

**THE CALL TO BE AUTHENTIC**  
A reflection on the eighth commandment

*Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.*

(Exodus 20 : 16)

Of the ten commandments, the eighth commandment does not appear to hold the same gravity as some, if not all of the others. In the culture of Irish society, we are ambivalent about the immorality of perjury and of deviating from the truth whether in courts of law or in public discourse. A prosecution for the offence of perjury is a contemporary rarity in this jurisdiction. There is something endemic in the Irish personality which attracts us to the mercurial, the duplicitous, the one who can twist meaning for a given purpose. In his poem '*Dark Ireland*', Patrick Kavanagh reflected upon our nature in this way :

*We are a dark people,  
Our eyes are ever turned  
Inward  
Watching the liar who twists  
The hill-paths awry.*

I would like to touch on some reasons as to why this commandment is of the utmost importance for us, not simply because it is at the heart of the proper administration of justice in our society but because of its inherent spiritual significance. If we can develop some spiritual understanding of why this is one of the great commandments of the Judeo-Christian tradition, we may question our complacency about the relevance and importance of this commandment in Irish society.

Making statements about another, whether under oath or not, often arises in situations of conflict. If the conflict is to lead to reconciliation, it can only do so on the basis of honesty and truthfulness. The making of a false statement against another person can only serve to deepen an existing division and make the prospect of reconciliation more remote. At the heart of the Christian vision is the aspiration that all of us will be reconciled or made one through the person of Jesus Christ. In His prayer to the Father, His final words before the progression to His passion and death in the Gospel of John, Jesus prays that all may be one. (Jn 17 : 21) This is the great atonement or at-one-ment of all of humanity and of creation through Him, the Lord of all. When we deepen divisions with each other by making statements that are false or disingenuous, we co-operate in the frustration of the mission of Jesus Christ to reconcile all in Himself, to bring peace into every situation. To lie about another person or even to be inaccurate in what one says about another is simply contrary to the spirit of truth and reconciliation that comes from the person of Jesus Christ.

The bearing of false witness against another is, however, understandable and can be forgiven when seen as an outward reflection of an inward, personal crisis in the human person, namely being false in one's own life. The Christian vision calls each of us to lead an authentic life, to be who one truly is before God. Shakespeare tells us in the advice of Polonius to his son Laertes in '*Hamlet*' that :

*“This above all : to thine own self be true,  
and it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not be false to any man.”*

It must also follow, however, that if one is not true to oneself, if one is leading an inauthentic life, one will be false to others and about others. The question then arises as to what is an authentic life. If at the heart of Christianity is the vision of Jesus drawing all to the Father, reconciling all into One, the authentic life for a Christian must be based upon the quality of one's relationships. Real life for a Christian is not lived in a condition of status anxiety alleviated by acquisitions but emerges from a simple trust in God which strengthens the relationships that give meaning to life. These relationships can be seen as fourfold and progress from the relationship to God, to one's own calling or vocation, to others in the bonds of family, friendship and community and ultimately, to society and creation itself. In serving these relationships, authentic Christian life elicits joy yet pain, sacrifice rather than achievement, apparent failure rather than success. It always entails struggle.

The commandment not to bear false witness against anyone has a further implicit injunction – the importance of being a witness to the truth. This is a lifelong challenge because it entails two difficulties. The first difficulty is the constant discernment of what is truth. This is the great question that Pilate put to Jesus (Jn 18 : 38). The face of God was looking at him when he asked this question and the answer stood beaten and disfigured before him. For the Christian, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is the truth upon which all other truths are based. This truth cannot be compromised no matter how much we yearn to learn from and understand other great traditions of religious faith.

The second difficulty is to have the courage to stand for the truth, to be a witness to transcendent principles in a society of compromise. It is not enough in the Christian faith to be like Nicodemus who came to Jesus by night. (Jn 3 : 2) The Christian challenge is to be a witness to the relationship with Christ in the light of each day. This challenge leaves one open to misunderstanding and at times to ridicule and outright hostility. It is a hostility that cannot be softened by understanding because it is not rational. *‘They hated me without a cause’* is how Jesus describes this hostility in the Gospel of John. (Jn 15 : 26) Yet, in the next sentence, He promises that the *‘Comforter’* will come from the Father, *‘the Spirit of truth’* and He tells the apostles that they *‘shall bear witness’*. (Jn 15 : 27) The Spirit emboldens us, sustains us, guides us in standing for Christ in the world and in the incomparable value of a personal relationship with Him.

Being a witness to an authentic, personal relationship with Christ begins in the realisation that one's knowledge of the truth is very limited, distorted and is, at best, like seeing through a glass darkly. (1 Cor 13 : 12) Unlike Pilate, the embodiment of all that is true and good is not standing before us. Being a true witness to Christ in the world means speaking the truth with humility. It entails a constant awareness that we can only know in part, in very small part and that when we do stand before Him, that which is in part shall be done away. (1 Cor 9 – 10)

For the Christian, in order to be truthful about others and to be authentic in oneself, the personal relationship to Jesus Christ is the cornerstone. This relationship needs to become personal, strong and demanding by virtue of a friendship lived in prayer and in deeds everyday with Christ. It is from being increasingly centred in Him that the truth can be discerned, spoken and acted upon in any given situation – with love.

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