

LOVE WINS

Flatter to Deceive

“There is a Spanish train that runs between Guadalquivir and Old Saville....”

So begins the Chris De Burgh song - Spanish Train. It's a song about a game played between God and the Devil. It's a song about God and the Devil playing poker for the souls of the dead. Now you might think it's a very strange thing to do, to begin a sermon talking about a song in which God and the Devil play poker for the souls of the dead. You might think it's not a very theological thing to do. You may think it's not very becoming of a minister to begin a sermon in such a way. You might even feel a little uneasy about the thought that God might play poker, and play poker against the Devil. You might think the whole concept of God and the Devil playing poker, let alone playing to win the souls of the dead, is seriously flawed.

Well, firstly, it's a song... that's all. Secondly, it isn't particularly theological. Thirdly, it is seriously flawed as a concept. Fourthly, you might do well, sometimes in a sermon, to feel a little uneasy – maybe you will again later in this talk.

So, you may be wondering why I have chosen to begin this sermon talking about this song. For all it's theological flaws, this song, I think, contains one deep truth that we would do well to attend to.

I am going to ask you to bear with me for a moment. Here's how the song goes:

*Well the Devil he had three aces and a king
And the Lord he was running for a straight
He had the queen the knave and nine and ten of spades
All he needed was the eight
And then the Lord called for one more card
But he drew the diamond eight
And the Devil said to the Son of God
I believe you've got it straight*

*So deal me one for the time has come
To see who'll be the king of this place
But as he spoke, from beneath his cloak
He slipped another ace.*

The deep and profound truth captured in this song is this: The Devil is a cheat and a liar.

The Lord and the Devil do not play cards for the souls of the dead. The premise of this song is utterly flawed. But the Devil is a cheat and a liar. And we would do well to hold that truth and know that truth deep in our hearts... Because we are adept at falling for his lies.

3 Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?”

²The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, ³ but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

⁴“You will not certainly die,” the serpent said to the woman. ⁵“For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

⁶When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. ⁷Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. (Genesis 3 v 1-7)

The Devil lies: ‘You will certainly not die.’ (v4)

The Devil flatters to deceive: ‘For God knows that when you eat fruit from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good from evil.’ (v5)

You will be like God. Adam and Eve fell for the flattery and the lie, and we've been falling for it ever since. Perhaps the prophet Jeremiah summed it up when he said: 'The heart is deceitful above all things.' (Jeremiah 17 v 9)

We are very good at finding ways to be dishonest: we cheat in our marriages; we cheat on our tax returns; we lie to our friends; we don't always own up to our mistakes; we don't always tell the truth; we tell stories to make ourselves look good and others look bad.

There was an article recently for Premier Radio where one of the members of the Christian band 'The Rend Collective' suggested "Christians don't tell lies, they sing them." I think that's worth thinking about. One example he gave was of singing about lifting our hands as we worship...when mostly we sing those words with our hands by our sides.

Last week we sang these words: "So, with every breath that I am given I will sing Salvation's song." Perhaps the question becomes: do you really live that way? Chris De Burgh's song Spanish Train doesn't set out to tell the truth, but it contains one deep truth: the Devil is a cheat and a liar.

Here's another story, not a song, that tells of a bigger and a better truth.

4 Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, left the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, ² where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.

³ The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread."

⁴ Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone.'"

⁵ The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶ And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendour; it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. ⁷ If you worship me, it will all be yours."

⁸ Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"

⁹ The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. “If you are the Son of God,” he said, “throw yourself down from here. ¹⁰ For it is written:

“He will command his angels concerning you
to guard you carefully;

¹¹ they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.”

¹² Jesus answered, “It is said: ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

¹³ When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time. (Luke 4 v 1-13)

Here, again, the Devil lies. Here, the Devil tries to lure Jesus into a short-cut that denies the truth. Here, the Devil misuses the Scripture, twists it, and makes it into a lie. That is the Devil’s story and the one he always tells. But there is at play in this encounter, a far bigger and a far better story at work.

Jesus tells the truth. Jesus at every turn, counters the lies of the Devil with the truth. The devil flatters to deceive. Jesus speaks the truth. Ever since that encounter in the Garden of Eden between Adam and Eve and the Devil, God has been speaking the truth to his people. From that moment God has been telling those he created that there is a better way to live than to fall for the flattery and lies of the devil.

God speaks his truth to Noah
God speaks his truth to Abraham
God speaks his truth to Isaac
God speaks his truth to Moses, to Joshua
God speaks his truth through his prophets; Isaiah, Jeremiah,
Ezekiel, Elijah, Elisha to name but a few.

God speaks his truth because he wants the people he created to know the truth, because, in the words of Jesus himself: “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” (John 8 v 32)

God's truth is the bigger and better story. It is the truth that he loves you because he loves you because he loves you... It is the truth that you are greatly loved. It is the truth that you are loved more than you will ever know. It is the truth that you are loved just as you are. It is the truth that you cannot be loved more than you are loved in these moments. It is the truth that there is nothing you can do to make God love you more, and there is nothing you can do to make him love you less.

It is the truth that is most perfectly expressed in Jesus himself: 'The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.' (John 1 v 14) Jesus is the greatest expression and demonstration of the truth of God's great and magnificent love. Jesus lived the truth of God's love. Jesus was the most honest person who has ever lived. Every word he spoke was accurate, every sentence true. He never cheated on anyone or anything. He didn't alter the facts. He never stretched the truth, he never twisted the truth, he never shaded the truth – he spoke the whole truth.

Jesus never avoided the truth. He quite simply was the truth. In his own words: 'I am the way and the truth and the life.' (John 14 v 6) Jesus spoke the truth and Jesus lived the truth. To a man with Leprosy he said: "I am willing, be clean, and immediately the leprosy left him." (Luke 5 v 13) To a paralysed man he said: "Friend, your sins are forgiven... pick up your mat and go home." (Mark 2 v 10-11) He met a crowd on a hill and by breaking bread in front of them and feeding them he told them they were welcome in the kingdom of the heavens. (Mathew 14 v 13) He ate with a tax collector called Zacchaeus and declared that salvation had come to his house. (Luke 19 v 9) To a prostitute who poured perfume on his feet and wiped it with her hair, he told her to go in peace (Luke 7 v 36) To a woman at a well he told her that only he could offer her that life she really wanted. (John 4 v 4)

Jesus lived the truth of God's compassion, mercy, grace and love and in the light of all that, maybe here's the challenge: we are invited and called to live and love like Jesus. We are to be people of truth and of the truth.

There is a sobering story that we would do well to pay attention to.

⁵ Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. ² With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet.

³ Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? ⁴ Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied just to human beings but to God."

⁵ When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. ⁶ Then some young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

⁷ About three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ Peter asked her, "Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?"

"Yes," she said, "that is the price."

⁹ Peter said to her, "How could you conspire to test the Spirit of the Lord? Listen! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also."

¹⁰ At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events. (Acts 5 v 1-11)

This is a shocking story isn't it? We may be tempted to think this is a story about money, but it is rather a story about the truth. The problem was not that Ananias and Sapphira had money. The problem was that they lied about their choice to keep some of the money for themselves. Another way of saying that might be to say they misrepresented the truth. For Ananias and Sapphira their deceit led to their deaths.

We may find that shocking. Perhaps it points to the seriousness with which God guards the truth. And we might be tempted to think that this kind of thing

wouldn't or doesn't happen today. But in Romans, Paul tells us that 'the wages of sin is death' and that is still true.

It may not be physical death, but it could be the death of:

- A marriage
- A friendship
- A conscience
- A career

It could be the death of intimacy, or trust, or peace, or credibility, or self-respect. And, if we can't speak the truth or live the truth, it might be the death of our witness – others will not hear the truth through us.

There is a story of a man, who, many years ago conned his way into the orchestra of the Emperor of China. The truth about this man was that he could not play a note on any instrument, including the flute. Whenever the orchestra practised or performed he would simply hold his flute to his lips and pretend to play. But, in truth, he never played a note.

Because he was a member of the Emperor's Orchestra he was paid a modest salary and enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle. But it was all based on a lie. One day the Emperor requested that each member of the orchestra perform a solo. The flutist knew he couldn't do it so pretended to be sick. The royal physician however, was not fooled, and the man was required to perform.

On the day of the performance, the man, who carried his deceit in his heart, took poison and killed himself. From this story comes our English phrase: He refused to face the music.¹

Here's the truth friends, one day we will have to face the music. On day, friends, we will stand before God, and, maybe, it would be better to face the music now – with others, with ourselves, and with God himself.

You are greatly loved, you are. But love speaks the truth. So perhaps the question is – where into your life is God speaking his truth today, in these moments? We talked last week of the song of God's love singing over you. Perhaps today, it's time to face the music.

¹ Lucado, M., "Just Like Jesus," W Publishing Group 1998 page 110-111

God loves you as you are, but loves you too much to leave you that way. He longs for you to become more like Jesus who spoke the truth and lived the truth. Love without limits? To love without limits we must be people of the truth, for the truth will set us free to love.

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