

# HEAD LINES

*A monthly message from Chip Denton, Head of School*



## *Veritas, Pulchritudo, Bonitas.*

Trinity's Motto

January 29, 2021

Dear Trinity Community,

“Truth, Goodness, and Beauty.” And the first of these great transcendentals is truth. The disappearance and demise of truth is surely one of the most unsettling features of our times. The cacophony of “Fake News!” from one side and “The Big Lie” from the other make us, if not uncertain, then surely disconcerted. What chance does truth have in these mistrustful times?

My theme here is the value and possibility of a Trinity education in the face of a post-truth culture. One of the measures of our success as a school is that we graduate students who can tell the truth—the *double entendre* is intentional and essential.

In “The Lost Tools of Learning,” an essay that was seminal for the founding of Trinity School, Dorothy Sayers asks a trenchant question: “Do you sometimes have an uneasy suspicion that the product of modern educational methods is less good than he or she might be at disentangling fact from opinion and the proven from the plausible?” This was in 1948, before the triumph of the screen, the decline of serious reading, and the slow boil of a Huxleyan nightmare that Neil Postman predicted in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. What Sayers would make of a click-bait Tweet designed to incite fear or anxiety is not hard to imagine. One hopes that she would still find reason to promote a positive defense against the trivialization of truth.

The defense that she offered was the classical Trivium, the three liberal arts of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, which teach students how to learn for themselves, how to think. The second of these, logic, is “the art of arguing correctly.” We teach logic at Trinity—our eighth graders have a special class in this. They learn the difference between truth and validity; they learn logical fallacies; they draw distinctions and define terms; and they learn syllogisms. And they practice argument. Along with algebra, this subject pushes them to think abstractly, to think about thinking. Thus are they furnished with tools essential to people who want to tell the truth from an untruth, with tools that in rhetoric (in Upper School) they will use to tell the truth to themselves and others.

But let us not think that this is enough. Milton’s Satan in *Paradise Lost* provides a master class in dialectic. To be people of the truth, we need more than skill in thinking, in argument, in reasoning. Paul’s critique of Peter in Galatians is that he and Barnabas were “not acting in line with the truth of the gospel” (Galatians 2:14). The truth is something we align our whole self with. This accords with Jesus’s teaching that we know the truth when we live in accordance with it: “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the



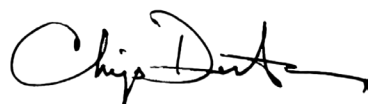
truth and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31-32). And so it is that the best way we can teach our students not to be taken in by “fake news” is to work and pray that they will be taken in by the good news of the Gospel. Becoming like Christ, we become people of the truth.

That Gospel has a logic to it, though it is based on a most implausible truth, one that not only surprises but shocks us: that on the cross, the just God was justifying the ungodly (Romans 5:6-9). Nobody could make that kind of thing up. Rodin’s *Thinker*, no matter how long he sat in his pensive posture, could never have come up with that one. No, this is a strange and wonderful truth that we could not have known apart from the revelation of God. Paul rings the changes on this paradox most effectively in 1 Corinthians, a book in which he employs all his skill as a master of rhetoric to say, essentially, that God has “made foolish the wisdom of the world” (1 Corinthians 1:20). But once that truth (God’s justification of the ungodly) is embraced, its inner logic cascades simply and beautifully, as Paul argues in Romans 5: If God loved us when we were enemies worthy of his wrath, how much more will he love us now that we are called his daughters and sons in Christ? If God can do the hardest thing (on the cross), do we really think he will falter at finishing this salvation that he has begun?

“True-truth,” as the late Francis Schaeffer liked to call the real thing, is unchanging. Trinity’s motto was not invented by us, but adopted from a venerable tradition called “The Great Transcendents.” Truth, along with Goodness and Beauty, points to something beyond the natural and created order, something firm and immovable, something that we can count on always and stand on forever. Jesus Christ is that Truth, and any truth we know to be absolute is rooted in Christ. A Christian is not a relativist. But a modern Christian might be, and probably is, a pluralist. We live in a world where truth is always contested. This is true (ha!) whether I am an orthodox liberal of the academy or a fundamentalist. There may have been a time and place where people, religious and irreligious, could live their lives and never imagine them to be otherwise. Not we. I have no desire to try to recreate such a premodern bubble and call it Trinity. Trinity is a Christian school for students who will find themselves buffeted by the secular, as Charles Taylor puts it, where it will always be possible to imagine that God does not exist. But the winds of secularism blow on the believing and the unbelieving alike; ours is a world where non-Christian friends will be haunted by the transcendent. (Julian Barnes: “I don’t believe in God, but I miss him.”) Somewhere, sometime, in their loves or in their angers, they will face the very real nagging thought that this one thing must be *absolutely true*.

Let’s hope so anyway, though of course we need to brace ourselves also for the real possibility that one of the results of an Ape’s setting up a false Aslan is that people will stop believing in the real one. In which case, it will be good to remember that we hold to the Truth who is Jesus Christ not because we will win or because we will convince others or because it is popular, but because it is...*true*. “The sum of your Word is truth,” as the psalmist says (119:160), and this was a song Jesus was singing on his way to the cross (John 17:17). If our Trinity students can learn to sing that song too, we will have done them great good.

Non Nobis,



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