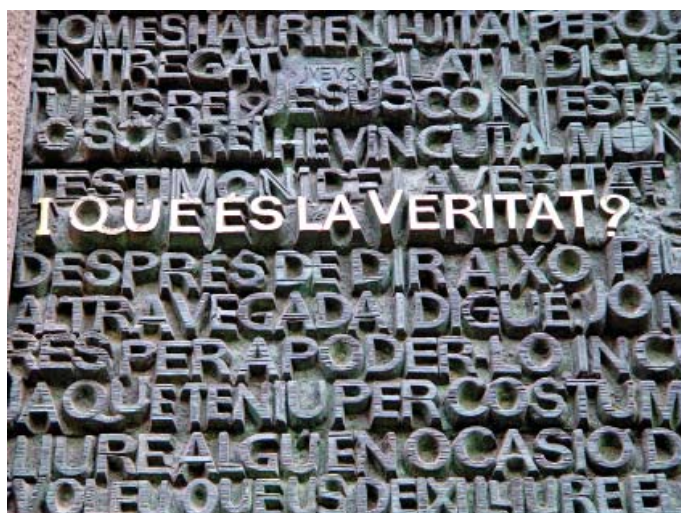


Lies and truth

Sunday 17th April 2011

STARTING OUT



What is Truth? Sacrada Familia, Barcelona. Photo: Etan J. Tal ©

What is the truth about Jesus?

On Palm Sunday, the extraordinary drama of the last days of Jesus' life unfolds. And one of the most significant themes which emerges is that of the struggle between lies and truth. It starts with the issue of the truth about who Jesus really is. The adulation of the crowds is for the Son of David, a conquering hero, one who will lead them out of oppression. The Jewish leaders represent him as a troublemaker, a zealot, a breaker of religious law and a stirrer of political unrest. Yet Jesus resists these untruths about him, riding into the city on a lowly donkey, refusing to agree with the stories about him, as later he will refuse to fight after his arrest. In the Passion narrative we see him refusing to play the games of the religious leaders or give them anything they can indict him on. But they find the blasphemy they are looking for anyway. That will do to get him sent off as an enemy of the people. We also meet with Pilate's confusion about the matter – what is the truth about what is being said about Jesus? Who is he? What has he really done? How should he be dealt with? Jesus twists things around by pointing not to the lies and truths of human affairs, but the one issue that matters: God's truth. Start with God's truth, and the messy business of human affairs gets put into perspective.

The issue of lies and truth is therefore not only central to the gospel message but woven into the events of Jesus' life and death. People came to Jesus because they wanted to see God's truth in his person. From the time of his birth, people came to witness God's promises made real and went away re-telling that truth to others. What truth did they see? That God took flesh as a human being, God-with-us. That Jesus declared God's truth to be that the poor should be raised up, the hungry fed, the sick made whole and the captives made free. That in the person of Jesus these things were done, so that people could see God's desire for humanity being performed in front of their eyes, as Jesus healed, preached, and went out to lost, forgotten people, making them whole and bringing them home.

Yet the Gospels are clear that other things were going on as well. Not everyone was exactly





happy that Jesus was making God's truth so clear for all to see. People murmured against him, accused him of being in league with dark powers, a troublemaker, a problem, a criminal. So the stories about Jesus are also followed about by a cloud of untruths, other stories, trying to discredit him, keep others in power, and keep the truth about him away from people who might believe it.

It's no different today. The Christian faith has been followed about by other explanations, discrediting, falsifications and fascinating fictions. Some of these surround the events of his crucifixion and resurrection: he did not die on the cross but escaped and lived somewhere else. His disciples stole the body and pretended he had risen from the dead. It was only a pretend Jesus who was really on the cross, either just a physical body and not God, or the unconquerable spirit of God without a real, killable body. He married Mary Magdalene and lived happily ever after. It was all a conspiracy. It was all a lie. It was all a delusion. It was all a made-up story.

Except that the most difficult truth that has to be faced at Easter is simply that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Son of God, is the truth. And it's a truth that refuses to go away because it lives in, and inspires Christians to this day. As we enter Holy Week, we can think about the truth and lies that struggle for this story. Pilate asked Jesus: 'what is truth?' At Easter, we decide.

Activity

Truth and lies game :

This activity is more suitable for groups and will not work for individual study

Give out some paper and pens.

Ask the group to write two truths and a lie about themselves. Choose things that might convince others that truth is a lie and the lie is true.

For example: I was born in London (true), I have four sisters (true), I am a vegetarian (false)

In pairs, get people to discuss their true/untrue statements with each other with the task of getting your partner to think your lie is true and one of your true statements is false. Don't own up at this stage even if the other person has guessed correctly.

As a whole group, get each person to read out their statements and get the group to vote true or false.

Gather feedback about the ease or difficulty of spotting truth and lies.





Activity

Stereotypes

Find some jokes in a book or on the internet which suggest:

- Irish people are stupid
- Scots people are mean
- Blonde women are stupid
- Jewish mothers are obsessed with their sons

Now consider the following (obviously false) assertions:

- Black people are inferior to white people
- Women are inferior to men
- Asylum seekers and refugees are scroungers
- Disabled people are better off dead

Ask the group to discuss: is there a difference between a joke which distorts the truth about people and a dangerous devaluing of human beings?

GOING DEEPER

living lies, fearing the truth

Groups of Unreconciled people are created throughout the world when lies are told about them or they are forced to live a lie. People also become unreconciled when they are prevented from telling the truth about what has happened to them. Some of these involve terrible acts of oppression which need to be put right through enabling truth-telling. So in South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has heard many harrowing stories of the experience of apartheid. In Northern Ireland, the support and reconciliation process of the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund allows unheard stories about living through the Troubles to be told.

But there are also similar problems with truth and lies which go on in our own local communities. People can be scarred by malicious rumours – that they are drug takers, or infected with HIV or are sexual predators. Yet other people do not dare to tell the truth on forms or in job interviews, for fear that they will be discriminated against. In some countries, some people do not dare to say that they are Christian for fear of what may happen to them or their families. But even in our own churches, some people don't like to tell the truth about themselves, because they fear how they will be received, or treated by their fellow Christians.





If we are thinking about God's truth then, it must matter that every human being can live openly, be able to tell the truth about themselves and have that truth received by others without reprisal. That doesn't mean that we should agree with everything our neighbour tells us, or never question or never take a critical view. It doesn't mean that we should compromise our own truth for the sake of toleration or an easy peace. But it does mean that we should create respectful spaces for truth to be told with integrity, and that we should always work to prevent the hurt and damage telling untruths about people causes. There are people all around us living Unreconciled lives because of untruth. They need our help to live as God wants them to live.

Activity

Consider this story:

Alhaji's story

'In 1997, when I was 10 years old, I went on Christmas holiday to my uncle,' Alhaji told the Security Council. 'During the second week, we heard that the rebels were 10 miles away from us. We ran into the bush to hide. On the second night, my elder brother and I went to look for water to do the cooking, and we ran into the rebels. We were taken back to our village where we were tied up, beaten and kept in the hot burning sun. Many houses were burnt down and people killed. My uncle was later killed.'

'That same night we were ordered by the rebels to go with them to their base behind Kabala Town. We walked for about 10 days in the bush, resting for only a few hours in between, mostly on empty stomachs. On arrival we were trained for a week to shoot and dismantle AK47 guns. Thereafter I was used to fighting. We killed people, burnt down houses, destroyed properties and cut limbs. But most of the time I went on food raids and did domestic work for my commander's wife. This is because I was so skinny.'

'In January 2000, two years after my capture, UN peacekeepers met with our commander to explain the DDR [Disarmament, Demobilization and Re-integration] process. Within two days more than 250 children were released. We were taken to a care centre in Lunsar and I was later handed over to [the local non-governmental organization] Caritas Makeni for care and protection ...

'I was put in a community school together with other children. The children were not friendly to us. They kept calling us 'rebel children'. So Caritas had several meetings with various community people to forgive and accept us. This worked very well, because at the end of the year a woman from the community agreed to foster me. I am still living with her, because my family has not been found yet ...

'I thank you for inviting me to tell my story on behalf of my brothers and sisters in Sierra Leone and in other countries at war. I hope that in all countries the government and the UN will listen to children and take our words into account. We want a better life. We want peace. We are counting on your continued support for this.'

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Photo: Pierre Holtz / UNICEF CAR ©11©



Alhaji was a child soldier in Sierra Leone. He has been able to move from soldier to peace maker and to tell his story to the UN Security Council.

Find other such stories of people who have been forced to live a lie. Make a list of what kinds of liberating work can dispel the lie and allow the truth to be revealed. Are any such people present in our communities? If so, what can be done to help them?

MOVING ON

Celebrating the Bible

Matthew 21.1-11

KJV

¹And when they drew nigh unto Jerusalem, and were come to Bethphage, unto the mount of Olives, then sent Jesus two disciples,

²Saying unto them, Go into the village over against you, and straightway ye shall find an ass tied, and a colt with her: loose them, and bring them unto me.

³And if any man say ought unto you, ye shall say, The Lord hath need of them; and straightway he will send them.

⁴All this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying,

⁵Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass.

⁶And the disciples went, and did as Jesus commanded them,

⁷And brought the ass, and the colt, and put on them their clothes, and they set him thereon.

⁸And a very great multitude spread their garments in the way; others cut down branches from the trees, and strawed them in the way.

⁹And the multitudes that went before, and that followed, cried, saying, Hosanna to the son of David: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest.

¹⁰And when he was come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, Who is this?

¹¹And the multitude said, This is Jesus the prophet of Nazareth of Galilee.

NRSV

Jesus' Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem

¹When they had come near Jerusalem and had reached Bethphage, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ²saying to them, 'Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me. ³If anyone says anything to you, just say this, "The Lord needs them." And he will send them immediately.' ⁴This took place to fulfil what had been spoken through the prophet, saying,

⁵'Tell the daughter of Zion,
Look, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'

⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them; ⁷they brought the donkey and the colt, and put their cloaks on them, and he sat on them. ⁸A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

⁹The crowds that went ahead of him and that followed were shouting,
'Hosanna to the Son of David!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!'

¹⁰When he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?' The crowds were saying, 'This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee.'





As we saw at the beginning of this resource, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem focuses the central question about who Jesus is. The gospels show us Jesus entering his ministry, his work with his disciples and the words he spoke and works he performed among the people. But the entry into Jerusalem marks the beginning of the end, a crunch point for deciding what it was all for. Thinking back to the temptations in the desert, where we started Lent, we remember Jesus' struggle with the visions of the world, false pictures of power and glory, as opposed to doing his Father's will. Here, the people react as if it was precisely that power and glory that Jesus chose, but he holds fast to the truth, which will see him arrested, tried, convicted and sent to death.

Some questions for discussion

KJV only

- Read the text through and make a note of any unusual words or phrases or things you didn't understand.
- Pick out any words or phrases you especially like or find meaningful. Why do you like them?
- Choose a phrase from this passage and write it up or make a banner for your church to share with others as a signpost for the start of the Holy Week journey.

Any Bible version

- What messages do you think Jesus intended by choosing to enter Jerusalem on a donkey? Do you think people understood the truth of what he was telling them?
- Imagine you were one of Jesus' disciples. What would you make of the entry into Jerusalem? What hopes and fears might you have for what might happen next?
- Imagine you were one of the people in the crowd asking who Jesus was? What do you think others would say to you about him and how would you make up your mind about who he was?



Ecce Homo
by Antonello da Messina
(part of a collection of reproductions
compiled by The Yorck Project)

CELEBRATING THE BIBLE

Gospel

Matthew 27: 11 -54

Please note: the reading for the day includes the whole passage of Matthew 27:11-54 but below are shortened extracts.

KJV

Matthew 27: 11-12

¹¹And Jesus stood before the governor: and the governor asked him, saying, Art thou the King of the Jews? And Jesus said unto him, Thou sayest.

¹²And when he was accused of the chief

NRSV

Matthew 27: 11-12

Pilate Questions Jesus

¹¹Now Jesus stood before the governor; and the governor asked him, 'Are you the King of the Jews?' Jesus said, 'You say so.' ¹²But when he was accused by the chief priests and



**(KJV continued)**

priests and elders, he answered nothing.

Matthew 27: 27-44

²⁷Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the common hall, and gathered unto him the whole band of soldiers.

²⁸And they stripped him, and put on him a scarlet robe.

²⁹And when they had platted a crown of thorns, they put it upon his head, and a reed in his right hand: and they bowed the knee before him, and mocked him, saying, Hail, King of the Jews!

³⁰And they spit upon him, and took the reed, and smote him on the head.

³¹And after that they had mocked him, they took the robe off from him, and put his own raiment on him, and led him away to crucify him.

³²And as they came out, they found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name: him they compelled to bear his cross.

³³And when they were come unto a place called Golgotha, that is to say, a place of a skull,

³⁴They gave him vinegar to drink mingled with gall: and when he had tasted thereof, he would not drink.

³⁵And they crucified him, and parted his garments, casting lots: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, They parted my garments among them, and upon my vesture did they cast lots.

³⁶And sitting down they watched him there;

³⁷And set up over his head his accusation written, THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS.

³⁸Then were there two thieves crucified with him, one on the right hand, and another on the left.

³⁹And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads,

(NRSV continued)

elders, he did not answer.

Matthew 27: 27-44**The Soldiers Mock Jesus**

²⁷Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him.

²⁸They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, ²⁹and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head. They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' ³⁰They spat on him, and took the reed and struck him on the head. ³¹After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him.

The Crucifixion of Jesus

³²As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross. ³³And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), ³⁴they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he would not drink it. ³⁵And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots; ³⁶then they sat down there and kept watch over him. ³⁷Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, 'This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.'

³⁸Then two bandits were crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. ³⁹Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads ⁴⁰and saying, 'You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.' ⁴¹In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, ⁴²'He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the



**(KJV continued)**

⁴⁰And saying, Thou that destroyest the temple, and buildest it in three days, save thyself. If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross.

⁴¹Likewise also the chief priests mocking him, with the scribes and elders, said,

⁴²He saved others; himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross, and we will believe him.

⁴³He trusted in God; let him deliver him now, if he will have him: for he said, I am the Son of God.

⁴⁴The thieves also, which were crucified with him, cast the same in his teeth.

Matthew 27: 50-54

⁵⁰Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost.

⁵¹And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent;

⁵²And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose,

⁵³And came out of the graves after his resurrection, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many.

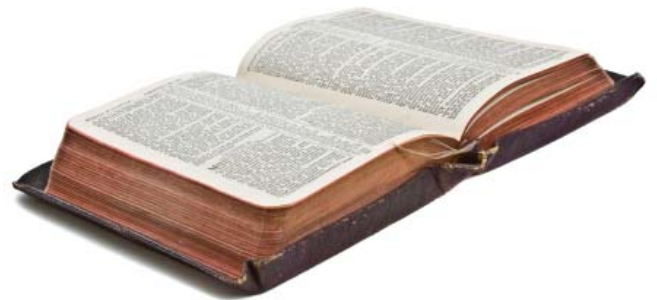
⁵⁴Now when the centurion, and they that were with him, watching Jesus, saw the earthquake, and those things that were done, they feared greatly, saying, Truly this was the Son of God.

(NRSV continued)

cross now, and we will believe in him. ⁴³He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, "I am God's Son." ⁴⁴The bandits who were crucified with him also taunted him in the same way.

Matthew 27: 50-54

⁵⁰Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. ⁵¹At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. ⁵²The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. ⁵³After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. ⁵⁴Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'



'Are you the King of the Jews?' This was not only Pilate's question to Jesus but the theme which runs through this whole encounter. What 'picture' of Jesus represents the truth about him? Is he a king? Or is he a terrorist? The soldiers take up the theme of Jesus as King when they plait a crown of thorns and dress him in purple. The plaque nailed to the cross ironically proclaimed he was 'The king of the Jews' – that was why he was being crucified. Those scribes and elders around the cross challenged him to prove it, 'He is the King of Israel: let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him'

So is he, 'The King of the Jews'? The answer is 'Yes' and 'No'. Using those words is both true and false. That's why Jesus did not answer Pilate's question. Sometimes, as here,





words are used to hide and distort the truth into lies, even to hide the challenge of the truth from ourselves. But there are many other words in this account which are clear truths ('it was out of jealousy they had handed him over' 27: 18) and others which are clear lies ('we will believe in him' 27:42).

Some questions for discussion

- Why do you think the scribes and elders resisted the truth about Jesus?
- Imagine you were the centurion. What do you think especially convinced him of the truth about Jesus?
- Think of ways in daily life which people can use words to mislead others, abuse others, try to escape our responsibilities? Do you think people in the Church can sometimes act in this way, and if so, how?

MOVING INTO LENT

Following Jesus

If we follow the life of Jesus through the account in St John's gospel we discover that this gospel is interested in making us think about truth and lies. Its opening sections make a bold statement about who Jesus is and why we should believe in him: 'we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth' (John 1.14) and he continues 'grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (John 1.17). Instead of the story of Jesus' birth, John, alone of the gospel writers, begins the story with John the Baptist and the question 'who are you?' John replies that he is merely one who is preparing the way for Jesus. After this we meet Jesus, coming for baptism, revealed as 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world' (John 1.29).

When we follow Jesus through John's gospel, we have a rather different journey to that of the other gospels. We encounter Jesus performing signs which break through ordinary earthly reality to show the power and compassion of God. He turns water into wine at Cana; he raises Lazarus from the dead; he heals a man blind from birth; he feeds thousands of hungry people. So God's power makes things 'true' that cannot otherwise happen in the ordinary course of things. We learn the truth that with God all things are possible. Similarly Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman learn truths about God that they could not have imagined before (John 3. 1-21; John 4.1-42). We too are invited to hear Jesus like Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, as Jesus offers a testimony of truth about himself and his relation to the Father. In a number of 'I am' sayings, we hear Jesus stating who he is, what he is on earth to do, and what believers can expect from belief in Jesus as Son of God. Through his encounters with the disbelieving Jews, Jesus issues a challenge about truth and lies: 'If I tell the truth, why do you not believe me?' (John 8.45). This challenge is set before us too.

It might be easy for us to think that as Christians we believe that Jesus is truly the Son of God and that we believe the truth of the signs of John's gospel and all that Jesus teaches us about





truth, and that we are 'sanctified in the truth' (John 17.19), but John also indicates that it is not so easy. Philip begs Jesus 'Show us the Father and we will be satisfied!' (John 14.8) and Thomas needs the 'proofs' of Jesus' wounds before he will believe that he is risen. Believing the truth about Jesus and telling the truth about him is not as easy as it might sound. And we are confirmed in Jesus' insights about this difficulty when we read the heartbreaking story of Peter, who promised he would always tell the truth about Jesus, but whom we see lying about knowing Jesus, not just once but over and over again.

So Holy Week comes with a number of challenges. We need to face up to the truth of who we think Jesus is, in the company of Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, and the bewildered disciples. What do Jesus' signs mean: impossible dreams, fairy stories, or the truth about God's power and desire to transform our imperfect world? Where do we stand, when we encounter Jesus' death on the cross and the empty tomb on Easter Day? And, beyond Easter, will we really tell the truth about Jesus to others? Or will that be a step too far? What about our testimony to the truth of the one who came to us, full of grace and truth?

Activity

Watch Derren Brown's programmes on exposing the paranormal at www.scienceofscams.com or find your own from TV programmes you may have watched, such as *Most Haunted*.

- What sort of 'truth' and/or 'lies' are we exposed to when watching these programmes? What are we supposed to believe?
- Do you think people who rely on psychics and astrologers can end up as groups of Unreconciled people? Do they just need Derren Brown to debunk psychic phenomena for them, or do they need something else?
- What's the difference between this kind of material about 'truth' 'illusion' and 'lies' and what Christian faith asserts about the truth of the Christian faith?
- What would you say to a non-believer who thinks Christianity is in the same category as paranormal beliefs?

MOVING OUT

Action in the community

Invite any people you know from your local community who have to deal with issues of lies and truth to talk about the difficulties in sorting out what people say. Such people could include police officers, teachers, social workers or magistrates. Discuss with them how they relate to Unreconciled people in the community, how they make decisions about truth and how they act on those decisions.





RESTING ON THE WAY

Theological reflection and prayer

Read this story:

Grace's story

It started at school. Somebody who didn't like me started a rumour that I stole a CD from a shop. I denied it to anyone who asked, but after a week everyone believed I was stealing CDs. Some people started pestering me to get *them* CDs. Soon it was everywhere and when someone lost some money I got blamed as a thief. I was going mad. My teacher asked me if I was stealing things and I got flustered and upset because I couldn't explain that I wasn't and hadn't done anything wrong. Even when the rumour got so out of hand that the first person said it was made up, no one believed her. In everyone's mind I was a thief. It made my life a misery.

How do you feel about Grace's story?

Prayer

Lord,

We pray for all those held captive by untruth,

People who have been lied to

People who have been lied about,

People who have been forced to live a lie every day.

Your way is truth and it is life;

Help us to break down the web of lies,

To clear a space for grief and painful stories,

So that your light and peace

Can find a new place in the hearts of all. Amen



Reconciliation Statue, Coventry. Photo: Marion O'Sullivan ©



DECISION TIME

What is going to change?

Now gather up your thoughts and ideas, and with these things in mind, consider these questions:

- **Where is the seed of new life?** What gifts has God given us to tell the truth about the people in our community?
- **How will we carry it?** What resources will we need to rectify injustice caused by lies and concealment of the truth?
- **Where can it be born?** Identify one reconciling action we can commit to which will help make the Unreconciled ones feel their story has been told.
- **How can we nurture it?** How can you support that reconciling action and make sure it follows through?
- **What will we hope to see?** What will be changed at the end of this process and what difference should it have made? If you have been following these resources over a few weeks, how have things changed?

Going further

This resource is based on the chapter 'Lies and Truth' in the book *Unreconciled?* where you can find lots of information, stories, and further ideas you can use for personal study or in a group, including more ideas for activities.

Robert Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order*, (Orbis 1992)
Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (Rider, Random House, 1999)

The Daily Service on Radio 4 from April 18 - 21 offers more readings and reflections for you to listen to on the theme of order and disorder.

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Photo of *The Unreconciled* (The Cross and broken glass): CTBI / Vicki & Chuck Rogers / Phil Dragash 