One commentator wrote recently, 'our culture is allergic to truth.' Now whether you think that is correct or not, we do have something of a love/hate relationship with truth, don't we? You know instinctively that being truthful matters. For a start, it's vital for relationships. Think of a close friendship or a marriage, and how destructive cheating, or lying could be to that relationship.

But it's not just personal relationships that depend on truthfulness. During the recent banking crisis the Economist magazine ran an article that called for a return to the kind of values that characterised banking in the past, such as good old-fashioned honesty. And you probably saw in the news last month that the electronics giant, Toshiba, recently admitted to over inflating their profits – which I guess is business speak for lying - by 1.2 billion dollars, with all the damage that does not just to their reputation, but also their share price and their employees.

And then there's the world of science. When you read a journal article, you want to know the results are genuine and not a result of scientific fraud. And when a researcher falsifies their experiments or their results, it's a disaster for his or her colleagues, and for the rest of the scientific community. It's not an exaggeration to say that scientific research depends on truthfulness.

So, whether it's buying something, and you want to know it really does do what it claims to do, or investing in a company, or doing research, or marrying someone, we all know that truth and truthfulness matters.

But the truth can also be painful, can't it. When you come face to face with what you are really like, for example when you realise how your behaviour has hurt this other person, acknowledging that can be an unpleasant experience. We don't like it when the truth is pointed out to us. We would rather live within the bubble of our own perceptions, where everything we do and think is right. We don't like to be told that we're wrong, that we are on the wrong side of truth. In fact, sometimes we like to think that truth is what I say it is.

So, we know we need the truth and truthfulness, but sometimes it chafes and it hurts. And so this morning we are going to look at another of God's characteristics: that he is the God of truth.

He Speaks Truth Because He is Truth

The very first chapter of the Bible opens with this repeating refrain, "And God said…" (Gen 1:3). Ten times: 'And God said'. God speaks into the darkness and chaos of creation and brings life and light and order. He speaks to Adam and Eve, telling them what they should and shouldn't do. And after they disobey him, he comes to them again, speaking to them. And so from the off, but then throughout the Bible, there is this growing revelation of God as a speaking God. He speaks his promises, he speaks his laws, he speaks his wisdom, he speaks his judgments, he speaks his instructions on how to do life.

But does it matter what he says? You see, for you and me, whilst you might have something to say, whether anyone listens is another thing isn't it? In the work

place, when you're the intern, or the tea boy, or in my past, the medical student, no one really cares what you think or say. But when you're the CEO then your word carries weight.

But just because someone's word carries weight doesn't mean they're right does it? I mean a CEO can exert extraordinary power in an organisation, he can say 'jump' and people ask 'how high?', but be totally wrong and lead the company down a bind alley. And sometimes people will obey or follow others, not because they know what they're saying is true, but out of fear, or a need to be 'in' the 'in crowd', or out of a sense of duty.

So does it matter what God says? Well, if what he says is true, then what he says should shape everything about us, shouldn't it? Because there is no authority, no word, higher than his. So how we see him, how we see the world, how we see ourselves, and our lives, in fact every corner of our lives should be guided and influenced and controlled by God's word, *if* what he says is true.

And the Bible leaves us in no doubt as to the truthfulness of God's word. In Psalm 119 the Psalmist says of God, 'All your commandments are true' (v151) and 'the sum of your word is truth' (v160). In other words, the psalmist says, if I could sum up everything you say God, I'd have to say 'it's truth'. Now, you might think that's just the psalmist getting carried away, but when Jesus was praying on the night he was betrayed, he said to God, 'your word is truth' (John 17:16).

But the Bible also tells us why God's words are true. It's because he is true. Now think about it, because this works on the human level, doesn't it: there is this link between someone's words, what comes out of their mouth, and their character. And God's word and God's character, are inextricably linked. His words are always true, because he is true.

Even the prophet Balaam, a man who got so much wrong, got this much right, when he said, 'God is not a man that he should lie, or a son of man that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfil it' (Num 23:19). God's not like you and me, Balaam says, he doesn't blow hot one minute and cold the next. He doesn't say one thing and do another. He doesn't make a promise with no intention of carrying it out. God is not a man, Balaam says, that he should lie. In other words, God's word is trustworthy, because he is trustworthy. In fact, the prophet Isaiah calls him, the 'God of truth' (Is 65:16) and when he writes to Titus, the apostle Paul calls God the 'God, who never lies' (Titus 1:2).

Now, think of what that means for God's faithfulness. If God's words are true, because he is true, then he will never make a promise that he will not keep. God's promises are true because he always keeps them. At primary school if we were making a promise, sometimes you'd keep your fingers crossed behind your back – God never does that. And that is why, time and again, the Bible calls God 'faithful'. When Moses has this incredible encounter with God in Exodus 34, and God passes before him, proclaiming his name, God says of himself, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and *abounding* in steadfast love

and faithfulness" (Ex 34:6). Abounding in faithfulness. Abounding in speaking promises that are true and abounding in keeping those promises. It's why David says in Psalm 36, 'Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds' (Ps 36:5). And it's because God's words are true, and his promises are true, and he is true and faithful to keep them, that we can put our faith in his word. As the book of Proverbs says: 'Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him' (Prov 30:5).

But, whilst knowing that God always speaks the truth is wonderful, and you can build your life on it, God's truthfulness is also deeply challenging.

Trouble with Truth:
And the first reason God's truthfulness is challenging is because he requires truthfulness of us. The second to last of the Ten Commandments reads, 'You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour' (Ex 20:16). In other words, don't lie. Proverbs 12:22 says 'lying lips are an abomination to the Lord'. The apostle Paul says that, along with others 'nor will swindlers', those who cheat others out of their money by lying, 'inherit the kingdom of God' (1 Cor 6:9) and, perhaps most devastatingly, in the book of Revelation, Jesus says that 'everyone who loves and practices falsehood' (Rev 22:15) will be outside the heavenly city of God's blessing.

Now, when you think about that, it is deeply sobering. You see in Psalm 15, David asks, 'O Lord… who shall dwell on your holy hill?' who has the right to live in God's presence, now and for eternity? And David answers his own question: 'He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks truth in his heart' (Ps 15:1-2). But which of us can claim to be blameless when it comes to speaking the truth?

You see whether it's telling the occasional 'white' lie, as we call them, or buffing up your CV, or putting an overly positive spin or exaggerating something, or being less than truthful in your responses, or flattering someone, none of us can say we are blameless when it comes to speaking the truth. In fact, a group of Dutch investigators, recently published an article in the medical journal, Acta Psychologica, on how often people lie. They investigated 1000 subjects between the ages of 6 and 77, and found that nearly everyone lied at least once a day, with an average across all ages of 2.19 lies per day, rising to 3-5 lies per day for teenagers and young adults, who were the most likely to lie.

But just ask yourself, why do any of us lie at all? Why aren't we always truthful? Well, I reckon there are two major reasons. The first is that we want to look better in the eyes of others. We think if we exaggerate or add some stuff or make some stuff up, we'll impress them. When I was a boy my best friend told me his dad had just bought a new car. So to try and score back I told him that my grandfather owned a Rolls Royce, which was great, except he went home, asked his mum, who asked my mum, who told her 'don't be daft', and so the next day at school not only did my friend have a new car and I didn't, but now I looked totally stupid. But we lie because we want to appear better in others' eyes. We're so insecure about ourselves that we think we need something that isn't true to

bolster what is true. And it's for the same reason that we are prone to soak it up when someone flatters us.

But the second reason we lie is to escape the consequences of having done or not done something. So, we lie because at root we don't trust God, we don't believe he has our best interests at heart, we don't believe he will work all things for our good. We think we need to cover our tracks with lies, or protect ourselves with untruths.

But there's another reason why God's truthfulness is challenging, and that is that there are times when what the Bible says is true and what we want to be true, are in conflict. And we want to be the ones who decide for ourselves what is right or wrong, we don't want that imposed on us from outside. We want to be free, and so we're happy with God's word being true when it offers us some wonderful promise, or agrees with what we think is right, but when it doesn't, when it trumps our wishes or our desires, or when it condemns things we think are ok, then we don't like it.

And yet, all of us would admit that to a greater or lesser extent we've been influenced and shaped by our culture. It's impossible not to be. And at the same time, we'd all accept that every culture is imperfect, that there is always something that could be critiqued. And so if God's truth is timeless and stands above culture and societies, then you'd expect it to challenge and confront every culture at some point. And so when you find the Bible critiquing and challenging your views on something, you shouldn't be surprised by that. In fact it is exactly what you should expect it to do if this is God's truth speaking to you. That God's word convicts and challenges us, is not a reason to dismiss it, it is the very reason to hear it and embrace it.

You see, if all we ever do is listen to that which agrees with us, there is nothing to stop us becoming increasingly self-centred, narcissistic and proud. We need truth from outside us to speak into our lives and change us. It's why the Lord says in Isaiah 66, "This is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word." (Is 66:2). You see, ultimately it's only rebels who refuse to hear and obey the king's word.

But thirdly, we can be challenged by this idea of God being true and his word being truthful because we often desire things that are the opposite of that. Listen to what the writer to the Hebrews says: 'Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin' (Heb 3:13). The problem is that we find attractive things that make false claims about themselves, that are untrue: the writer calls it, 'the deceitfulness if sin.' Sin and temptation promise you something they can never deliver, or will never last. It promises you that if you do this, then you'll be happy, but you end up more miserable than you began. It tells you if you do this, you'll be free, but you end up enslaved to it, hooked on it, and under it's control. It promises that if you push yourself forward, you'll get what you want, but you end up more isolated and alone than ever. And all the time, this deceitfulness hardens our hearts the writer says. It blunts our consciences, and our character begins to crumble, as we

exchange the truth of God for a lie. It's interesting though what the writer gives as an antidote to that deceitfulness, isn't it? That we 'exhort one another every day.' That we speak the truth, God's truth to one another on a daily basis. And to experience that you need to be in a community filled with God's truth.

So if on the one hand we love the idea that God is trustworthy, and true, but on the other hand we struggle with untruthfulness and lie; we resent God's word when it contradicts what we want, and we are drawn to the deceitfulness of sin, what is there that can help us fully embrace his truth and let it change us?

The Word of Truth

John's Gospel opens with this remarkable statement about Jesus: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God… And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1:1, 14). So if one reason you and I speak is to express ourselves, then God's ultimate expression of himself, his word, is Jesus. And if God's word is always true, then, even if it's shocking, it's no surprise that Jesus should say, "I am the way *and the truth* and the life" (John 14:6). Not, 'I have come as a teacher of truth', or let me help you post-moderns intellectual types ask interesting questions to discover your own truth, but 'I am the truth.'

So ultimately, God's truth is not an abstract concept, it's Jesus. It's why John said of him, 'We have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, *full of* grace *and truth'* (John 1:14).

So, if we want to base our lives on what's right and true, and none of us want to base it on what's false, then you've got to consider Jesus. In fact, you've got to consider all that God has done for us in and through Jesus, what Paul calls 'the word of the truth, the gospel' (Col 1:5) the good news.

You see, we've already seen in Psalm 15 that only those who are blameless when it comes to truthfulness can climb God's hill and live in his presence, but none of us can claim to be that. There is only One, the One who is the truth, who can claim that. And he was condemned on the basis of lies. And he took the place of Barabbas, a rebel in prison, but not just that rebel, but every rebel, every one of us who have ever refused to obey the king of heaven's word and truth. And Jesus, the truth, climbed the hill, and was crucified in our place, and he was excluded from God's presence on that hill, as he cried out 'My God My God, why have you forsaken me', that you and I might enter God's presence and dwell on his hill. The One who is Truth, took upon himself all the God-forsakenness that we who are untruthful deserve, because he loves us. And it's as we put our trust in him, and are united with him, by faith, that we can be counted blameless by God.

And when you know what Jesus has done for you, it does something more than just tickle the emotions of your heart. It changes your heart. Jesus said, 'If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.' (John 8:31-2).

You see knowing, deep in our hearts, what Jesus has done for us, sets us free from the need to be untruthful and speak lies, and it gives you the strength to be truthful. When you know that God your heavenly Father loves you so much that Jesus would die for you, that he accepts you and delights in you, then the need to impress others by lying, or embellishing the truth, or putting on a mask, disappears. It frees you to be who you really are, which may be much less impressive than the image untruths, or part-truths, can create, but it's the you who is so deeply loved by God who is truth, that you don't need to add to it.

But also, when you know that this is how much God loves you, then you know that he will work everything for your good. So the need to try and manipulate your circumstances by lying, or by being economical with the truth, disappears. When you know that Christ died for you, and holds you in the palm of his hand, you don't need to lie to be safe. So you can be a person of integrity and a person of your word, even when it costs you.

But knowing the truth of what Jesus has done for you also sets you free from the slavery of thinking you need to be free to decide for yourself what is right or wrong. It frees you to receive and embrace God's word even when it says hard things that you struggle with. You see, when you know that Christ loved you enough to take your place, then you know that he has your very best at heart. So you know that, just as a sports team will willingly see their freedom curtailed under the leadership of a coach who wants them to achieve their very best, so you will truly thrive and achieve all God wants you to be, by submitting to his truth.

Finally, when you see Jesus, the Word of God and the truth of God, giving his life for you, so that you might receive and enter into all that he has for you, then sin begins to lose its shine. And you'd rather have him, and stay close to him, than enjoy the fleeting pleasure of sin. And when sin seems attractive you can fight it with the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, and the belt of truth – the truth that God is greater, that he is infinitely more valuable than sin, that he will never leave you or forsake you, that there is reward for those who endure, that those who hunger and thirst after righteousness will be filled. That God is your exceedingly great reward.

And that has the power to turn temptation into worship, as you remind yourself of the truth of God and begin to thank him for his promises, and as you warm your heart at the fire of his truth, you'll begin to worship him in Spirit and in truth.