“What is truth?” asked jesting Cooper

Sermon at Churchill Chapel, Cambridge

18 October 2026

By Nigel Cooper

Ps 85. 7-13

Proverbs 12. 15-20

John 18. 33-38

Welcome again.

Whenever I am listening to someone speaking, especially listening to other clergy sermonising, I am hypercritical. What do I agree with; what do I disagree with? I now give notice that I expect you to do exactly the same as you listen to me.

Returners will know that I often mention the three transcendentals, goodness, truth and beauty. It is time I addressed them and this is the first of the series and is on truth. Should we, like Pilate, ask in jest[1], shrug our shoulders and get on with politics? There is a lot of evidence that we conclude the truth lies where we want it to lie – and when we want it to lie! This is termed ‘motivated reasoning’[2] I am not motivated to believe that!

I believe having differences over truth is beneficial in the search for truth. Of course we should express our differences honestly and with respect towards those we disagree with. That, though, includes speaking confidently and with conviction, not with hedging or social timidity, but also being open and level about our uncertainties and doubts.

The to and fro of discussion can bring light. This is not merely a stepwise approach to truth as we learn from one another, not least in having our mistakes identified. But much more than this, the truth actually may lie in the tensions between truth claims, especially when it comes to the deeper questions of life. So differences of opinions are not to be shrugged off as an impasse, a ‘whatever’, allowing a conversation to move on quickly to safer ground.

There is a wonderful story that is found in in the Talmud, a compendium of opinions of early Jewish rabbis. A studious rabbi discovers that two earlier and distinguished rabbis strongly disagreed on a certain point. Our rabbi prays to God, “Which of the two rabbis is correct?” God replies, “They both are.” But our rabbi replies, “But, God, they cannot both be right.” God’s response? “All three of you are right!”

---

1 ‘"What is truth?" said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer.’ These are the first words of "Of Truth", which is the opening essay in the final edition of the philosopher, statesman, and jurist Francis Bacon's "Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral" (1625)

2 Kunda, Z. (1990). The case for motivated reasoning. Psychological Bulletin, 108(3), 480–498. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.108.3.480

This story is cited by Iain McGilchrist in a work titled "The Matter with Things"[3] He uses this story to illustrate the generative power of opposites. He is particularly taken with some aphorisms of Heraclitus, the Pre-Socratic philosopher, he of "You cannot step into the same river twice." Another fragment from Heraclitus is, "They do not understand how a thing agrees at variance with itself: it is an attunement turning back on itself, like that of the bow and the lyre."[4] This McGilchrist interprets, "It is the tension between the warring ends of the bow that gives the arrow the power to fly, as it is the tension in the strings of the lyre that gives rise to melody." The truth is generated in the tension between opposites. Just as in a magnet where both ends are integral to the essence of a magnet, so apparent contradictions may constitute truth in their combination and tension.

In another fragment, Heraclitus said, "Graspings/Syllapsīes: wholes and not wholes, convergent divergent, consonant dissonant, from all one, and from one all." Συλληψις is a rich Greek word, literally taking-together with senses such as gatherings, grasping with the mind, fitting together, even conception in the womb. McGilchrist waxes lyrical: a deep understanding of the nature of reality comes in glimpses where all is neither simply single nor simply manifold, neither whole nor not whole, neither like nor unlike, each thing working with and working against the others; the One and the Many bring one another into being; and all is held together in a syllapsis, which births a further syllapsis – a moment of dawning insight in us.[5]

You can perhaps see that I'm not interested here in truth as an account of reality, or a theory or a mental image that relates more or less accurately with the way things are. I suggest that the philosophical debates between truth as correspondence with reality and truth as coherence within an account of reality miss the point. Truth that interests me is primarily an embodied engagement with life and its complexities[6].That John's Jesus says, "I am the way, the truth and the life," points in the same direction[7].

Etymology may help us here. As a method, the history of words can help us engage with the wisdom of the ancients, tracing the way concepts develop over time, maybe identifying what of benefit was lost along the way, or legacies of connotation that are like rich seams of ore ready to be mined.

So, 'true' can be used as in 'true to yourself', or 'he was true to his word.' It is related to trust. To be true is to be trustworthy: People put their trust in it as they live their lives and, if true, they find they are not let down. As everyone's life is different, so their experience of truth will differ. Their points of view will differ, as do people's views from windows into a murky aquarium[8]. There is a unity beyond our diverse perspectives. This is a relativism that does not rest with 'anything goes'.

To my mind, our very search for truth is evidence that we trust there is something worth searching for[9]. We desire the wisdom we need to live our lives well. We are not relativists at heart. Our search is a journey and not an arrival and we shall need different wisdoms at different stages of our lives.

---

3 (2021) Perspectiva Press, London. On page 833.
4 On page 817
5 My shortening of McGilchrist's text on p 817.
6 I am close here to American Pragmatism or Continental Phenomenology.
7 John 14. 16
8 An image coined by the philosopher Mary Midgley, *The Myths we Live By* (2003)
9 Sometimes truth is claimed merely to buldgeon someone into conformity with one's own political outlook.

But, how do we undertake this search for truth? This is the next stage of my questioning.

Heidegger, the Continental Phenomenologist, is noted for his repeated reference to the etymology of the Greek word for truth, ἀληθεια. The initial alpha is an alpha-privative, a negation of the word that it prefixes, which is ληθη – forgetfulness, oblivion, the unobserved. Remember the river Lethe, the river of the underworld that mind-wipes those who cross it. Truth, then, is the unforgetting of a forgotten reality, the release from being oblivious to the blindingly obvious.

One might think this easy, unnecessary even. But no, It is hard, hard, hard. Both as individuals and as societies we tell ourselves many myths to comfort ourselves – motivated reasoning again. For convenience we ignore the inconvenient. The search for truth is much more than a search for facts. It is the task of lifting the carpet to see what has been swept underneath. It will involve many strategies and skills. It may be a species of a poetic or artistic task, to see below the surface of things; or of a musical task, encountering relationships of harmony and discord; of a psychoanalytic task, to 'know thyself'; of a spiritual task, to journey beyond a materialist world. It will seek to clear our vision of the distortions we inherit or apply ourselves, removing the blindfolds that protect us from seeing what we fear. We shall be applying a reflective observation of others and, importantly, of ourselves, our behaviour, our thoughts, and what is below our casual thoughts, that is a mindfulness. There will be much learning from others, seeing through other people's eyes, hearing their challenges to us. And just resting in being, contemplating nature and the nature of nature.

Oh, how rhapsodic of me!

Let's ground this in an illustrative example. I consider that we are nearly all living in a phantasy land over climate change. It is the widespread view of our culture that climate change is real at the level of fact. And there is the pervasive opinion that this is serious but solvable; it just needs a bit more technology and sensible decisions by politicians, supported by the rest of us. This, at least, has been my position for many years. It has allowed me to sleep at night, even though it remains a tough call in the context of rising popular antagonism to net zero and persistent political inaction.

Over the past four weeks I have changed my mind. And the book that has done this is *Promise the Earth*[10] by Professors Julian Allwood, an engineer in this university, and Andrew Davison, a theologian at Oxford. Allwood's calculations, repeated in his talk yesterday that I heard, seem to me to be decisive. (They are echoed in Dieter Helm's book *Climate Realism* published just ten days ago[11].)

Allwood begins by accepting the target of global net zero carbon by 2050 as essential to avoid global war over food. He looks at the strategies to remove carbon such as carbon capture, planting trees and geo-engineering and argues persuasively that even if they might work in theory, they cannot work at the necessary scale within the required time-frame. There is, for him, no sensible net zero carbon; there is only zero carbon by 2050. He then makes an optimistic, but not impossible, estimation of the growth of renewable electrical energy. However, by 2050 it will meet only about half of predicted energy demand. And on top of this, he reminds his readers of the non-energy gas emissions from things like cement and steel production, farming, especially fertilisers, meat, dairy

[10] CUP 2026
[11] CUP 2026

and rice, and deforestation. It does not add up. We cannot reach zero green house gas emissions by 2050 if we continue with our current level of activity. We have an irresistible force, global lifestyle expectations, facing an immovable object, the maximum greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 for the chance of a safe future of humanity. This is not a syllapsis of a fruitful contradiction; it is a car-crash in the making.

How is it that this clarity Allwood provides is not commonplace? Is not clearly communicated in the many official reports that I read each year? The numbers are there in the reports, but they are not added up and compared – this is a sweeping statement, but they have not leaped out at me as I have read them.

And how have I allowed myself to be forgetful, crossing the River Lethe into a world of comforting make-believe? Did I not conclude in 2006, when I read the Stern Review[12], that we were destined for societal collapse unless the world woke up? And in 2009, did I not grasp, when I read David Mackay's *Sustainable Energy – without the hot air*[13], that the renewable electricity that will be needed will require unfeasible land areas for its generation? And yet I had let those insights slip into oblivion.

Well, of course, I don't want to face this bad news. My mental health – all our mental healths – need some protection. This is essential to continue with life and, even more, for engaging with what does need to be done in order to play our parts in averting disaster. Many climate communicators would be roundly criticising me for not emphasising hope here (I shall come back to hope in a moment).Yet Jesus is noted for saying, "The truth will set you free," and I think we do first need our eyes open to navigate the future as felicitously as possible.

But this is not primarily an individual failure; it is a societal one. The great forces of capitalism have no wish to row back on what brings their profits and we, the people, have no wish to row back on our standards of living. This is the great collusion of our time. It is like living in denial after a diagnosis of a terminal disease. It is a reciprocating collusion, both parties addicted to consumerism; neither wanting to face the costs now but ready enough to dump them on future generations.

But am I right in my views? Is this the truth? The IPCC is, I think, a sound source for the science, but not for the politics which has to pass the governments of the world to get into the summaries for policy-makers. Analyses of people's self-interested behaviour offers cogent explanations for our collective Nelson's Eye. Through self-analysis we can uncover the inconvenient truth.

Now to the last link in my chain of thought.

I think a deeper grasp of hope allows us to see more of the truth. I think it is not incidental that Allwood's conclusions are presented in a Christian book with a theological co-author setting out the case for hope, hope that allows the authors to see somewhat more clearly than most.

In our search for truth we need hope. Hope gives us the courage to take our blindfolds off. Hope gives the confidence to stick with uncertainties and contradictions. Hope trusts that the search for truth is not fruitless because truth allows us to live more wisely.

---

12 [ARCHIVED CONTENT] Stern Review final report - HM Treasury

13 David MacKay FRS: : Contents

I plan to set out more of my thoughts on hope in a fortnight. For now I wish to leave you with my slogan, “Hope is a spiritual discipline, not an estimate of probabilities.” Plenty of times before in history, humans have faced disasters. The disasters may have been of various extents, but they have involved war, hunger, oppression, grief and death. And yet our forebears often faced them with courage and determination. Fortified by the Holy Spirit (as I believe) or not (as you may believe), the human spirit has risen to the crises. And it can and will do so again.

This chapel must be a place in which we search for truth; where we share our differences with generosity; where we seek to identify our illusions; and where we hold onto the hope that the search for truth, indeed life itself, is worthwhile.

Welcome to this chapel.