

Sermon 1.3. 2015

Rights and Ethics

From today's gospel reading; Mark chapter 8v36 "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" and from today's Collect:

Almighty God,
you show to those who are in error the light of your truth,
that they may return to the way of righteousness:
grant to all those who are admitted
into the fellowship of Christ's religion,
that they may reject those things
that are contrary to their profession,
and follow all such things as are agreeable to the same;

There we have it; we are instructed to live in an ethical way, rejecting wrong or sinful behaviour and embracing right or virtuous behaviour.

As you know, in this year 2015 we are celebrating the 800th anniversary of the signing of the Magna Carta. A charter which helped to define the rights of the British Subjects versus the rights of King John. It wasn't necessarily the first time that a society had drawn up rules of conduct. Indeed the so-called Cyrus cylinder which dates back to the 6th century BC and which we have in the British Museum is seen by some as defining human rights in a kingdom where Cyrus was reigning over differing nationalities and states. But for us the Magna Carta is seen as beginning to define the liberty that British subjects could expect under the law in England, placing limits on the rights of the monarch who was not above the law and famously giving the right to a fair trial for all.

Following on from this:

The American declaration of independence of 1776 states that 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.'

And the United Nations declaration of human rights; 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.'

So we have these rights spelt out to us in various historical texts. But what about our Christian ethics? Well we have the 10 commandments which again were about the orderly running of a society- a community which was responsible to God, but in which some of the rules are those which can be agreed upon in most societies. The instructions not to kill, steal, lie, commit adultery and to honour the elderly are found in many other communities. In Matthew 22, Jesus refers to the great commandments to 'love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and all thy soul and all thy might', and 'to love thy neighbour as thyself' as the summary of all the Old Testament laws. But we also learn that Jesus has given his followers

a new commandment that 'you must love one another as I have loved you'. This is an even higher ambition as we are expected to love each other unconditionally.

We see that our ethics, our standards are to be based on those which Jesus applied in his life and indeed there is a group of Christians who talk about looking at life in terms of 'what would Jesus do'? I sometimes find this a little difficult because the retort might well be that Jesus would never find himself in my position, our positions where we find ourselves choosing between several bad options.

So Christians have help with ethical problems. We have our inborn and God given sense of right and wrong which has evolved over the millennia. The taboo on killing, the need to nurture the young, indeed the need for cooperation between people within our communities and mutual support seem to be basic ideas which we find in many societies. Against this has been the great emphasis on personal and individual rights which seem to have grown over the last 30 years or so.

As Christians we look for the guidance that we find in reading the Bible, we can look to the church for collective wisdom- the wisdom that has been worked out over the centuries in answer to various problems and we can look to our own God given consciences when we come to make decisions.

We may decide that some things are always wrong; for example, I cannot envisaging myself killing another person, but then, what about self-defence, or defence of a child or can we say that there are just wars when the aggressor needs to be defeated?

Is lying always wrong? What if my friend has bought a new dress or a new house and is really pleased with the purchase? Am I being loving if I tell them that I don't like the dress or the house?

(interestingly, on this point it seems that people with autism find it hard to understand when someone says something they don't mean, eg you must come and visit me some time), but in our society most of us understand the conventions of the white lie.

It seems that Christian ethics requires us to examine the motives, our motives and those of society and to understand as best as we can the possible effects of our words and actions.

As you probably all know, my background is in medicine and there is a well- developed framework for looking at ethical medical decisions both in medical practice and in research. As regards medical treatment, the aim has to be to cure or alleviate suffering and not to do harm and there needs to be respect for the individual's wishes (even when other people think that he or she is making the wrong decision). There also has to be an understanding of fairness (distributive justice). So we look at the needs of the patient but also the opportunities that will be denied to others if this action or treatment takes place. We need to take into account the possible burdens that will be placed on the patient and weigh these up against the possible benefits. As health professionals we also need to be aware of the balance of power in our relationships and the awareness of undue coercion. The over-riding principle has to be that the health professional will be trusted to act in the patient's best interests.

Historically the church has often got hung up on the conflicting opinions of pressure groups when it examines difficult ethical questions. For example the latest bill about IVF procedures aimed at preventing mitochondrial disease has been opposed by those who believe that IVF is always wrong, rather than the much larger group of doctors and scientists who believe that God has given man the ability to develop mechanisms for avoiding and relieving suffering. Of course the church needs to examine the arguments for euthanasia, for dealing with unwanted pregnancies and for sexual practices. But it does sometimes seem to be obsessed with condemning particular groups of society whilst ignoring many other moral and ethical problems.

The understanding of good and evil which we have is surely part of our understanding of the nature of the Godhead itself. It was therefore good to find that in the recent letter our bishops were asking us to focus on the common good. They stress that so-called political issues about the economy, inequality, the welfare system, housing, immigration, the Trident nuclear deterrent, etc all contain ethical issues in which we should engage and that we might wish to examine whether we agree 'that the greatest burdens of austerity have not been borne by those with the broadest shoulders'.

Surely the issues of loneliness, materialism, the care of the elderly, the predicament of those on very low wages who find themselves using foodbanks as a result of a cash-flow crisis, these all present ethical problems which we as Christians are called to examine. This week we have witnessed the downfall of two senior politicians whose behaviour was exposed as unethical. A downfall brought about by a probable mixture of pride, greed, arrogance and a sense of entitlement. Are we to be so cynical that we have come to expect hypocrisy and corruption from our politicians?

We look at the state of the banks whose objective seemed to be to make as much money as possible by whatever means they could, and protest that that they were working within the law, or that they had no knowledge of what was going on. Indeed our press seems to collude in this as it gives as much exposure to so-called benefit scroungers as it does to those who avoid paying enormous sums of tax. Our government also seems to have strange priorities; I am told that our Department of Work and Pensions has 3200 investigators working to recoup a possible £1.2 billion of benefit fraud, whereas HMRC has only 300 inspectors investigating £70 billion of corporate tax evasion. We also discover that our so-called free press is afraid to upset those who pay large sums of money for advertising.

We are quick to condemn the individual carers who fail in their duties to care for the elderly and frail, but we also need to examine the ethics of asking people to perform skilled and difficult and exhausting jobs while only rewarding them with minimum wages. We condemn those who get into debt, but condone the proliferation of betting shops and gambling machines on our high streets.

In case you think that I am sounding excessively political, I must now point out that I have no easy answers for any of these dilemmas. As far as international investments are concerned I would not wish to support those who sell tobacco, or weapons, those who pollute the earth, those who make excessive profits by exploiting the earth's limited resources. And yet, I understand that industry needs to make profits, that there is a need for

wealth creators, that there is a duty for all people to contribute to society, and that the redistribution of wealth alone creates a culture of dependence and undermines human dignity. So, I have no intention of standing for Parliament!

We return to the questions of personal ethics. We are all hypocrites to some extent. We make lazy compromises, we turn a blind eye to some of life's difficulties. We make excuses for ourselves.

We try to be honest and truthful, but we often fail to be honest with ourselves. Our motives for action are usually mixed and yet we delude ourselves into thinking that we are only concerned for the welfare of others.

Our church asks us to reflect on how we spend our money and has condemned those who make it easy for people to obtain credit and then charge them enormous amounts in interest. It asks us all to spend our money wisely and to reflect on our priorities and we find it uncomfortable to be reminded that throughout the world people live on very little money. When we go to the shops do we try to buy products that have been fairly traded or do we rely on the wholesalers to behave ethically? I find this very difficult, because it may well be that people who work in so-called sweat shops may have no income at all if the manufacturer closes the factory. What do we think when we buy our milk? Are the dairy farmers getting a fair price for their milk, when the supermarkets are competing to sell at the lowest price? Should I boycott B and Q because it delays payment to its suppliers or Starbucks because it fails to pay taxes in UK?

When it comes to the workplace, do we cheat our employers by using the computer or telephone for our personal use or by taking credit for the work of others? Or do we sometimes waste time at work? What about whistleblowing? Is our duty to our employers greater than our loyalty to our colleagues? Taken to its extreme, do we think that Edward Snowden behaved ethically when he leaked classified information about global surveillance programmes- did he endanger national security?

How about our duties to those who tell us something in confidence? Would we tell a friend if we knew that his or her partner was being unfaithful?

Our vicar has suggested that this Lent we look at our rights. Of course we find that our own rights can only be viewed in relation to the rights of others and of our society. For example, on a simple level we are not permitted by law to drive our cars unless we wear a seatbelt, so our rights have been limited as society has decreed. We do live in a country where we can campaign for changes in the law if we are unhappy, but generally we accept these limitations. We have a right to free speech, but is it ethical to insult others?

As Christians we have rights;

In John chapter 1, we are told that as Christians we have the right to call ourselves children, sons and daughters of God; St Paul tells us that the truth has set us free (Romans 8), that we have the knowledge that God is with us, the holy Spirit is with us teaching us, helping us to discern the ethical way in our relationships and that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

In Lent we are reminded that Jesus went into the desert to be alone, he was tempted by the devil to misuse his power, to force others to worship him, and to gain earthly possessions and earthly success. He resisted these temptations and asks us to love him of our own freewill.

St Augustine taught that true freedom is not choice or lack of constraint, but being what you are meant to be. We are given the freedom to think for ourselves. Humans were created in the image of God. True freedom, then, is not found in moving away from that image but only in living it out. The closer we conform to the true image of God, Jesus Christ, the freer we become.

May we seek to make sure that our ethics, our behaviour and our choices are those which help us to grow as children of God.