

ST MARK'S 2018 COMMENCEMENT SERMON

 In the name of God; Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

A few weeks back, my wife Ellie was browsing through a magazine rack when her gaze was drawn to something regrettably all too familiar. Two conflicting bits of Hollywood goss. One magazine proclaimed: *Jen's joy after 12 years – I've Got Brad Back!* The other: *Brad and Ange – Why We Faked Our Split*. Who, my good wife wondered, was telling the truth? If anyone!

Ellie mentioned this next day while we were lunching with the former managing editor of a reputable, New York-based magazine. I couldn't resist the obvious question. "Jillian! [*not her real name – even in retirement she's wary of a libel suit*] Do these popular magazines just make this stuff up?" There was a pause "Let's just say some of them are economical with the truth." The lawyer at the table laughed and immediately chimed in: "Of course Grant! They spout an enormous load of [*and here I'll have to be polite*] animal fertilizer!"

Should we be surprised? After all, we're in a post-truth age, aren't we? Post-truth, as in, cherry-pick the data and come to any conclusion you like. But I argue we've been in post-truth times ever since that ancient serpent deceived our ancestral parents. And it's two whole millennia since that question famously asked of Jesus, during his trial by Roman governor, Pontius Pilate: "What is truth?" The truth is, factoids, fake news, fallacious fabrications; they're as old as human history. Maybe just magnified these days by social media. And by some of the prominent people using it.

President Trump springs to mind. Of course, the "fake news" he rails against isn't all one-way traffic. In its review of Michael Wolff's *Fire and Fury*, Time Magazine noted: "Trump is a president with a broad definition of truth." It was quick to add though, that Wolff himself is

known for his “flexibility with facts.” If nothing else, it seems the truth can be rather elusive.

But for all the scurrilous jokes that circulate about the President, it’s still possible to tell one, and make a point, without disrespecting him. An example: Donald Trump is getting out of his limo when a man steps forward with what appears to be a gun. A secret service agent, new in the job, shouts: “Mickey Mouse!” This startles the would-be assailant and he’s overpowered and hand-cuffed. Later, the agent’s supervisor takes him aside and asks: “What the heck made you shout Mickey Mouse?” The agent replies: “I got nervous. I meant to shout, ‘Donald, duck!’”

The truth [*and the point of course*], is that gun violence is no laughing matter. And if the scenario just mentioned ever became reality [*and not for one moment am I wishing it*], the President might be more proactive in tackling the issue. As you’d be aware, tighter gun controls are the subject of fierce debate in the U.S. at present. Some say more guns are the answer [*including the President I notice*]. Others, especially America’s teenagers this week, say less, or better still, none.

How a constitutional amendment can be allowed to trump human lives [*no pun intended*] is a matter for some real soul-searching. What the whole saga does reinforce for me [*observing helplessly from afar*] is that vested interests, political baggage, and plain-old, rusted-on prejudice, have the propensity to blind any one of us to the truth, any truth, in our opponent’s argument.

An ancient Indian parable seems appropriate here. It concerns six blind men who encounter an elephant for the first time. One man touches the elephant’s trunk and declares the animal to be like a thick snake. Another feels the ear and thinks the elephant is some kind of fan. The third rubs the animal’s side and is convinced the elephant is like a wall. And so ... on it goes! When a sighted man

comes along and describes the elephant in detail, the men gain a vital insight: one's subjective experience does not necessarily capture the totality of truth.

So, not only can truth be elusive; it's often far more complex than we'd like. And no more so than in academic circles. I'm sure you're already aware, or soon will be, of the complexity of many of the debates that rage among professional scholars. Let me introduce two academics really feeling the heat; Jerry Fodor and Massimo Piattelli-Palmarini. They've ignited a fiery controversy with their assault on the classical Darwinism which underpins and permeates modern Western society.

But in their book, *What Darwin Got Wrong*, they make one thing very clear. "This is not about God. In fact, we are outright, card-carrying, signed-up, dyed-in-the-wool, no-holds-barred atheists - nevertheless, we intend to show that Darwin's theory of natural selection is fatally flawed." They argue that from the seed of that original idea, not just a tree, but a whole forest of unquestioned assumptions has sprouted. And they think the tree needs to be cut at its roots.

In case you're wondering, these guys are no academic lightweights. Fodor is professor of philosophy and cognitive science at Rutgers University. Piattelli-Palmarini is a biophysicist and molecular biologist as well as being professor of cognitive science at the University of Arizona. They insist they're seeking the truth – which, unsurprisingly, they expect will turn out to be quite complex. And they're doing it, they say, for the sake of good science.

Which is well and good, because while they say, "This isn't about God!" it never could be. Because the truth about God, about the meaning and purpose of life, and the realities that lie beyond it, belongs to an entirely different realm. And it can't be explained by scientific theories or measured by physical instruments.

Jesus said [*and this is what precipitated Pilate's famous question*]: "I came into the world to testify to the truth. All who love the truth recognise that what I say is true." To dismiss the existence of spiritual truth because it doesn't answer to scientific empiricism is irrational. It's a bit like denying the existence of FM radio because it doesn't register on the AM-only receiver in your vintage Kingswood. Or disavowing the reality of beauty because nothing answering to it emerges from the chemical analysis of a cut diamond.

Speaking of diamonds, they resemble truth in an important respect. Like truth, they're multi-faceted. In order to be fully appreciated, both truth and diamonds need close inspection from different angles, rigorous scrutiny from every possible perspective. Perhaps that's what Pilate, under immense pressure at the trial of Jesus, either didn't understand, didn't have time for, or for whatever reason, was too afraid to pursue. That's if, of course, he really existed? [*Do I think so?*]

Well, there have been historians in the past who've argued that Pilate may simply be a fictional creation of the New Testament writers [*thus putting them on a par with the editors of today's glossy mags*]. But, in 1961, archaeologists at Caesarea Maritima [*in Israel*], unearthed a limestone block on which was inscribed [*among other things*] Pontius Pilatus, prefect of Judaea – complete with the date of his tenure. The truth turns up in odd places.

Indeed it does, but never with more certainty than in the words of Jesus himself. And this is his promise: "If you are faithful to my teachings, you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Oh, there is one more small thing! On a local magazine rack this week: "Against all odds – Brad's won Jen's heart again!" Could that finally be the truth?

Amen.

