evasions to truth are made, and that's one reason why truth matters. But it didn't receive much attention. However, another set of reasons why truth matters did emerge, especially when the focus shifted from formal notions of 'telling the truth' to the substantive notion of 'seeing' the truth. This occurred notably in the symposium lectures on the Christian apologist CS Lewis. These were eloquent reminders that 'seeing' the truth is an experience of 'making sense' of things. This certainly matters. It matters to make sense of the world, if we can. In Lewis's case, both rational and imaginative faculties worked towards this end. He invited people imaginatively to see the world in a particular way (through the lens of the Christian metanarrative), then showed that reality seen in this way proves more reasonable than any other. As such it was an exercise both of 'inspiration' and inductive reason. They are both necessary to make sense of things.

This impetus to make sense also has a transformative outcome. A whole way of life follows from new ways of seeing, and this is another reason why truth matters. This transformative effect was displayed most dramatically in the Oscar Romero lecture ('A Disturbing Truth: the Church and the Poor). Once Romero had grasped that the truth of the Word of God is primarily an invitation to enter friendship with God and 'God's friends' (especially the poor), he had to tell this truth as a *lived* truth which would help transform experience. This led him actively to expose the way poor are marginalised and made invisible (it also led to his own death). So this too implies why truth matters: if the authority of truth and the quest for truthfulness leads to trust and transformation, then few will doubt its rationale. For many, this will be enough. If the idea of truth generally helps cement social life and inspire justice, the fact that its pure form can be so elusive (in any field) might not matter.

Anything more will require a different kind of debate altogether. It will need the likes of Nietzsche to galvanize us. For him, the authority of truth was so binding that even great social value wouldn't suffice as an explanation for it. It cries out for a metaphysical and religious explanation as well, even though he himself believed in neither. That's why he said that even 'godless anti-metaphysicians' still take their cue from 'the flame lit by the thousand-year old faith... that God is truth; that truth is divine'. So perhaps that, in the end, is the final question provoked, even if not always answered explicitly. *Is truth 'divine'? Does truth rest on metaphysical foundations?* The setting of Westminster Abbey implied its own answer. How many people attending these debates, I wonder, would have offered a different one?