

My truth or Gospel truth?

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ACTS 17:22-31

Rev John Barr



Some weeks ago, on the 4th May, The Sun newspaper in the UK created a worldwide furore as it ran the headline: “Prince Philip is dead at 95”. The French media followed suit while US broadcasters were slightly more cautious as they asserted the prince was merely “close to death”.

Royal household staff in the UK were summoned to a meeting on 4th May and, on receiving wind of this, the media launched into all sorts of speculation. Some even suggested the Queen had died. Meanwhile, Tracy Grimshaw, a presenter with Channel Nine’s A Current Affair, stood outside Buckingham Palace with the claim that the Queen had not died, she was simply retiring from public life.

This prompted a swift reply from the palace as a press officer informed the world that everything was, indeed, okay. The royals are still with us and you “can safely assume the Queen and Prince Philip are not dead.”

Now we know that the real news informed us that the aging Prince Philip was standing down from public life. There is nothing more to it than that. Indeed, one loyal compatriot was noted as saying he was sorry the Queen’s husband was stepping down. On hearing this, the ageing prince reportedly replied” “Well, I can’t stand up much longer”!

News is now a consumer item and the British royal family are one of many targets. Here correspondents and reporters play to the interests, the compulsions and the prejudices of the general public. We love to hear what we want to hear. We yearn to listen to what makes life interesting, to what creates controversy and to what meets a perceived need. As Prince Philip once said to an admirer in the Caribbean: “You have mosquitoes, we have the media”.

This is, perhaps, no more emphasized than it is in the phenomenon of the so-called “shock-jocks” who inhabit our radio waves.

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The Sydney Theatre Company recently staged a play in the Opera House which satirizes these talk-show hosts as they pontificate on what's wrong with the world. Starring John Walters, the play, Talk, is unsettling with its focus on media efforts to be the first and the loudest, to sound authoritative in matters where there is really little knowledge or understanding, and to put down, ridicule or speak over the top of anyone with whom one disagrees.



These latter techniques come as our media shock-jocks charge in with a particular agenda unsettling their guests, changing the subject mid-sentence, twisting the guest's words, repeating words back to them, making outlandish comments or launching into provocative statements that both puts the guest on the defense and sidetracks them away from what they really have come to say.

Bill O'Reilly on the Fox News Network in the US is a classic example. No doubt there are equivalents here in Australia.

The great St Paul had his fair share of grubbings. While there were no shock-jocks bleating out their form of populist newspeak across the air waves in Paul's day, we know that Paul was, firstly, involved in imposing his own zealous pro-establishment view upon the early follows of Jesus. And then, in an amazing about-turn, Paul sees the light and launches a brilliant program to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ.

But here Paul is brought before a number of hostile tribunals because of the message he dares to preach. Here Paul is interrogated and torn apart by the temple tribunal because of the witness he is bold enough to proclaim. Here Paul is seized by angry crowds and is literally run out of town because of the Good News he is yearning to share.

In Athens Paul is mocked. He is sent up and dismissed while in Lystra he is intimidated and threatened with death by stoning.

Paul, the Apostle of Christ, was simply not popular with the status-quo. The truth he preached clearly did not resonate the powers that be. His teaching proved unacceptable to the wider populace who simply couldn't get their heads around the challenging, revolutionary nature of the gospel.

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Meanwhile, in sophisticated Athens Paul was seen as a bit of babbler, a bird-brain or a fool. The message Paul preached was received as a stumbling block to many and sheer foolishness to most.

Yet Paul was no intellectual slouch. He was a learned scholar educated by Judaism's finest. Paul could meet his match in any philosophical debate and, in the Christian tradition Paul is considered to be a brilliant mastermind as he interpreted and communicated the faith.

Fortunately, a few observers in Athens could see this. So, Paul was invited to speak on the prestigious hill of Ares. This place was named after the Greek god of war who was known to the Romans as Mars. Also known as the Aeropagus, it was here that ancient Greece's council of elders gathered to meet over the centuries. Their role was to guide the City State as the foundations of Greece's democracy were laid. In Paul's day the Areopagus was the location where matters of law, philosophy and politics were adjudicated.

Paul begins his sermon with an attempt to curry favour with his audience. He exclaims: *"Athenians! I see how extremely religious you are in every way"*. Paul then observes: *"For as I walked around and carefully observed your objects of worship, I even discovered an altar upon which had been inscribed, 'To an unknown god'"*.

Paul claims this "unknown God" who the Athenians speak of is none other than the one and only true God, the God monotheistic Jews worshipped and the God who sent Jesus.

Paul emphasizes this God as creator, a creator who stands apart from the creation. And this means such a God cannot be manipulated or controlled. Indeed, such a God cannot be confined to temples made by human hands. Nor can this God be subjected to the whims, the desires or the demands of those by who worship God.

Paul then speaks about this God's creative acts. Here humanity is formed by God. And in doing so, humanity bears the very image of the God who creates. And all this is done by a God who is never disengaged or remote. Rather this God is immanent, this God is near, God is always present to God's people.



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Having made these claims Paul then goes on to say that, in God, *“we live and move and have our being”*. This means who we are and what we called to do is inexplicably bound up in God. These matters are one with God’s intentions. In other words, we are created for God to be God’s!

This complex sermon comes to an end as Paul claims everything that is - belongs to God.

Here Paul is not referring to just another god who can be stacked up with all the other gods that frequent the city of Athens. Rather, Paul asserts this God is unique. Paul proclaims this God is special. For, this God makes a claim on everything, meaning everyone and everything is of God. Therefore, everyone and everything is subject to God’s judgement, a judgement from which those who follow Jesus, the one who was raised from dead, are saved.

Now, the truth of the matter is that the Athenians didn’t much like what was being said here. Reference to Jesus, who through his resurrection, brings about new life for all was an absolute anathema to them.

For you see, the Athenians did not believe in the resurrection of the body. Their belief centred on the immortality of the soul. For those in ancient Athens life was made up of body and spirit. At death the spirit was said to be released or freed from its mortal abode. The idea of the body rising from the dead to give new life was simply ridiculous.

Meanwhile the idea of a one true God who exercised universal judgement just didn’t add up. This is because the gods of Athens were there, not to judge but to serve the interests of humankind. Religion was a means to an end. Men and women were not answerable to the deities they had created. Rather, the gods were there for one’s mutual benefit. The suggestion that God was in any way sovereign, calling all people to account, was just crazy.

So, most of the people in Athens scoffed and made fun of Paul. Only a few really listened. Even less comprehended. As far as we can see no church was established in Athens at this time. The Athenians were simply too focussed and too obsessed with their own particular brand of truth!

Friends, as we reflect on the Athenian response to Paul, I would like to ask the question: do you go through life listening to and embracing the truths that suit you? Do you approach the things of life with a particular agenda, with a certain idea or with a definite longing in mind - and then seek to fashion those truths that mean something to you - within the confines of such an agenda?

Think about it. In London the media was literally dying for a sensational story about the royal family. So, it made sense to suggest, to assume or to invent a so-called truth that said either the Queen or Prince Philip had died. While this suited the appetites of a craving public, the media were wrong. They were terribly wrong!

The Athenians didn't much like what Paul was saying because it didn't fit their agenda. It didn't fit what they longed for or wanted to believe. Hence Paul was accused of being a "babbler", a fool, dim-whit.

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But who are you prepared to believe? Paul - or those who are bound to their ancient gods, to their present longings or to their current fantasies?

The pursuit of truth can be a challenging, taxing, even uncomfortable one. And here, there is so much to struggle with. A careful examination of Paul's famous sermon on the Areopagus suggests this.

But we need to work at it. We need to take time. We need to wait upon God. For, the truth Paul proclaims is Gospel truth. It goes to very heart of who we are and to what we are called to be as God's people.

So, don't be swayed by the soothsayers or the easy beats. Don't be fooled by the shock-jocks or the fast talkers. Don't be consumed by those who proclaim exactly what you may want to hear.

It may feel good. It may offer simple answers to complex questions. It may even make your day. But concocted, fabricated, convenient truths are non-truths. They are fundamentally lies.

Friends, this not the way. For you see, God is bigger than this. God is far more important than this.

And so are you!

Amen.



