

I'm becoming more and more sceptical. For example, last year, one person shared with me an email. It said that police were asking people to be wary of people posing as being stranded on a roadside with a baby in distress. Once the person stopped they would hi-jack the vehicle. The email said we should pass it along to warn everyone.

In my scepticism, I did a quick online search, which revealed that this email was in fact a hoax. It was being distributed simply to create fear and panic in people so that they would also forward it on. I then wondered how different this was to terrorism. Both have the aim of creating fear and distrust in our community.

That's why I'm becoming more and more sceptical of things I read or hear. As Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) [Slide 1] supposedly said,

“Believe nothing you hear, and only one half that you see.”

I say ‘supposedly said’, because one website claimed another guy by the name of Poe coined this phrase in 1845, around 50 years later. So who was the original author? This itself is an illustration of the importance not believing everything you read.

At one of my first lectures at Australian Lutheran College, I was told, [Slide 2] test everything you believe. If it's false, you shouldn't believe it in the first place. If it's true, then you can stand on it with greater conviction.

This is especially important today, as many are saying that we are now in a ‘Post-Truth’ age. But why call it post-truth? [Slide 3] Because there are so many things being said that just aren't true!

[Slide 4] You see, 500 years ago, wasn't just the beginning of the Lutheran Church. It was also the dawn of Enlightenment and scientific thinking. Society was on a quest for universal, objective truth. People believed the truth was out there, just waiting to be discovered.

However, after 500 years of research, science still can't prove the existence of spiritual matter. Science hasn't been able to prove whether or not God, angels, demons and other spirits exist.

And yet many people have had spiritual experiences that science can't explain. Many have concluded that perhaps some things can't be discovered through scientific reason alone. Perhaps there's another truth.

[Slide 5] This led to a post-modern society that started believing that perhaps there wasn't one universal, objective truth. Rather, it believed there were many truths. People were proclaiming, 'what might be true for you, may not be true for me'.

However, after September 11, 2001, this changed somewhat. Many Post-modernists realised that there was still something deep and universal that was violated in the terrorist attack that day.

[Slide 6] Since then there has been an increase in social media and the 24 hour news. With it has come an increase in fake, false, and misleading news. It seems nowadays many people are making up their own 'facts'. That's why some are calling it a post-truth era. People are saying or believing whatever they want others to believe.

Some of these news reports are accidentally misleading or false. For example, in the rush to be first to report breaking 'news', it has become more like a game of Chinese whispers. There is miscommunication, and no time to confirm with reliable sources before the information is posted and reposted, spreading false or misleading information far and wide.

In other cases, false or misleading information is deliberately spread in the community to create fear or provoke a particular response. This is somewhat similar to the email I mentioned earlier. In many cases, fake news is designed to damage the

reputation of a particular person (8th Commandment) or entity and/or for financial or political gain. (Note that this is different to satire or parody, which is intended to amuse, rather than mislead it's audience.)

Fake and misleading news was most clearly seen in 2016 with both the Brexit vote in the UK and the US presidential election. In both cases, there were many social media and news posts that were deliberately misleading or false, designed to damage the reputation of a certain entity for political gain.

[Slide 7] In a post-truth world, emotion is seen as more important than truth. For example, news stories, emails and social media posts are designed to evoke a certain emotional response, rather than reporting the truth. Post-truth politics is based on appeals to emotion, rather than the details of any particular policy. It often involves repeating talking points, even if it is pointed out that these talking points are illogical, misleading or false. Recently we've seen the effects of post-truth in the importance placed on how we feel about our gender today, more than our physical anatomy.

So in the last few decades there has been a dramatic shift in our society. **[Slide 8]** We have gone from a quest for universal, objective truth, to a path of many truths, to appeals for emotion regardless of the truth. We have gone from doubting if there is a God, to living as though we are god. That's because we are now making up our own truth and deciding the truth people should believe.

That is why I'm becoming more and more sceptical of things I read or hear. Before I want to believe a particular news story, article or social media post, I want to check out if it is in fact true. Perhaps Franklin was right. Perhaps we should consider believing nothing we hear, and only one half of what we see.

So how do we know what is right in a world where truth is made up? Where do we get any sense of normality in a world that is so confusing? How do we find stability in a culture that is just as stable as an overturning iceberg? What is the most reliable source of information?

An investigative journalist and atheist once investigated the claims of the bible. [Slide 9] In *The Case for Christ*, Lee Strobel, explains that, during his research, he discovered that the New Testament is the most reliable archaeological document ever written. For example, it's over a thousand times more reliable than anything ever written about Julius Caesar, who happened to be a Roman Emperor around that time. I'm sure you have all heard of him, and no one debates the truth of whether or not he existed.

So if that is the most reliable, historic document, let's take some time to listen to what it says.

During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that nothing in this world lasts forever. [Slide 10]

“Don't store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal.” (Matthew 6:19, NLT)

We all know the lies, deception and arrogance of Donald Trump. No one knows what will come out of his mouth next. But one thing I do know, is that he won't be in power forever.

But Jesus goes on to say that there is somewhere that is eternal,

“Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal.” (Matthew 6:20, NLT)

As was pointed out last week, the Kingdom of Heaven is eternal. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus explains something else that will last – his words. **[Slide 11]**

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.” (Luke 21:33, NLT)

What's more, the gospel of John points out that Jesus is the eternal Word of God, in flesh and blood.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. ... [He is] the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14, NIV)

Also the book of Hebrews says,

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. (Hebrews 13:8, NLT)

That means Jesus, his words and the Kingdom of Heaven will all last forever. Jesus also says, **[Slide 12]**

The devil ... is a liar and the father of lies. ... there is no truth in him. (John 8:44, NIV)

Over the years the devil has tried to have us believe that he and God don't even exist. The devil tries to make us believe that there are many versions of the truth, or that the truth isn't really that important – that emotion is more important.

But in Isaiah we read,

I, the Lord, speak the truth;
I declare what is right. (Isaiah 45:19b, NIV)

And what does he say about you and I? He says, that you are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14). And God doesn't make junk. He says,

you are precious and honoured in my sight, ... I love you (Isaiah 43:4, NIV)

You are so precious to God. You belong to him, and he doesn't want to lose you. When someone has something they value and treasure, they write their name on it. In baptism, God writes his name on you. That's so that everyone will know who we belong to.

And he loves you dearly. He loves you so much that he sent his one and only son to suffer and die for you and me. Not only are you fearfully and wonderfully made, but through Jesus Christ and his death for you, you are fearfully and wonderfully remade. We are healed and made whole. Jesus died so that we could know the truth of who we are, and more importantly, whose we are.

Jesus says he loves you and you belong to him, and his words will never pass away. No matter what others say or claim, may we hold onto and treasure this truth.