

8th February 2021

Dear Friends

I have been wondering about the question that Pontius Pilate addressed to Jesus 'What is truth.' John 18 vs 38. I have been wondering about that question because in recent days this question has touched on many events in the news. We live an age of 'alternative facts' and conspiracy theories that cast doubt on what we are told by people in authority so I thought it was worth writing about.

There have been some famous conspiracy theories, most famously the idea that Lee Harvey Oswald was not the assassin who killed John F Kennedy and some that are quite entertaining, for example the idea that the Moon landings were faked and filmed in a television studio. Of course, some conspiracies are real and dangerous and should send a chill down our spine, for example the conspiracy that was conceived at a highly secret meeting in Wannsee in 1942, which paved the way for the 'final solution'; the genocide of six million Jews. This is an extreme example but it is a healthy reminder that people keep secrets and that is why openness and accountability are essential to a healthy society in which we may be confident we can tell the difference between truth and lies.

One of the most popular conspiracy theories that has many subscribers, especially but not exclusively in the United States is QAnon. Like many conspiracy theories it has spread via social media and the internet and is popular because it weaves together so many threads of suspicion and appeals to people who believe society is controlled by elites who conspire to control us. The internet makes it possible to spread conspiracy theories in a way that wasn't possible and there are many good reasons why people, including me, are vulnerable to believing them. They may have become victims of the echo chambers they live in, because if the only news you listen is via social media where invisible algorithms govern what you hear, then everything you are exposed to will confirm what you already believe. Of course, this doesn't mean that the mainstream media isn't biased or misleading but it is subject to a degree of critical scrutiny that makes it much harder for the BBC, ITN, Sky, the Daily Mail, or the other newspapers to create alternative facts.

Of course, you may be wondering what an alternative fact is? After the inauguration of Donald Trump as president of the USA, the White House said that more people had attended this ceremony than any presidential inauguration in history. This was demonstrably untrue, anybody could tell just by looking at their television, but when a counsellor to the new president Kellyanne Conway was interviewed she defended the statement by saying it was an 'alternative fact.' Of course, this is nonsense but it set the pattern for a string of falsehoods which people believed because it fitted their preconceptions, culminating in the invasion of the Capital buildings in Washington D.C. by a mob who believed their recent election was stolen, despite there being no evidence that this is true.

It may be no accident that conspiracy theories like this take hold in the United States but that doesn't mean we are immune. In the United Kingdom we have been exposed to conspiracy theories that have sought to explain coronavirus that has led sceptics to invade hospital wards to show the pandemic is a hoax and others to believe that the new 5 G masts have caused the epidemic. For some people this sounds like madness but then, who would have believed eighteen months ago that for much of 2020 and 2021 whole nations like ours would be living under severe lockdowns? The desire to understand and explain what is happening, to discern its real significance is very human and very helpful. The question we all face is where do we go when we want to understand? Who do we trust and how do we know they are trustworthy?

This question is especially important because in the course of the next year we will all be offered one of the new coronavirus vaccines and in order to build up 'herd immunity' we need as many people as possibly can to take the vaccine. This means that we are protected as individuals because we have received the vaccine and we are protected as a society because coronavirus will be denied the opportunity to spread.

For some people this is a no brainer, but other people will wonder is it safe. That question is a good question and it helps to understand the way science works. Science works by peer review. In other words, no scientist or group of scientists can publish their research as if it were a fact without that research being extensively peer reviewed which means other scientists have to carefully read and interrogate the research to see if it will stand up to the highest standards of critical scrutiny. If it doesn't the research

cannot be published. When that research leads to a new product such as a new vaccine it has to undergo clinical trials before it is authorised for public use and these trials are careful to consider the likely side effects of any new vaccine and who might be vulnerable to them. The new coronavirus vaccines have been developed with remarkable speed because of the pandemic but that doesn't mean that the drug companies or the medical authorities have not taken great care about them.

This won't prevent people spreading conspiracy theories. Among these are the idea that what is really being injected is a microscopic chip that the government will use to control us and the idea that there could be serious side effects. The microchip idea may appeal to people who feel alienated and excluded from society but it's not true. The story about side effects will play into the reasonable fears people have about side effects of the vaccine. I have heard about one of the alleged side effects several times. It's something that can happen to people for a whole variety of reasons and it can happen suddenly and unexpectedly, so if happened to you at about the same time as you received the vaccine then it's no surprise you might think the vaccine caused it. Whenever we hear something that seems to play into our fears it's always worth investigating and asking if the information you are being given is trustworthy

I believe we can trust the science. I am saddened when I hear of people saying that that it is wrong for people to choose the vaccine over faith in God who will keep them safe. I want to gently reply that God who is the God of all truth has gifted humankind the intelligence to create vaccines that will keep us safe. There is a spiritual dimension to the current situation for God is our ultimate refuge and stronghold but that doesn't mean God is opposed to science. Of course, we should use our minds to ask intelligent questions while believing in the goodness of God and the provision of God for our needs. He does this in many ways, including the wonders of science.

As Christians this is especially important because we are commanded to love our neighbours. When we are vaccinated, we are protecting our families, our friends, our neighbours, and our colleagues. It is an act of love.

I'm really happy that many of our older members at New North Road have received the vaccine and hope that all of the most vulnerable people for you may be concerned will

receive theirs soon. In time we will emerge from this strange season of our lives, having learned new things and thankful to God for his faithfulness and abiding love.

Your friend and pastor

Mark