

I tell you the truth...

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[0 : 00] What do you imagine is the most commonly used and recognized word in the world, in the whole world?

And I'm talking about a word that retains its shape and sound across most languages. I haven't studied this or investigated, but I would imagine across the vast majority of languages. So it's not translated in that sense, it retains the form and sound that it had ever since it was coined, whenever that was. What might that word be? Now one of the problems of giving you an outline is that all the drama is removed from those kind of questions because you just have a look and you already know where I'm going. But anyway, it is a word that forms part of the religious vocabulary of the three great monotheistic faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It's a word that will have been used today in every church service, in every Christian tradition, in every language.

church. The word is amen. And that word is my text for this evening. Just one word. The phrase where we find the word in the passage that we looked at this morning is one that is made up of three words, though translated into English, four words are used. Well, I tell you the truth, actually five.

And there in Mark 3.28, I tell you the truth. But in the original that Mark would have written the gospel in, three words, amen, I tell you, or the truth, I tell you. But especially that word, amen, that is translated in the version of the Bible that we use as the truth. Now we find that word, as I say, in that passage that we were looking at this morning, there in chapter three, it's the first occurrence of that expression that Jesus uses. In the older versions translated as, truly I tell you, or verily I tell you. And in the Bible we use, I tell you the truth, or the truth I tell you.

In Mark's gospel, we find it on 13 occasions. Across all the gospels, on over 70 occasions. And it is, this word, amen, it is a gem of a word laden with huge significance, especially as it is found on the lips of Jesus. And we want to think about that this evening. What I want to do is to demonstrate that this word, amen, allows us, or Jesus' use of the word, allows us to reach three fundamental conclusions about Jesus. About what Jesus says or tells, about what Jesus possesses, and about who Jesus is. We could put that in the form of three propositions. First of all, Jesus tells the truth. Then secondly, Jesus possesses authority. And then thirdly, Jesus is God.

[3 : 30] Well, before we argue the case for those three propositions, we need to take a quick look through the Old Testament to notice how the word amen is used. The word amen is a Hebrew word that is simply adopted into Greek and indeed into English and Spanish and Italian and so many other languages where you would find that word. But its origin is Semitic. It's a Hebrew word. And so we need to have a quick look at how it is used in the Old Testament. There's much that could be said. We're going to limit ourselves greatly. But we need to do it just to then contrast that with the way Jesus uses it, which is what is of great significance. The word amen in the Old Testament, there are two things that we can say about it. There are two things that I think are important to say about it for our purposes this evening. The first one is to note where it is found. And what I mean by that is not in what book of the Bible, because you'd find it in many books of the Bible, but rather where it is found in the construction of a sentence. And of course, the word, as I'm sure you already know, is a word that is invariably found at the end or following a statement. It is a word of response.

People respond with the word amen. So something is said, and then there is a response, and this word is used, the word amen. So just take a mental note of that, that that word you would find in its use in the Old Testament, indeed into the New Testament in many ways, at the end, in response to. But what does it mean? You know, what was the purpose, or what purpose does it serve?

Well, it's a word that allows the one expressing it to confirm or to give assent to what has been said, and almost invariably to what has been said by God, or through the prophets by God.

It's a way of saying yes to God, or acknowledging that what has been said by God, or about God, is true and binding. So for example, there are one or two occasions in the Old Testament when the word amen is used to confirm the acceptance of a task given by God. A task is given, a mission is given, and the one receiving the task responds, amen. Or the people respond, amen, in agreement. That is what we will do. That is what God wants us to do. Or it's used also to confirm assent to a curse that is pronounced by God. And the people or an individual responds, amen, to give their assent to what God has said, or the curse that has been delivered. And of course also in the context of praise. At the end of an outburst of praise, a doxology, you find the word amen. And so those who express that word are saying we agree with that, with what has been said about God, that he's good, that he's merciful, that he is to be praised. Amen. We agree with that. That's true. And so amen serves that purpose in the Old Testament.

And as I say often into the New, we read Psalm 41, and it ends with these words, Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and amen.

[6 : 58] We agree that is true. That is the right thing to do. And as I say, into the New Testament, it's also used in this way on a number of occasions. We think especially of Paul, and often in his letters, he introduces at sometimes quite unexpected places, doxologies of praise to God. And he ends them with this word, amen. I'll just give one of a number of examples we could give in Ephesians chapter 3, and reading from verse 20, now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine according to his power that is at work within us. To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever. Amen.

But in the New Testament, this word, amen, is also used by Jesus in an altogether innovative, striking, and we might even say shocking way. And it's the way Jesus uses the word in our text. It's the way Jesus uses the word in our text. And it's the way Jesus uses the word in our text. In this expression, amen, I tell you, or the truth, I tell you, or verily I tell you, however we choose to translate it.

Now, it's true that when we come across this expression in the Gospels, preachers will often highlight that the form of words, verily I tell you, or the truth I tell you, introduces something very important.

And that makes sense. And we say, yeah, okay, we have to pay particular attention when something is introduced with these words. But we might say, yes, that's helpful to have that pinpointed.

[8 : 51] But at the end of the day, that's an expression maybe we could use if we wanted to sound maybe very important or add gravitas to what we had to say. The truth I tell you, and then declare whatever it is.

I think we're capable occasionally of telling the truth. Maybe we could use those words to introduce what we have to say. And really, what I need to say, or what I'm trying to say really is that though we might see that expression and say, well, why are you saying that that's shocking? Or why is that so innovative? Well, it is because there is no parallel in pre-Christian Jewish literature to Jesus' use of this expression.

This is not a phrase that people use. This is unique to Jesus. Jesus coined this phrase. We find it nowhere else. No rabbi in the time that Jesus lived would have introduced something he had to say with these words.

This, as far as we can establish, was unique to Jesus. This manner of speaking, this manner of introducing what he had to say, this usage of the word amen in particular.

[10 : 02] Amen, I tell you, or the truth I tell you. So that, almost by way of introduction, reminding ourselves of how the word is used in the Old Testament, but then noticing how Jesus uses it in this very new and innovative way.

And having done that, let's return to the propositions concerning the use of the word by Jesus. Jesus tells the truth. Jesus possesses authority.

And Jesus is God. First of all, then, Jesus tells the truth. The NIV translation of the expression, I tell you the truth.

A little bit of a, perhaps not a paraphrase, but there's a reordering of the words, but it certainly captures the meaning of the key word amen. Again, we might prefer to keep the word order in the original, the truth, I tell you.

To my ears, it may be different to your ears, but to my ears, that has slightly more gravitas. The truth, I tell you. That's the order that we find them and the order in which they were spoken.

[11 : 06] But the point, really, that we're making here is a simple one, and yet such a fundamental one. Jesus tells the truth. The truth, I tell you, I tell you the truth.

Jesus is equating that. What I say is true. It would be difficult to overstate the importance of this simple proposition.

Jesus tells the truth. And let's just develop that a little. It could be developed in so many ways. But let's just develop that a little in the light of some of the principles concerning the truth, as we find in the Bible about the truth and what the truth is.

The first thing that we need to acknowledge, and this also is so foundational, is that there is such a thing as truth. There is truth. You remember Pilate, when he declared that very provocative question.

I don't know if it's provocative, but memorable, certainly. What is truth? And in declaring that question or in voicing that question, we seem to be encountering a postmodern relativist born a couple of millennia before his time.

[12 : 26] Although, in actual fact, he wasn't that. His view, or at least the view that he seems to betray by the question, was one that was quite common in ancient times.

This question, well, what is truth? Is there truth? Is there such a thing as truth? Are there absolutes? These aren't new ideas that we find today that did not exist in the past.

The modern popularity of these notions or of posing that question is simply a confirmation of the biblical maxim that there is nothing new under the sun.

But there is truth, and God is the source of all truth. We need a standard for truth, and God establishes that standard. He determines what is true.

And His Son, Jesus, tells the truth. There is truth, and Jesus tells it. And that truth is absolute. It's universal.

[13 : 28] It's not the case, as is often popularly imagined, that something can be true for you, but not true for me. Very common to hear people speaking in those terms.

Nor is it the case that something can be true for then, but not true for now. So even in the reading of the Bible, people might say, oh, well, that was true for then. But we live in different times.

It's not true for now. Well, that's not the case. Truth is absolute. It's universal. It's unchanging. Truth is not determined by opinion polls or established by public survey.

I was following just online news with regard to forthcoming presidential elections in Peru. And one of the candidates is the daughter of a former president, Alberto Fujimori.

And his government was famous for the levels of corruption that were reached during his government. And in the run-up to these elections, where his daughter is one of the leading candidates, one of her team was asked the question by a journalist.

[14 : 39] And the question that was posed was this. Was the government of Fujimori, his previous government, was it the most corrupt in history, in the history of Peru? That was the question.

Now, the answer that was given by this representative of the party was, let the opinion polls answer that question.

That was the answer. That was a very bizarre answer. You see, the question that was posed to him, he could have answered it yes, very unlikely given his colors. He could have said no.

No, that's not true. He could even have said, I don't know. I don't know. I don't have the information. I don't have a basis on which to answer your question. All of those would have been legitimate answers to the question.

But to say, well, let the opinion polls decide is a piece of nonsense. You see, that question has an answer. It may be very difficult to establish the answer, but there is an answer. There is a true answer to that question.

[15 : 39] It's not a function of what people think or of what people say or of people's preferences or of opinion polls. Truth is absolute. It's universal. Truth is objective and unchanging.

It is propositional. It is conveyed with words that have a definite and defined meaning. So with the propositions of Jesus. Those introduced by these words, the truth I tell you, and indeed those not prefaced by those words.

Now that's not to say that it's always crystal clear what the meaning is, but the principle holds. We need to get to the truth. Indeed, the very example in Mark chapter 3 where Jesus uses these words, Amen, I tell you, or the truth I tell you, is followed by a statement that is quite difficult to understand.

But nonetheless, we accept it as true, and we wrestle and we struggle to try and understand what it means. And as I say, it may be very difficult to get to that level of understanding, but there's an acknowledgement that what has been said is true.

Truth is, given all that we've said already, truth is unchanging. It doesn't evolve or morph from one generation to another.

[16 : 58] What Jesus declared 2,000 years ago in Palestine remains true in Aberdeen today. And we could illustrate that in any number of ways.

Perhaps one contemporary, sadly contemporary example, would be what God says and what Jesus confirms concerning marriage. God declares that marriage is the union of a man and a woman.

That's true. It doesn't matter if the Scottish Parliament decides otherwise or if public opinion has a different view in the matter. It's still true what God says, and that doesn't change, regardless of what others might contend.

Jesus tells the truth. That is true, and that is fundamental. But the second proposition that I would make, that can be made on the basis of Jesus' use of this word, amen, is that Jesus possesses authority.

This is where the positioning of the word, amen, is so important. We notice that in the Old Testament, it's found at the end or following a proposition in response to a God-given, authoritative, and true declaration.

[18 : 14] But Jesus, and this is where it's shocking, Jesus shifts the amen to the beginning. Amen, I tell you. The truth, I tell you.

What Jesus is doing is affirming that what he says is true because he says it. Now, if anybody else did that, you would say, well, what utter arrogance.

It's true because I say so. But that's really what Jesus is doing. He's saying this is true, and it's true because I say so. I possess the authority to declare what is true, and because I say it is true, it is true.

We sometimes can think of the occasion maybe in the family where children are protesting about something that has been said by mom or dad, and mom or dad has said something, this is the way it is, and the child responds, well, why is that the way it is?

I think we would normally say that it's probably not wise or fair for a parent to respond, because I say so. Maybe something we do, but Jesus can do that.

[19 : 23] Jesus can respond to anybody who protests with those words, because I say so. That's why it's true. Amen, I tell you.

The truth, I tell you. When Jesus declares something, it is true. It is true because he has the authority to declare what is true, and as a result, there's no need for us to examine if what he says is true.

We need to do that of anybody else. We need to ask the question, well, is that true? But when Jesus speaks, we don't need to ask the question, is that true? The mere fact that he says it is sufficient.

Now, that's not to say that there isn't a place for careful and intelligent examination of what Jesus says, but we do so not to determine if what he says is true, but to understand what he is saying and its implications for us.

We do need to think and examine and wrestle with what he says, but not to decide if it's true or not. Remember how the prophets introduced a word from God, thus saith the Lord, and those words sometimes called the prophetic formula, thus saith the Lord.

[20 : 42] Well, the parallel expression used by Jesus to that formula in the Old Testament are these words, Amen, I tell you. By the language he uses, Jesus is declaring his authority to declare that which is both true and binding because he says so.

So Jesus tells the truth, Jesus possesses authority, but then finally, Jesus is God. Now, we could come to that conclusion. Of course, the evidence for that does not rest on this one matter, but we could come to that conclusion, certainly tentatively, if not more than tentatively, on the basis of what we've already noted concerning his authority.

But I want to grant this particular proposition, Jesus is God, by reference to how the word Amen is used in a particular way, very sparingly, but in a particular way in both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

The Old Testament reference is in Isaiah 65 and verse 16, and I'll read what that verse declares, and you won't find in the translation that I'm reading from, which is the church Bible, the word Amen, but I'm sure you'll be able to work out which word has been translated, or which word is being used to translate that word.

Well, let me just read what it says there. In Isaiah 65, 16, whoever invokes a blessing in the land will do so by the God of truth. He who takes an oath in the land will swear by the God of truth.

[22 : 23] Now, as I say, no prizes for guessing what the Hebrew word is that is translated truth. Well, it's the word Amen. Whoever invokes a blessing in the land will do so by the God of Amen.

He who takes an oath in the land will swear by the God of Amen. Amen becomes, in this verse, almost a name for God. He is the God of Amen. He is the God of truth.

Now, with that in mind, the word Amen being used as a name for God there in Isaiah, compare that with what we read in Revelation 3, verse 14. To the angel of the church in Laodicea write, these are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation.

The word is simply taken, transliterated, not even translated, simply adopted from the Old Testament and employed here to speak of whom? To speak of Jesus.

Jesus is the Amen. Jesus is the true and faithful witness. Just as Yahweh is described as the God of Amen there in Isaiah, so Jesus is described as the Amen in Revelation.

[23 : 40] Amen is being used as a divine name, and it is applied to Jesus as the divine and eternal Son of God. Jesus is the Amen.

Jesus is the truth. Indeed, that language that we're employing there, drawing from the Bible, reminds us that truth, in one sense, is singular.

What do I mean by calling, by saying that, that truth is singular? Well, if I can just quote the words of Francis Schaeffer, he expresses himself in this way, that Christianity is not a series of truths in the plural, but rather truth spelled out with a capital T.

And of course, that is particularly so when we acknowledge, as the Bible does, that Jesus is the truth. Well, as we kind of draw things to a close, let's just return for a moment to the expression that Jesus uses there in Mark chapter 3, and then subsequently on a number of occasions.

The truth, I tell you, or Amen, I tell you. And we return to it because I want you to just notice before we close that in using this expression, Jesus gets personal.

[24 : 54] The truth, I tell you. And that's very deliberate. Jesus doesn't just say, I tell the truth, or the truth I tell. He could have said that.

The truth I tell. But no, he doesn't. He says the truth, I tell you. He is speaking to you. And you must respond.

As I was thinking of this, and as it was in my mind today, I was also hearing, as I'm sure many of you have heard, the news that has been spoken about throughout the day, and that is the death of Terry Wogan.

And in the avalanche of tributes, no doubt well deserved. One in particular struck me as I heard it being voiced on the radio. One of his listeners, who was reflecting on his early morning radio show that he had for so many years, said something along these lines.

She said that, though she knew that Terry Wogan had about eight million listeners, you always knew he was speaking to you. Something along these lines is what this person declared.

[26 : 10] Now that certainly acknowledges his skill as a broadcaster, that he was able to speak in such a way that people had the sensation that he was speaking to them. Some will have done, some perhaps not.

It perhaps also points to his genuine human charm and empathy. But of course it's nonsense. He wasn't speaking to each of his eight million listeners.

He wasn't. He wasn't speaking to you. He was speaking to everybody. People will have enjoyed it or not enjoyed it or whatever. But when Jesus speaks, when Jesus declares the truth, I tell you, he is speaking to you.

He's not just speaking to the mass of humanity. He's not just speaking to his eight million listeners or whoever many there are who read the Bible or hear these words. No, he is speaking to you. He can do that.

He can direct the truth that he declares to you. And he does. And as he does, and because he does, you are duty bound to respond.

[27 : 20] You have an obligation to respond. He's speaking to you. And you have to respond to what he says. And what's he speaking? He's speaking the truth.

Whatever he says, it's true. Whatever he says about himself, whatever he says about the human condition, about your condition, whatever he says about his demands upon you, and we could go on, it's true.

And it is directed to you. We're often prone to avoid the direction of Jesus' words.

We wriggle and squirm to avoid the truth. But Jesus directs the truth to you right between your eyes. The truth, I tell you.

Amen, I tell you. Let me just end by reading from the Gospel of John on another occasion when Jesus introduced truth with these words.

[28 : 21] In John chapter 5 and verse 24, I tell you the truth. Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned.

He has crossed over from death to life. I tell you the truth. Jesus tells this truth to you. And he invites you and he urges you to hear his word, to believe him who sent him, that you might have eternal life and not be condemned.

Cross over from death to life. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your Son. We thank you for Jesus. We thank you that he was able to declare, I am the way, the truth, and the life.

We thank you that when he speaks, what he says is altogether true, altogether trustworthy. We thank you for the authority that he enjoys. And we pray that as he directs the truth to us, we would hear, that we would understand, and we would respond as we ought.

And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.