

## “Can We Handle the Truth?”

“As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of the prophet comes true, then it will be known that the LORD has truly sent the prophet.”

*“You can’t handle the truth!”*

The climactic scene in *A Few Good Men* features an explosive courtroom showdown where Navy lawyer Lt. Daniel Kaffee cross-examines Colonel Nathan Jessep concerning the death of a soldier under his command at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba. Kaffee successfully baits Jessep into admitting that he had ordered a lethal “Code Red” on Private Santiago in a scene that has become among the most famous in movie history:

- “Colonel Jessep, did you order a Code Red?”
- [Judge] “You don’t have to answer that question.”
- “I’ll answer the question. You want answers?”
- “I think I’m entitled to them.”
- ‘You want answers?!’
- “I want the truth!”
- “You can’t handle the truth!”

When Colonel Jessep reveals the truth that he did indeed order the Code Red that led to the private’s death it is a shocking moment that changes the course of the trial and the plot of the movie, leaving the characters visibly shaken and the audience wondering if the truth that is revealed was indeed too hard to handle. After watching the movie that starred Tom Cruise and Jack Nicholson, many are left asking themselves the question *“can we handle the truth?”*

In a world where technological advances have led to the phrase “deep fakes” entering our common vocabulary, where it is difficult to tell the truth from falsehoods, having confidence that the words of people are trustworthy and true is becoming increasingly important. We want to have confidence that the news we receive through multiple media sources is true and reliable, not merely seeking to sway us to their biased position. We want to have assurances that people who provide us services or in whom we trust our lives and resources are who they claim to be and

not merely “wolves in sheep’s clothing.” We want some sense of reliability in the words we hear from people who claim to have our best interests at heart, since we know all too well that words can be manipulated and used to deceive us and gain control in many nefarious ways. It is becoming increasingly clear that *“in a world where fear of gaslighting, mental gymnastics, and deceit are at an all-time high, the importance of truth could not be clearer.”* (Joseph Hiebert).

At the centre of our Christian faith is the assertion that the Word of God is trustworthy and true, that the Word proclaimed to us in Holy Scripture is the “Word of the Lord” that brings to us the good news of God’s love in Jesus Christ that is the truth that will set us free. The people of Israel celebrated God’s Word as the word of truth in the Psalms (*“Lead me in you truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long”* – Psalm 25:5) and those who followed Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour heard his invitation to follow the one who is *“the Way, and the Truth, and the Life”* – John 14:6). Jesus encouraged those who believed in him that *“if you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free”* (John 8:31-32), and promised his followers that *“when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.”* (John 16:13). Martin Luther begins his *Ninety-Five Theses* by stating that it was his intention that *“out of love for the truth and from desire to elucidate it, the Reverend Father Martin Luther, Master of Arts and Sacred Theology and ordinary lecturer therein at Wittenberg, intends to defend the following statements and to dispute on them in that place.”* The Augsburg Confession defines the church as *“the pillar of the truth, for it retains the pure gospel, the true knowledge of Christ and faith.”*

Among those called to proclaim the truth of God’s Word in the Bible were the prophets, persons called to share the Word with the people of Israel, particularly in times when the people were straying from the path that God had set before them in the Torah. The prophets would often begin their messages with the phrase *“Thus says the Lord”* or *“the Word of the Lord,”* making it clear that they were not speaking for themselves but acting as messengers from the God of Israel. The call of Jeremiah illustrates how the prophets of the Lord were chosen to proclaim the Word of God to the people of Israel who had been set apart to be the holy nation through which all peoples of the earth would be blessed:

- “Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, ‘Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today, I appoint you

over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” – Jeremiah 1:9-10.

The message that Jeremiah and other prophets would proclaim would often be harsh, calling the people to repent of their sinfulness and return to the Lord lest they suffer destruction because of their faithlessness to God’s teachings. Prophets would often face rejection, scorn, and persecution from those who could not handle the truth they were proclaiming in the name of the Lord. At one point, Jeremiah becomes so disillusioned by the suffering and rejection he is experiencing that he cries out in lament to the Lord that *“O LORD, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me.”* (Jeremiah 20:7). Despite these feelings of deception and abandonment, Jeremiah still knows that his work on behalf of the truth of God’s Word is vital and turns to praise God as he encourages others to *“sing to the LORD; praise the LORD! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers.”* (20:7).

In today’s first lesson, we find Jeremiah being challenged by others who claim to be prophets of the Lord, but whose word does not resemble the word that Jeremiah and other true prophets are called to proclaim. The context of this confrontation between prophets is an incident dated to the fourth year of the reign of King Zedekiah (593-594 BC). A few years earlier, Judah had been attacked by the Babylonian army under the leadership of King Nebuchadnezzar, who deported King Jehoiachin and other prominent Judean leaders and plundered the sacred vessels in the Jerusalem Temple (*“He carried off all the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king’s house; he cut in pieces all the vessels of gold in the temple of the LORD, which King Solomon of Israel had made, all this as the LORD had foretold.”* – 2 Kings 24:13). Nebuchadnezzar appointed Zedekiah king of Judah, whose loyalty at first was to Babylon but who soon resented this foreign control and mounted an unsuccessful rebellion that would lead to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian Exile of 587 BC. Jeremiah had firmly and categorically counseled the king not to join this proposed rebellion against Babylon, declaring that this was contrary to the purposes of God:

- “Now I have given all these lands into the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him even the wild animals of the field to serve him. All the nations shall serve him and his son and his grandson, until the time his own land comes; then many nations and great kings shall make him their slave.” – 27:6-7.

Shortly afterwards, however, another prophet appears with a conflicting message: “*the prophet Hananiah son of Azzur, form Gibeon*” (28:1). While Hananiah is otherwise unattested in biblical and extrabiblical texts, he must have been known to the community at the time so that his appearance on the scene and his proclamation of an oracle would have been no more unusual than Jeremiah’s. Hananiah’s proclamation is in the form comparable to that of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the other prophets as he uses the prophetic phrase “*thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel*” (28:2). Hananiah presents a divine speech announcing the future act of the Lord that contradicts Jeremiah’s more dour warnings, promising the recovery of the implements and vessels of the Temple as well as the return of the exiled king together with all the Judeans who had been taken to Babylon in 597. Hananiah’s pronouncement is a word of deliverance that presented a contradictory vision of what God was about to do on behalf of God’s people:

- “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the LORD’s house, which the King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon. I will also bring back to this place King Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim of Judah, and all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon, says the LORD, for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.” – 28:2-4.

Prophets such as Hananiah looked, talked, and acted like the true prophets of God such as Isaiah and Jeremiah; but while both Hananiah and Jeremiah claimed that their word was the Word of the Lord, in the context of Old Testament prophecy Hananiah’s word is seen not to be the true Word of God but the maintenance of a mistaken assumption that the Lord will preserve Zion and the people from any serious harm, that the unpleasant events of the present were a reprimand but not a serious reality of punishment and judgment. But as would be proven by the disaster that would befall the nation, “*this announcement of salvation was dead wrong, a popular word that couched a kind of nationalistic and establishment confidence in the garment of divine speech.*” (Patrick D. Miller).

Jeremiah is aware of the threat that Hananiah’s more positive message poses to the harsh word that he was proclaimed, but he also knows the danger of what might happen if the people chose to ignore the message of God’s truth for the words that sound attractive but are in reality false. Jeremiah also knows that if he follows the usual path of unqualified denunciation of the oracle of this false prophet that he risks alienating his audience. So, in the presence of Hananiah as well as “*the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of the LORD*” (28:5), Jeremiah

responds with a word of affirmation: *“Amen! May the LORD do so; may the LORD fulfill the words that you have prophesied and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of the LORD, and all the exiles.”* (28:6). In confirming Hananiah’s salvation prophecy with an “Amen,” and the wish for God to make it happen, Jeremiah expresses his own wishes and hopes for a positive outcome to the present trials. There is little indication throughout this book that Jeremiah enjoyed uttering his words of judgment and much indication of the pain that such prophecies caused him:

- “They did not wholly put off every humane feeling but condoled with the miseries of the people; and though they denounced on them destruction, yet they could not but receive sorrow from their own prophecies.” – John Calvin.

While it would have been much easier for Jeremiah to proclaim the more positive message spoken by Hananiah than the harsh words he was called to pronounce, the prophet knew that he was called to proclaim the truth of God’s Word, a truth that at times was hard for the people to handle. This is why he follows his supportive words for Hananiah’s proclamation with a sharp “nevertheless” that challenges the hopeful words of Hananiah on two grounds, both of which belong to the criteria for assessing the truth or falsehood of prophetic words. Jeremiah challenges Hananiah on the basis of prophetic tradition, the experience of the community in the past with the words of the prophets: *“The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms.”* (28:8). While words of deliverance were prophesied in the past, the large picture for this pre-exilic period is one of announcements of judgment (*“Therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against his people, and he stretched out his hand against them and struck them; the mountains quaked, and their corpses were like refuse in the streets. For all this his anger has not turned away; and his hand is stretched out still.”* (Isaiah 5:25)). In the light of that history, one should be very suspicious of easy words of deliverance. The second ground on which Jeremiah responds to Hananiah is the test of prophecy, the issue of what happens. The word of the prophet truly sent by the Lord is the word that will come to pass: *“As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that the LORD has truly sent the prophet.”* (28:9). History will tell which prophet was sent by the Lord. As later readers will learn, the word of Jeremiah came to pass, while Hananiah’s did not. While there is nothing to suggest that Hananiah’s intentions were not sincere, his message flatly contradicted the true prophetic word. Jeremiah does not call Hananiah a liar, but points out that Hananiah’s words were not in the tradition of the great prophets of Israel and that the teachings of the Torah would in the end show who was telling the truth:

- “But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak – that prophet shall die. You may say to yourself, ‘How can we recognize a word that the LORD has not spoken?’ If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it.” – Deuteronomy 18:20-22.

The Word of God in prophecy called for a discriminating response if its truth were to become effective. Only hearing the Word of God in light of the tradition regarding the entire prophetic revelation of God could provide authoritative and authentic knowledge of God’s Will, “*an understanding of the tradition of Israel’s faith as a true guide to the power of God effective in history.*” (R.E. Clements).

The true prophetic word could often be harsh, but its intention was always that the people repent and return to the Lord and following God’s teachings and walking in the ways of the Lord. Yet this message was not always received in the manner the Lord intended; people would rather hear the more positive message of false prophets like Hananiah than the harsh words of true prophets like Jeremiah. Amos was confronted by Amaziah the priest of Bethel after King Jeroboam of Israel complained that “*the land is not able to bear his words*” (Amos 7:10) and encouraged to “*flee away to the land of Judah; earn your living there*” (7:12). When Jesus reads from the words of Isaiah in his home synagogue and proclaims to the people of Nazareth that “*today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing*” (Luke 4:21), the people of his hometown are so offended that Jesus is left to proclaim that “*truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown*” (4:24). Following Jesus’ teaching that “*I am the living bread that came down from heaven ... the one who eats this bread will live forever*” (John 6:51, 58) many of his disciples found that they could not handle this truth: “*When many of his disciples heard it, they said, ‘This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?’ ... Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.*” (John 6:60, 66). But when Jesus asks his remaining disciples if they also wish to go away, Peter’s response is to ask “*Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.*” (6:68).

- “Jesus’ teachings may be challenging, but he does not shy away from them. He continues to offer hard truths that, if we remain with him, can profoundly benefit us. Are we willing to stay with our Teacher even when his teachings seem complicated? Can we, like Peter, say, ‘To whom shall we go?’ and commit to Jesus, the teacher of excellence, whose word gives life? Can we

embrace the relationship, ‘eating his flesh and drinking his blood,’ so that we maintain a deeper relationship with God?” – Peter Claver Ajer.

The truth can be hard to handle, because it reveals things about us that we might rather not face. This is the truth that Luther identifies as the Law, that which convicts us of our sinfulness and our need for God’s grace and forgiveness. We might prefer to hear the words of Hananiah assuring us that all is well and whatever challenges we are facing will magically disappear; but it is only the true Word of God from prophets like Jeremiah that will proclaim to us the truth that will liberate us from the bondage to ‘*sin, death, and the power of the devil*’ that does not come to us easily but is bestowed upon us freely through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and the blessed assurance that he is “*the Way, and the Truth, and the Life.*”

- “Let us consider it certain and firmly established that the soul can do without anything except the Word of God and that where the Word of God is missing there is no help at all for the soul. If it has the Word of God, it is rich and lacks nothing since it is the Word of life, truth, light, peace, righteousness, salvation, joy, liberty, wisdom, power, grace, glory, and of ever incalculable blessing.” – Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*.

The truth can be hard to handle because it exposes things as they are rather than as we wish they would be. But the truth that sets us free is a yoke that is easy and a burden that is light because it is the truth that is God’s liberation love that is ours in Jesus Christ, the truth that sets us free to live, love, and serve as people who know that in Christ we have the one who is the Word of eternal, the Truth that leads us and guides us in God’s paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.

Amen.