TRUTH STUMBLES IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE[1]

A sermon preached by Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, at Choral Matins on the 21st Sunday after Trinity, 25 October 2026

Justice is turned back,
and deliverance stands at a distance,
for truth stumbles in the public square,
and uprightness cannot enter.
Truth is lacking …[2]

"Truth" is a difficult and complex subject. When Jesus told Pontius Pilate that he had come into the world to testify to the truth, the Procurator famously asked him, "What is truth?" to which Jesus made no reply.[3]

While we once thought that we could easily tell which things were factually true, even that has changed. As we now know, AI can generate seemingly true images of persons saying anything that the creator wishes. The appearance, voice and manner of the speaker are perfectly replicated to show an event that did not happen. This is done not only to public figures, but it is possible to represent one's acquaintances in any unseemly fashion, even unclad or acting in an offensive way. Scammers can replicate the voices of our children and have them call us for help. This creation of an alternative reality is accompanied in the public square by deliberate fabrication of "alternative facts" for political gain. Well may we say that truth has stumbled in the public square.

Despite all this destructive change, Isaiah is not talking about factual truth in contrast with falsehood. Our text comes from early in the part of Isaiah known as Trito-Isaiah, the third of the identified authors in the book. The problem addressed by Trito-Isaiah is how those returning from the exile in Babylon can establish true religion as against the ways of those who had stayed behind.[4] The section that we have read describes the confusion faced by people who have no firm foundation in "truth". They have no direction and cannot, therefore, do justice. This is the truth that has fallen in the public square.

We can look at this in several ways. *Two Ways News*, a website operated by Phillip and Peter Jensen, said in February 2023, that the concept of a "public square" is a myth. They argued that public utterance has always been controlled by those in power. They claimed that, as long as you conform to the current rules of public discourse, you are OK. Denounce the accepted discourse and you will be locked out. In this sense, the public square is a place for competition, and we can acknowledge that the Diocese of Sydney will have experienced what the Jensen

[1] Readings: Psalm 119:137-152; Isaiah 59:9-20; John 4:46b-54
[2] Isaiah 59:14-15a
[3] John 18:37-18a
[4] Margaret Baker, *Isaiah: Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2019, pp. 196-198

article expressed. For example, their views on sexuality are frequently rejected. In this sense, "truth" is seen, on both sides, as absolute [5].

In his book, *Faith in the Public Square*,[6] Rowan Williams acknowledges that claims to hold the truth can be seen as divisive. History has many examples of religion and conflict, but he points out that replacing religious faith with secular reason has not resulted in the decline of violence, only in different ways of justifying it. Instead, Williams argues for the maintenance of religious diversity, with its range of competing "truths". They point to the existence of people in society who believe that "there are values which are not negotiable". He says:

> Religious diversity when studied with care and sympathy shows us a historical world in which, whatever we say about the claims of diverse religions to truth, there is no possibility of claiming that every human question is answered once and for all by one system.

Writing this September in the English Catholic magazine, *The Tablet*, Williams entertains a different aspect of truth, not as asserted fact, but as lived reality.[7] He argues that concentrating too much on truth claims can turn the "word of grace" into an "ideology of Christ". In this article, he turns from arguing for the existence of competing truth claims to considering how we as Christians should act. Ideology, pretending to be a form of truth, Williams argues, is an act of power, a way of imposing a structure on the world.

In that sense, he agrees with Pope Leo XIV in his encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*, when he says that

> … truth is a gift to be shared, not a possession to be monopolized, [which] frees the Church from the temptation of seeking forms of presence based on power. … I too have reaffirmed that the Church "does not claim to possess a monopoly on truth," because truth is not a territory to be defended, but a good to be shared.[8]

We can now see that, although Isaiah speaks with authority about what happens when truth stumbles in the public square, applying this warning is more difficult than might appear. We now return to Pilate's question, "What is truth?"

In his article, Williams says:

> I can remember a conference many years ago where one rather over-enthusiastic participant announced that the purpose of the Church was the overthrow of capitalism. I thought to myself, well, I see where that's coming from; but if that's the case, what are we going to do the morning after capitalism has been overthrown? All this can become once more a matter of power, not much more sophisticated than the older ideas about Christianity as a sort of sanction for hierarchical, exclusive, gender-bound models of authority.

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[5] (11) The myth of the public square
[6] Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, Chapter 24, "Religious diversity and social unity", London, Bloomsbury, 2012
[7] Rowan Williams, "The skills of survival", *The Tablet*, 26 September 2026, pp.6-8
[8] Encyclical Letter of His Holiness Leo XIV Magnifica Humanitas (15 May 2026) para. 25

To avoid this kind of imposed "truth", Williams goes on to say:

> Jesus does not say to those he encounters in the gospels: here is a new religious system which you might find interesting, and here's the membership form. Jesus says: trust what I am telling you. Come with me, watch me at work, and stay watching me, even when it looks as if failure and tragedy are overtaking that work. Because in watching and witnessing what I'm doing, the penny will sooner or later drop.

Perhaps this is the kind of truth that Isaiah also proposes. There is no justice in the public square when people do not live the truth. It is not that they have failed to grasp the correct proposition, or failed to join the group holding the truth, or have failed to fight hard enough for what they believe. It is because the truth does not live in them.

If anyone were to come here, walk with us and watch what we do, how long before the penny would drop? It will not drop if we concentrate on persuading them that we are correct. It will drop when we make space in the life of our community and in our persons for the truth to appear almost unspoken.

Since I began to write this sermon, the attack on MP Helen Haines has shocked the nation. The Governor-General has revealed that, following her call for the restoration of decency in public discourse, her website has been bombarded by offensive comments. If discourse has moved from a real public square to a virtual one, with the corresponding concealment of identity, the form of truth of which I have spoken becomes still more urgent. Truly,

> Justice is turned back, [if] truth stumbles in the public square.

In Search of the Truth
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