

TELL THE TRUTH

Human relationships are fragile, and can be undermined or even destroyed all too easily. Right relationship is perfected only to the extent that our actions and attitudes build up wholesome bonds with those around us. Telling lies and bearing false witness weakens the foundations of any relationship, for it erodes the trust upon which it is built. As Patrick Hannon explained in a recent article: "There's more than one kind of lie. One might fail the truth by silence at a time when speaking up is called for, or by concealing truth when one's duty is to declare it; and we speak of 'living a lie' when there's a discrepancy between the values people publicly profess and how in fact they conduct their lives." Truthfulness is something to be promoted and prized in our lives. We try to protect it through our civil laws (think of our laws regarding slander and defamation, for example). We expect it from those around us in a host of different ways. We identify truthfulness as both a personal and social good.

But how do we promote it? What measures might we take to help increase the prospect of honesty? One of the things we need is "safe spaces"; that is, space in which ideas, opinions, criticisms, and questions can be voiced without fear of unjust reprisal. This implies respect for others, mutuality, and integrity. This is important since without it, we cannot be sure of honest and open discussions on societal or global issues. We need only think again of the notion of "post-truth" that became a feature of the US election, and the enormity of the consequences of such a reality.

TRUTH TELLING IN CHURCH

The command not to bear false witness has implications for our Church also. The child abuse scandals have shown all too graphically how a lack of truthfulness, combined with a lack of leadership, can cause enormous human devastation. Truthful acknowledgement of past wrongs is an indispensable part of reconciliation. And unfortunately it would seem that a culture of secrecy within the Church is not yet a thing of the past. What is needed is the courage to stand up for what you believe to be true and right, and to have the freedom to articulate it. So this commandment isn't just about what NOT to do. It's about creating the right environment in which truthfulness can flourish. As James Keenan put it, "We need to recognize the challenge today to speak what we believe. We need to recognize the call for clear leadership to guide all of us in the pursuit of truth. We need to invite one another to speak the truth as we understand it, so that in a loving and respectful context we may together discover and articulate the truth as it really is. That's not an ideal; it is a command" (Commandments of Compassion, 48).

Finally, the command to truthfulness has implications for how we see others. "Thou shall not bear false witness" challenges the simplistic and discriminatory stereotypes that are often so evident in society. Discrimination, in all its guises, is based on prejudice, on false understandings of the human person. All forms of racism, sexism, classism, all homophobic and Islamophobic attitudes, deny the dignity of human beings. We injure and hurt through the caricatures that we construct, and we diminish our own dignity in the process. The Christian call is one of compassion, mercy, inclusivity, justice. Our responsibility, therefore, is to make the Gospel message a reality in our world. ■

SoulSpace

SERIES: THE TEN COMMANDMENTS
IN A MODERN WORLD

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In this series, **Suzanne Mulligan** looks at the commandments and their relevance for our world.

EIGHTH
COMMANDMENT

YOU SHALL
NOT BEAR
FALSE
WITNESS
AGAINST
YOUR
NEIGHBOUR



Today's readings

GOD'S WORD TODAY

Is 45:1.4-6

1 Thessalonians 1:1-5

Matthew 22:15-21

Our second reading today is from the earliest document of the New Testament.

The apostle Paul is writing to some of the first Christians, and begins by giving thanks to God for the way in which they accepted his preaching of the Gospel and how they are living that out under God by their active faith, practical love and steady hope. His mission to them has borne fruit under the Holy Spirit and now their mission is to continue to live out their faith in action. Paul does not regard faith as something private to the individual but as power and as the Holy Spirit and as utter conviction. He describes the people of the community in Thessalonica as the people God loves and has chosen. But this choosing also brings responsibility: the responsibility is to be the people of God in the world. That is the mission of the Church, to show to the world the kind of God we believe in. The Bible reveals God as a God first of all of justice, who is angered at the way in which the weaker members of society are exploited by those with power and wealth. Sin is often built into the way in which society functions, and the Bible is much more concerned with this as an offence against God than with what we might regard as individual moral behaviour.

Last year's US Presidential election has raised several interesting questions for our world. In the aftermath of the election, we started to hear about what is being termed the "post-truth era". That is, the manner in which social media can influence our perception of truth and reality. This played no small part in President Trump's victory. Whether we are thinking of this phenomenon or events closer to home such as investigations into policing, the need to promote truthfulness is as urgent a task as ever. The eighth commandment invites us to rethink how we understand the call to honesty, and what its implications may be for our lives and for society.

