

“KEEPING THE BALANCE”

3. Truth vs Love

Ephesians 4:1-15

Imagine the scene. In fact, many of you will not need to imagine it – you’ve lived through it times without number. You may even have been scarred psychologically by it. It may well have affected your relationships. You are getting ready to go out for the evening. As you sit on the edge of the bed, combing those last few stray strands, your spouse turns to you and says, “How do I look?”

“You look fine, my dear,” you reply. (It always starts like this – you’ll never learn.)

“But what about this top with this skirt?” (Or, “this tie with this shirt?” – let’s not make any assumptions here.)

“It’s fine,” you reply, not looking up, for you know it won’t make any difference.

“No. Be honest: is it all OK?”

“Look, it’s wonderful. You look great,” you say.

“Well, I’m not sure myself. Do you think the blue might be better?”

“No. It’s absolutely right. Eric Clapton could have been singing just about you.”

“No, go on. I want the truth.”

You take a deep breath. “Well, maybe the pink is a teensy bit bright with that green.” The die is cast. Here it comes.

“I thought so! You think I’m a ragbag, don’t you? You think I look awful. I don’t know why I bother asking you. You’re always so critical of me and what I wear. I thought you loved me, but it’s obvious you don’t. How could you possibly say that about my clothes? You know I don’t have much to choose from.” (In fact, the floor is nearly knee deep in discarded clothing.) “Why can’t you be a bit more affirming? I’ll bet (insert name here!) doesn’t treat his/her spouse like this. If I’d wanted your opinion, I’d have asked for it.”

This is not the time to point out that, yes, you did ask for my opinion – you dragged it kicking and screaming from my better judgement. Once again, you have been ambushed. You have tried to steer a course between the Scylla of Truth and the Charybdis of Love – and you have foundered on the Rocks of Reality. (“What did you think of that metaphor? No, honestly – tell me!”)

We’ve all been there, haven’t we? Perhaps not in that specific situation, but one that is very much like it – and perhaps dealing with far more serious matters than the combination of colours in an evening ensemble. It’s another of those situations where we need to strike a balance. We’ve looked at the ways in which we need to keep a balance between personal and collective responsibility, and between home, work and church. Well, here’s another one. How do we attempt to keep the balance between truth and love? It’s a dilemma for us, isn’t it? Do we speak out and risk offence, or do we shut up and risk consequences that could be pretty serious both in the short term and, possibly, for eternity?

We firmly believe that our faith is one based on truth. We have certain beliefs that we hold to be important – non-negotiable, even – beliefs about God and ourselves, about this world and the next. And if we are to be true to those beliefs, there will come times when we need to speak out, when we need to speak the truth, even if when we think it might upset someone. If someone is threatening to jump from a high building onto the car park below, based on the laws of the physical universe and our observed experience, it would seem to be the truth that that person is going to end up in rather a mess. We would want to point that out to whoever is planning to jump. If someone completely disregards the guidelines and instructions that God has given all people about how to live life, then we would believe that the truth is that they will foul up for all eternity. We try to point that out to people who are following the wrong game plan for their lives.

But we also follow the way of love. Indeed, the Bible tells us that “*God is love*”. Peter writes in his first letter that “*love covers over a multitude of sins*” (1 Peter 4:8). So we try to prevent our friends and family from being too offended by what they consider to be the harsher aspects of our faith. In the name of preserving relationships amongst ourselves, we gloss over the problem areas and keep off the tricky subjects where the truth might need to be confronted. It’s a dilemma, isn’t it?

Of course, there are the caricatured extremes of truth and love. We often think about those who come down on the truth side of things as Bible-bashing shouters with no shred of compassion who condemn everyone who doesn’t think and act like them to an eternity of punishment. They “speak as they find” – and what they find is always worth condemning. Their doctrine is narrow and unyielding. Their dogma watertight and resistant to any rethink or revision. They tell the jumper from the building in grisly detail exactly what is going to happen to his bones and organs when they come into contact with the tarmac – and, indeed, what horrors await their soul in the sulphurous pit of hell when their life has been forced out of them.

And those on the love side of the seesaw are seen as woolly-minded and spineless. They have to show love because they don’t have anything else to believe in. They willingly embrace all-comers – literally and metaphorically – and don’t want to put anyone’s back up by even offering an opinion, let alone the suggestion of a position. To them, everything is an attempt to be warm and fuzzy, to draw everyone into the melting pot that sees no place for any oppressive attempt at a strongly held faith. They tell the jumper from the building that there’s always an outside chance they might not get hurt – after all, what with quantum mechanics and chaos theory, there’s no longer a 100% guaranteed outcome to any physical action. And, what’s more, there will be lots of people thinking of them and praying for them on the way down.

In the end, it may be the dogmatist who is most helpful to the person who is going to jump. His truth may come from a position of real love for that person, and he knows the only way to prevent him jumping is to be gruesomely honest with him. The person who tries to be loving may well not care two hoots for the jumper and he’s just taking a position that he feels is what he should be doing. We could have come up with a situation which appeared completely the opposite of that. It just goes to show how difficult the dilemma is.

John, Jesus, Paul – they all spoke in what we might consider to be appallingly offensive and dogmatic terms as they expressed the truth. John greeted those who came to hear him speak with the words, “*You brood of vipers!*” (Luke 3:7) – not the way you’d expect to be greeted here on a Sunday morning, although there may well be some who deserve that label! Jesus poured great dollops of invective over the religious leaders of his day when he addressed them as, amongst other things, “*hypocrites*” in Matthew 23:13-36. Paul writes to the Galatian Christians, “*Have I become your enemy by telling you the truth?*” (Galatians 4:16). I don’t suppose any of them gained any popularity with the people to whom they spoke, and we might accuse them of being unloving in their apparent insults.

But we are also encouraged by all three of them to show love towards one another as well. And as we’ve already said, the other John tells us in his letter that “*God is love*” (1 John 4:16). In the words we read this morning from *Ephesians 4*, Paul writes that we are to “*bear with one another in love*” (v2). In perhaps his most famous words, *1 Corinthians 13*, he writes that love is the most important aspect of our lives, not just as Christians, but as human beings. It seems that this is where the balance should be tipped – towards love: that is the controlling element in all this.

But then, a bit further down in this passage, we find Paul writing that we should be “*speaking the truth in love*” (v15). It’s a strange phrase, and one that has been much misused. I remember well a particularly obnoxious member of the Christian Union when I was at university, who would say whatever he thought about you, usually in the most offensive of ways – and then say, “Of course, I mean that in love.” For him, that somehow made it all OK. “I think you’re an ugly halfwit with the breath of a camel, and your

views on predestination are totally without foundation. But I say that out of love for you, of course.” You can’t get away with that kind of thing.

Part of the difficulty in working out what this is all about is that in Paul’s Greek the word “truth” is actually a verb. He doesn’t mention “speaking”. A literal translation would read, “*truthing in love*”, so it’s not “speaking as you find” (an appalling Yorkshire euphemism for being rude and insulting), but living *and* speaking with integrity. It’s a phrase which more or less provides the answer to our dilemma this morning. Once again, the way to keep the balance is not to try and steer a middle way, but to go all out for both things at the same time, to hold both elements in creative tension.

The love of which Paul speaks here is not the warm and woolly, inoffensive and anodyne emotion that we so are often led to believe is what love is all about. It’s not an emotional, sentimental *feeling*. This is that love which is indicated in Paul’s Greek by the word ἀγαπή. This is love which is an act of will. There will be people whom you encounter in all kinds of walks of life – not least within the church – that you have to decide to love: you have to resolve that, however different from you they may be, however irritating and obnoxious you may find them, you are going to love them, to put yourself out for them.

In ἀγαπή love, there is no bitterness or rancour. You do not speak the truth to them to try and get your own back on them, to get revenge, to annoy or upset them, but because you want the best for them. Αγαπή love seeks the highest good of others, even if it means you yourself end up getting the raw end of the deal. It means pointing out the awful truth to the one who is about to jump. It means trying to pull someone back from the brink of self-destruction as they follow a pathway that is taking them away from God. James writes in his letter, “*If one of you should wander from the truth, [...] someone should bring him back*” (James 5:19). And Paul writes that we should be “*truthing in love*” in order to prevent what he describes in the previous verse (Ephesians 4:14).

Naturally, that means we need to have a good grasp of the truth ourselves. And also to choose which are the battles we really think are worth fighting. We must avoid the path of nit-picking nagging – that is effectively what the Pharisees whom Jesus branded hypocrites were doing. You may hold it to be a truth self-evident that those who wear tattoos will not get into heaven or that people from other churches are bound for the eternal fires of hell – but check your truth out with the Bible before you make that the main plank of your evangelism. Jesus proclaimed himself to be, “*The way, the truth and the life.*” If you want to know what truth is all about, then look at Jesus. If you want to know what love is all about, then look to God.

When I was looking through the concordance in preparing for this, I discovered an interesting fact. The first letter of John contains more references to truth than any other letter in the New Testament. And many people point to that letter as a bulwark in the battle for truth against error. The word truth itself is used eleven times. But John also uses the word “love” more times than any other letter in the New Testament – even including the number of times Paul uses it in *1 Corinthians 13*. The word ἀγαπή appears no less than thirty five times. The writer who was most insistent on truth, was also by far the most insistent on love.

In our church life today, there is, as always, a desperate need for us to balance truth and love. They are both needed. We cannot build a church on truth alone – or it will become hard and insensitive and there will be no relational aspect to it. But neither can we build a church on love alone or we will find that we all get along in a friendly way for a while, but the lack of a firm foundation will mean that even those relationships crumble and fade away – and we will have nothing distinctive to offer those who are as yet outside the church. In his commentary on *Ephesians*, entitled *God’s New Society*, John Stott writes: “*Truth becomes hard if it is not softened by love: love becomes soft if it is not strengthened by truth.*”

Let us open ourselves up to God’s perfect love, allowing him to work in us and through us by his Holy Spirit, receiving his forgiveness and enjoying his compassion. And in that love, let us speak the truth

sensitively. Our whole lives should reflect the truth of God's word and ways, and as we immerse ourselves in his love, so we need, too, to learn how to speak the truth with sensitivity and compassion.