

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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Fifth Sunday of Easter

'Politics, Morality, Ethics and Religion'

19 May 2019

Readings: Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148;
Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35.

Talking About Politics

This has been a big election year, with both State and Federal parliaments going to the polls. Indeed, as I understand it, this morning we should have elected a new government – although it is currently unclear what it will look like. This an example of democracy in action. Despite a significant amount of apathy toward things political in Australia, it nevertheless remains an important process for the establishment of priorities, values and directions in our nation.

There is, however, a mixed understanding of what constitutes the basis for our political views. Some argue that it is about ideology between, say, left and right (or progressives and conservatives). Others say it is principally about self-interest that coalesces with others who have similar interests, thereby ensuring favourable outcomes for a particular group in the community. Those of a more conspiracy theorist bent might argue that the process is irrelevant and that powers stronger than the electorate itself (such as the media and multinational corporations) manipulate attitudes and processes to achieve certain outcomes for themselves. You can take your choice.

The arguments go on; indeed, argument is the thing, because politics is about the management of conflict and competing desires within a community. Whether we like it or not, community life is politics, and everyone is caught up in it – including the church.

As the business of politics takes its course, it is not uncommon for people to question the direction society is taking, the values by which people live out their lives, and how this influences our corporate life. Issues, such as:

- the treatment of refugees, indigenous peoples, and the vulnerable; or
- environmental concerns and climate change; or
- the behaviour of institutions such as the banks, the police and the churches,

are all weighed up against other matters of security, trade and the economy. It is 'guns or butter', as the macroeconomists point out and the propagandists cry!

Ideology, as a system of ideas that form a basis for political theory and policy, ultimately shapes the thinking of the voter and the outcome of the election. Added to this, is the anticipated use of power and resources by governments for good or ill.

We therefore need to be aware of those things that ultimately direct our understanding of the world, and which in turn lead to political attitudes and behaviours. This is a function of a society's world-view, morality and ethics. It is also important to note that there has been a growing attention to the operation of ethics and values in recent times. Social institutions such as the law, businesses, government, schools and universities, hospitals, defence and police forces, and the medical professions have all moved toward the development of ethics statements and codes of conduct.

Morals and Ethics

This brings us to the matter of 'morals' and 'ethics'. While linked, there is nevertheless a difference between these two things. Morality is about the ideas that constitute an understanding of right and wrong (or good and bad) behaviour, whereas ethics is about the rules and customs applied to moral human behaviour within a community. It is possible to agree on the morality but disagree on the ethos as the churches have demonstrated for thousands of years.

The recent debate about Israel Folau's posts about 'drunks, gays, adulterers and others going to hell' has been principally an ethical one. It was a breach of the rules put in place by the Rugby Union for its employees. Of course, one may question as to whether such organisations should have binding codes of conduct at all, but if a code is in place and it is breached then such behaviour is technically an ethical failure.

The matter of religious freedom or freedom of speech (in the broader context), is not the pressing issue when addressing a breach of a code of conduct, as one is about principles and the other is about regulation. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to ask, 'what is the moral basis for the development of a particular ethic?' - but this is too big a question to explore now.

Pragmatically, what we can see today is an increasing number of institutions responding to moral failures within them by trying to get people to behave ethically. In this respect, regulations have been used to force people to behave decently toward each other. Statutes on 'equal opportunities', 'anti-discrimination', 'occupational health and safety' and 'child protection' have all been about making people behave in a moral way.

It must be asked, however, 'why does it require the threat of punishment to get people to be moral?' At this point it may be tempting to embrace John Calvin's doctrine on the 'total depravity of mankind' as I suspect Israel Folau does; but in contrast I suggest that, as St Paul teaches, there is a more excellent way (1 Corinthians 12:31ff).

A More Excellent Way

Christians (as do all religions) have both moral and ethical aspects to their faith, which is a way of understanding good and evil as well as right and wrong. We also have a way of organising our lives and behaving in a way that reflects the common good, instead of pursuing selfishness or immorality.

People are not formed, nurtured and sustained in a vacuum. Cultural forces shape the individual exemplifying what is good and just and condemning what is wrong, thereby limiting excesses in human behaviour. Unsurprisingly, the church has sought to do this over the millennia sometimes doing it well, but often enough performing it badly. More often than not, its times of failure have been when it has focussed more on its social power and authority rather than on its spiritual responsibility of love and service.

Some have pointed out the cant present in Folau and his acolytes on this matter. Concern was expressed not so much on the words he wrote (indeed, they were based on a disembodied passage of scripture), but rather on the attitudes of arrogance and judgementalism that lie behind his propositions. But none of this is new and, in a democracy, people are free to say what they like as long as they are willing to live with the consequences of people's reactions to them – some of which may not be kindly.

But let's move from this situation to the scriptures and look at how we might respond to the challenge of morals and ethics in a Christian context. As we approach the end of the Easter season our Sunday readings begin to anticipate the commemoration of the Ascension of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit. In this respect, the readings focus on:

- the establishment of the early church,
- a vision of God's kingdom that brings hope in the face of persecution, and
- Jesus preparing his disciples for his death, resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

As we read through the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, we realise that the early church was not an organisation that reflected peace, love and harmony. There were many divisions and a variety of narratives, practices and structures. A major area of division in the church at this time was over the mission to the gentiles. Some argued that gentiles (non-Jews) could not become Christians; while others argued that gentiles needed to become Jews first and fulfil the needs of the law before becoming followers of Christ.

This debate led to a public argument between Peter and Paul and their supporters. Paul argued that the gospel was open to all people, because God's love was directed to all. It is interesting to note that, even at this early stage, the sin of exclusion and tribalism was infecting the church. God therefore revealed to Peter, through a vision, the acceptance of all people and things as well as the demise of the interpretation of the Law in an exclusivist way. The moral principle is that God's grace is there for all.

In today's Gospel reading we hear Jesus instructing his disciples in the primacy of love. This is not a warm fuzzy 'love' of affection but rather a radical and strong love that goes on loving even when the object of that love doesn't respond. It is easy to love those of whom we approve, but radical love requires us to be unrestricted and unconditional, which is costly – another moral principle.

Jesus' idea is that his followers should stand out from the crowd because of the depth of love they have for others. The people of God should therefore be attractive to the world, not repugnant. Grace, acceptance and openness should prevail over arrogance, exclusion and bullying.

Finally, is the 'vision thing', as illustrated in Revelation chapter 21, of a new heaven and earth. God's sacrificial love makes all things new, it is therefore transformative allowing us to become the people God wants us to be. Indeed, the cross and resurrection is the example of how 'love' overcomes 'death' through resurrection.

In all of this, Christian morality is presented through the principles of love, acceptance and transformation. This is discovered through the person of Jesus the Messiah, who is the archetype of a human filled with God's Spirit thereby becoming God's presence. Christian ethics is therefore derived from these principles, as well as several others such as self-sacrifice, human dignity and justice.

Beware! therefore, of that person who claims to have a 'Christian ethic' but is incapable of showing love and hospitality in a way that ultimately leads to goodness, transformation and new life.