

Who do you think you're kidding?



Donald Trump obviously didn't read the *Tyne Valley Express* four months ago, and he didn't turn up in Prudhoe in June when we had a talk on "Climate change – is it real and does it matter?" This was the third in a series I've arranged, at different venues in the local area, giving a Christian perspective on topical science issues. The first, in Hexham, asked "Creation or evolution – do we have to

choose?" and drew an audience of over 100, and the second, in Wylam, considered "Mine for ever? Our use of the earth's resources" and touched on various environmental issues.

At the time of writing I'm preparing to give the fourth talk, in Heddon on the Wall, tackling "Science and Christian faith – age-old enemies or natural allies?"; it will be in the past by the time you read this, but the fifth is still to come, in Stocksfield, and is advertised in this issue: "Can we believe in miracles in an age of science?" More talks will take place in the autumn, looking at artificial intelligence, natural disasters, and the universe ("Life, the universe and everything" perhaps?).



Science and religion (here Christianity specifically): both make claims to present truth, but it's a widespread belief that they are opposed and incompatible so we have to choose between them – or even be suspicious of both. We're told we live in a postmodern age, in which there is no absolute truth and what is true for you may not be true for me; we're free to choose for ourselves with no-one to tell us how. Where people in an earlier generation asked "Is it true?", now the key question is "Does it work?", and experience matters more than facts and stuff – a view borne out by research into our spending habits.



Pontius Pilate

What is truth?

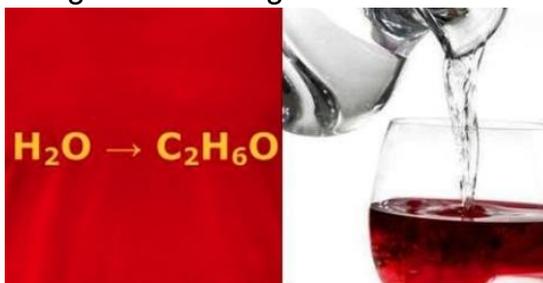
I rather think the general mood is changing again – of course, you're quite entitled to disagree with me! Following a divisive EU referendum in which it's now clear both sides presented distortions and false claims, the emergence of "alternative facts" and "fake news" in the rise of Donald Trump to power, and an unnecessary UK election that promised stability but delivered uncertainty, people are perhaps thinking that truth might actually matter after all, and we could do with having some reliable things to

trust. But what? "What is truth?" asked Pontius Pilate at the trial of Jesus, and it's generally regarded that he was being cynical. Having problems when confronting claims of both truth and authority, he was a postmodernist long before his time!

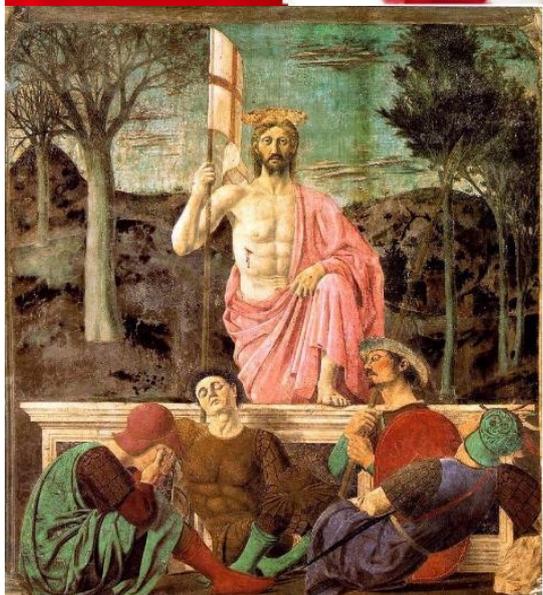
Those who push the idea that science and faith have always been in conflict (in fact it's a late 19th century invention) like to back up their case by appealing to a string of historical events, like Galileo's imprisonment and torture by the Inquisition, the great Oxford Debate on evolution in 1860, and the Scopes Monkey Trial in Tennessee in 1925. Careful historical investigation has shown that most of these accounts, as you will find them on the internet, are at best distortions that can rightly be called "alternative facts".



The chemist Peter Atkins has said "There is no reason to suppose that science cannot deal with every aspect of existence." At one time people thought science and technology would solve all our problems, but we know better now and those who really understand science recognise both its great abilities and its major limitations: there are many questions that



simply lie outside its scope. Atkins' better known colleague, the biologist Richard Dawkins, frequently speaks out against religion as the great enemy of science, and his approach includes making up his own definitions – such as for faith and miracles as well as describing God as an alternative scientific hypothesis – which he can then easily attack.



Whatever such campaigners may tell you, there are actually many people who are both serious scientists and committed Christians, including the speakers in our series of talks. The two approaches to exploring truth are not incompatible, despite what you see and hear in the media, for which conflict rather than harmony is newsworthy and a good basis for entertainment. If you think miracles are impossible by definition because they violate the laws of nature, Sir Colin Humphrey's talk on 10 July will challenge that view and make you think again. It's the "science *versus* faith" position that's kidding you.

Bill Clegg

Modified version of the article in the Tyne Valley Express for July–August 2017