

4th January 2023

Liars

**“And, after all, what is a lie? ‘Tis but
The truth in masquerade.”**

Lord Byron, Don Juan

Frederick Douglass was an American abolitionist, women’s rights advocate and statesman during the American Civil War. Born a slave in Maryland, he wrote in his treaty on Civil Rights, *Our Composite Nationality*, in 1869:

[The liar] is secretive and treacherous, and will not tell the truth when he thinks it for his interest to tell a lie ... If he will not tell the truth, except when it is for his interest to do so, let us make it for his interest to tell the truth ... Trust is the foundation of society. Where there is no truth, there can be no trust, and where there is no trust, there can be no society. Where there is society, there is trust, and where there is trust, there is something upon which it is supported.

What has changed in a century and a half? Little, I believe, to call into question Douglass’ assertions. But much, it seems, in the out-working of the principles which are enshrined in his arguments. When “the truth in masquerade”, as Byron puts it, is offered as a weapon for self-preservation or puts power and self-interest before integrity and honesty, then the fundamental pillars on which a stable society is built are seriously undermined. Truth and trust are severely threatened by lies.

It is a long-standing convention in debates in the House of Commons, the lower house in the UK parliament, that an “honourable” gentleman or lady should not be called a liar. Someone can be called “a stranger to the truth”. But they must *never* be called a liar. It comes from the days where honour was everything. That’s also why, in the adversarial lay-out of the House, the government and opposition benches are two sword-lengths apart – each side out of harm’s way from the other! But when an “honourable member” is more than two sword-lengths from the truth, when honour and honesty are no longer the driving forces of service and representation, what then?

Let us press those who represent us to tell the truth. It is for their interest, as well as ours, to do so. For when they do not, if they lie, then they can no longer justify the title of “honourable”. If the “truth in masquerade” becomes commonplace, we all suffer the consequences.

A prayer for today

Lord, you are the Way, the Truth and the Life. Let my life be true to your Way. Amen