

On Being Right

*A sermon preached at Lindfield Uniting Church on Sunday 2 June 2024, by David Gill.
Readings for the 2nd Sunday after Pentecost were 1 Samuel 3:1-10, 2 Corinthians 4:5-12 and St Mark 2:23-3:6*

In 1980, several Uniting Church and Anglican ministers went to a place called Noonkanbah in Western Australia. There they sat down with Aboriginal people to block oil exploration rigs that were planning to drill into what the locals saw as sacred land. Having knowingly broken the law, they were arrested.

Two decades later, the Uniting Church opened a medically supervised injecting centre in Kings Cross, aimed at reducing the harm suffered by drug addicts.

Seven years ago, the Uniting Church decided to allow its ministers to celebrate same-gender marriages and adopted an order of service suitable for such occasions.

With each of these decisions and many more like them, the people involved have had to wrestle with the question: what is the right thing to do?

It's not just the big-ticket issues, of course, the ones we hear about in news reports – or, sometimes, news *misreports*! We, all of us, make ethical decisions every day. Usually instinctively. But sometimes we agonise. And often, maybe just below the surface, there's that same question: what is the right thing to do?

How can we know what is right?

One answer is, follow your **conscience**.

Now, a conscience is a very useful device. It's a sort of moral memory bank, that helps a person navigate through life on auto-pilot.

But take care. It's an auto-pilot that, if not watched, can take us into some dark places. Six million Jews went into Nazi gas chambers because a lot of consciences thought anti-Semitism was OK.

Consciences have to be formed. They need to be *informed*. They can become *deformed*. They must constantly be *reformed*. The question becomes, then: how can our consciences know what is right?

We're Christians, so turn to the **Bible**, perhaps?

Well, yes. The Bible is a good place to start. But take care. The Bible is not some sort of magic book, with infallible answers to all of life's questions.

There is lots of good stuff in the Bible. But there's also plenty of outdated thinking as well. Some of it quite hair-raising.

Not surprising, really. The Bible was written by people. Naturally, it reflects the wisdom (and the ignorance), the struggles (and the blind spots), of their times and cultures. We've learned to cope with that. Nobody, fortunately, not even the most rigid fundamentalists, takes everything in the Bible literally.

So when the book of Deuteronomy says rebellious sons who won't obey their parents may be stoned to death, we ignore that even when the kids are driving us nuts. When it forbids the eating of shellfish, we ignore that too as we tuck in to half a dozen

oysters and toss another shrimp on the barbie. When Leviticus chapter 19 says “you must not put tattoo markings on yourselves,” even Israel Folau has managed to skate around that!

Paul, of course, thought women should keep silent in church. We’ve found good reason to disagree. And while slavery remained unchallenged by Biblical writers, today we thank God for Christians who in later centuries have had the guts to fight against it.

So the Bible on its own is not enough. Indeed, isolated verses from the Bible can be downright dangerous; they may be misused in ways that have terrible consequences. Victims of South Africa’s apartheid regime know a few things about that. Women know about it too. So do gay people. So do Jews - and, in a terrible twist of history, so too do Palestinians.

C S Lewis sets us straight: *“It is Christ himself, not the Bible, who is the true word of God. The Bible, read in the right spirit and with the guidance of good teachers, will bring us to Him. We must not use the Bible as a sort of encyclopedia out of which texts can be taken for use as weapons.”*

So, how can we read the Bible in the right spirit? Where can we find the spectacles we need to help us use it properly?

Cast your mind back to this morning’s gospel. We heard about the running battle Jesus had with the Pharisees.

Those Pharisees were good people. They were sincere. Like Jesus, they were Jews. Like him, they took their Hebrew Bible very seriously. They adhered strictly not only to the Law of Moses, but also to some other conventions that weren’t in scripture but were generally accepted at the time. Religiously and socially, the Pharisees were conservatives.

No surprise, then, that they were not happy about Jesus. He’d been enjoying the company of the despised tax collectors and “sinners”. He was ignoring dietary and fasting laws. He seemed to sit loose to what everyone knew was right.

Worst of all, they said, he’d approved the violation of the Sabbath. They’d seen his disciples collecting food on God’s special day. They even caught him healing a person on the Sabbath.

It was too much. Something had to be done about this dangerous man.

You remember how Jesus responded to their protests about Sabbath-keeping? First, he tried to reason with them. That got him nowhere. Then came the real shocker. Human beings, Jesus said, are not made to serve the Sabbath. The Sabbath – and by implication every other rule and institution -- is meant to serve them.

This was dynamite. A radically different way of seeing religious laws and social conventions. What matters, he’s saying, is **the wellbeing of people**, because if God cares more about people than about laws then we should too.

There's the clue. There are the spectacles with which Jesus' followers should read the scriptures. That's the focus we should carry with us into complex debates, whether in the church or in the wider society. Be they about justice for Australia's indigenous people, injecting centres, same gender marriage or anything else.

What is in the best interest of each and every one of God's children?

Now, this focus does not mean that all disagreements magically disappear! It begs plenty of further questions - like what, in any particular debate, the best interest of people really entails, what to do when interests conflict, how to legislate accordingly, and what compromises may be necessary to get the best politically achievable outcome.

But this focus does give Christians crucial guidance towards answering the question: what is right? It presses us, on any given issue, to take full account of the insights of contemporary wisdom. And it enables us to engage with people of other faiths and of none. People who understandably, and rightly, switch off if Christians just hit them over the head with quotes from the Bible.

But ... three things to remember.

First, be suspicious of easy answers to complicated questions. The world is a difficult place. Human beings are complex animals. God's grace boggles every mind. When Christians come up with answers that are simple and wrong - and sometimes we do - then we're not helping anyone. We may actually be hurting people. And, when that happens, we're bringing the Christian faith itself into grave disrepute.

Second, in this country right now we're not good at talking to each other. Not good at listening to each other either. Too often, personal abuse takes the place of reasoned argument. And mutual respect goes out the nearest window.

Recently the leaders of Sydney's two oldest universities were speaking of "a breakdown in civil discourse at all levels of Australian public life and on both sides of the political spectrum". In the words of the then Vice Chancellor of Sydney University, "the whole culture has a problem with the way we're talking to each other". We Christians are part of that culture. And we are part of that problem.

Religious people like anyone else can rush to judgement and be harsh in speaking of those who differ. Remember, people who disagree with you might have a point.

Whether they do or not, they remain loved children of God. Try to listen to them, talk to them and talk about them, accordingly.

Third, what should you do when you find yourself facing a tough decision - when the arguments are coming from all sides, the right answer is elusive, you're just not sure and you're afraid you might make a mistake? What then?

Then you should try to ensure that any mistake you might make is on the side of compassion.

For if that is where your heart is, you may sometimes not get things 100% right. But you are unlikely, ever, to be very far wrong.