

NON EST MENDACIUM SED MYSTERIUM

(From St Augustine's 'Contra Mendacium' 24.)

IT is not a lie but a mystery.' This rather mischievous bon mot of St Augustine's on Jacob's deceitful behaviour (Gen. xxvii) has offended generations of upright clerics. One American bishop at the Vatican Council moved to have the lesson in which it occurs (second Sunday in Lent) cut out of the breviary. We feel that a translation of this passage will make a good introduction to a number on Truth, because it provides a suitable antidote to the somewhat pinchbeck and pedantic view of truth that generally prevails nowadays. Truth is not synonymous with accuracy, or precision, or the bald statement of facts. Fiction, make-believe, poetry, flights of fancy, the tall story (technically known as hyperbole), all can contribute to that adequate grasp of reality by the mind which is what St Thomas says truth is. Truth is mysterious, and can ultimately be only known in mystery, which calls forth strange symbolic forms of expression. It is the mark of a narrow mind to reject the mysterious as simply mendacious.

What Jacob did at his mother's instigation, his apparent deception of his father (Gen. xxvii), if considered carefully and in faith, is not a lie but a mystery or mime. If we do call it a lie, then all parables and figurative ways of expressing things, which are not to be taken literally and in which one thing stands for another, they will all have to be called lies—and that would be quite ridiculous. People who think this a lie will be able to make the same charge against any metaphorical figure of speech. When we talk about waving cornfields, jewelled vines, the flower of youth, the hoar of eld, because in fact waves, jewels, flowers and hoar-frost are not found in these cases, to which the words have been applied from other contexts, sticklers will dismiss it all as lies. Talking about Christ as the rock (I Cor. x, 4), or about the stony hearts of the Jews (Ezech. xxxvi, 26); calling Christ a lion (Apoc. v, 5) or the devil a lion (I Peter v, 8); these and countless other such expressions will be dubbed lies. And what about that figure of speech which is called antiphrasis, which consists of saying the opposite to what is intended, so that 'you have had it' means that you have not and never will have whatever it is; and a thing is called sweet because it is sour; and the Fates are called the Kindly

Ones because they are so ruthless? An instance of this in Scripture is what the devil said to the Lord about holy Job; 'See if he does not bless you to your face' (Job ii, 5), when what he meant is 'curse you'.

All these manners of speaking will be considered lies, if any figurative utterance is accounted a lie. But if it is not a lie when for the better understanding of truth one thing is used to signify another, then what Jacob did or said to his father in order to get the blessing should not be accounted a lie; nor for that matter should what Joseph said to his brothers to keep them on tenter-hooks (Gen. xlii), nor David's pretence of madness (I Kings (Sam.) xxi, 13), nor other such cases; they should be regarded instead as prophetic utterances and actions to be applied to the understanding of certain truths which they signify. These truths are covered up in figurative wrappings in order to exercise the perspicacity of the devout seeker; or else, if they were always obvious and ready to hand, they might come to be regarded as of little value. But the point to make is that it is truth, not falsehood, which is being stated in such cases, because it is truth, not falsehood, that is ultimately being signified whether by word or deed; and it is of course what is signified that is being stated. People think these things are lies, because they do not understand that it is the truth which is ultimately signified that is being stated; they believe that what is being stated is something apparently false.

To make it plainer by an example, look at what Jacob did. He undoubtedly covered his limbs with goat skins; if we look for the immediate cause of his action, we will consider that he was lying, because he did it in order to be taken for someone else. But if we refer this deed to its meaning, to what it was intended to signify, then the goat skins mean sins, and he who covered himself with them means one who bore not his own but other people's sins, Christ. So the true meaning of the deed can in no way be called a lie.

And as in what he did, so in what he said. When his father asked him: 'Who are you, my son?', he answered: 'I am Esau, your first-born'. If this is simply referred to those two twins, it will look like a lie; but if it is referred to the meaning which these words and deeds were all written down to signify, then *he* is to be understood, in his body the Church, who was to say when

speaking on this subject, 'When you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, while you are driven outside; and they shall come from east and west and north and south and sit down in the kingdom of God; and behold *they are last who were first and first who were last*' (Luke xiii, 28). It is in this way that the younger brother has taken away the first place from the elder brother and transferred it to himself. Well then, since such great truths are being signified, and so truly, can anything said or done in this story be fairly considered a lie?



TRUTH IN THE GOSPEL OF ST JOHN

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TO the people St John addresses, the question 'What is truth?' (xviii, 38) was not simply a matter of intellectual curiosity or scepticism. The gospel offers an answer to the deepest needs of a sophisticated society, in search of 'life', 'light' and 'truth'. Although we are pressed by questions of a similar kind, yet John's answers are not immediately understandable to us. The problem what the meaning is of the concept 'truth' in the fourth gospel is best approached along three separate ways: in what contexts does it appear in the gospel, what were the connotations attached to it in the contemporary world, and how far is all this relevant to us?

As for the first point, it is most helpful to return to the context of Pilate's question; because the account of our Lord's trial before the Roman procurator has a far greater importance in the evangelist's mind than just that of a chronicle of certain juridical facts. He gives such prominence to the scene because he is depicting at the same time the trial of Christianity by the secular authorities. The whole scene has to be read in the light of the Johannine 'irony'. Whereas at face-value it is Pilate who judges, the believing reader of the gospel knows that in point of fact it is the Lord who is King and Judge. 'I am king. For this I was born and came into this world, to give testimony to the truth.' This solemn royal declaration brings us into the heart of this gospel and into its favourite themes. Its dramatic message is that now already,