

## *Conscience*

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor  
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost—20 August 2017  
Revd Martin Johnson

*Genesis 45.1–15; Psalm 133; Romans 11.13–36; Matthew 15.10–28*

Is it ever OK to break the law? It's a question as old as Socrates and one that we will continue to debate.

As a little boy, the trip to the cinema was a real treat. No videos or Netflix in my day. The Disney cartoons were all the rage. I recall going to see *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Bambi* and *Jungle Book*. One movie that stuck with me is *Pinocchio*; it is still thought of as a masterpiece of Disney animation, even today it still looks good and the movie is over seventy years old. *Pinocchio*, of course, is about the puppet who wants to be a real boy. He doesn't want anybody pulling his strings, he wants to be autonomous. But to be a real human being he needs something that has been discussed and argued about for ever, he needs to know right and wrong, he needs a conscience. *Pinocchio* comes under the influence of wicked characters who try to lead him astray and, at one point, even Satan himself gets a look in. *Pinocchio* is offered celebrity status, he goes to Pleasure Island for instant gratification—all these temptations. Disney writes into the story the character Jiminy Cricket who acts as *Pinocchio*'s conscience and sings, in the classic song, 'always let your conscience be your guide.' This is the way for the puppet to become a real human boy. It is thought by many to be significant that Jiminy Cricket's initials are JC.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse has begun to hand down its recommendations. Among the first is that confessions made in the context of an act of religious reconciliation should be brought to the attention of authorities should the penitent admit to acts of abuse; 'penitent' here being the operative word. It seems self-evident to me that any person approaching a priest for reconciliation—we have such a rite in our Prayer Book—does so to receive absolution because they are penitent, sorry. Now I am not a canon law expert but it is my view that if a person confesses to something which is illegal, then part of the process of receiving absolution will involve facing justice. An unwillingness to face justice precludes that person from absolution. It is an issue of faith; if someone comes to reconciliation then, clearly, they must be a person of faith and must therefore realize that their reception of absolution is an act of faith that involves repentance. It seems that, in some instances, matters of canon law have been given greater emphasis than the issue of conscience.

During my preparation for ordination I was sent off to the College of the Resurrection at Mirfield in West Yorkshire; one of the courses I studied was on moral theology. We used a text called *Ductor Dubitantium, or, The Rule of Conscience in All Her General Measures*, written in 1660 by the Anglican divine, Bishop Jeremy Taylor. He writes convincingly of the primacy of conscience and this I believe is at the heart of understanding a particular Anglican moral or practical theology. For Taylor and the others at that time—often known as the Caroline divines because they lived during the time of Charles I—conscience was central to the practical living out of Christian faith. In Anglican thinking the application of moral principles is grounded first in scripture as against canon law or the confessional. What is important in classical Anglican thinking is the Biblical issue of repentance, *metanoia*, change.

Our gospel reading this morning begins with Jesus, as is often the case, in debate with the Pharisees, the lawyers, the keepers of the law. Jesus calls them blind guides. They are consumed with the keeping of the law and Jesus uses the regulations regarding food to say that they have got things the wrong way around. It is not what we eat that reveals what we are but

what we say and then what we do. From there Jesus goes beyond the bounds of Israel to gentile territory and we hear that most difficult of gospel stories: that of Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite or the Syrophenician woman. It makes for awkward reading but we must be careful not to read the account with our twenty-first century glasses on. If we do this first we will be totally outraged by Jesus' response and, secondly, we will fail to grasp the radical change of heart that we see in Jesus. So we must be careful. That Jesus was Jewish there can be no doubt; his response to the Canaanite woman was to be expected—she would have expected it. We cannot project our own sensitivities to matters of race and gender and religion onto Jesus. In Jesus' day, that Gentile woman could not receive his ministry because she did not share his faith; but, she proved him wrong. Her faith was as great if not greater than Jesus had seen anywhere in his homeland and she spoke to him over and above law and custom, her response touched Jesus' conscience. And her daughter was healed.

In considering the role of conscience in matters of confession I have been drawn to the writings of John Henry Cardinal Newman. After he left the Anglican Church and became a Roman Catholic he wrote a book called *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching* (1896). Newman wrote of Divine Law, revealed in the nature of God as justice, truth, wisdom, sanctity, benevolence and mercy. He wrote that these attributes in our minds are revealed as conscience, and he goes on that conscience then is the voice of God. But we must be wary, remember Paul this morning: 'O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways!'

None of this is easy and we can find this struggle in many writers. Newman clearly struggled with the issue of papal infallibility, despite becoming a Catholic. He wrote that 'when conscience comes into collision with the word of a pope, it is to be followed in spite of that word.' I rather like his comment on after dinner toasts; he said: 'If I am obliged to bring religion into after dinner toasts (which indeed does not seem quite the right thing) I shall drink to the Pope if you please—still to conscience first and pope afterwards!' Our consciences do need to be formed, nurtured, and schooled. But clearly, for us as Anglicans, a conscience formed under scripture is our first point of call when considering how we live out our Christian lives. Is it then okay to break the law? Sometimes, perhaps.

When Martin Luther stood before the Diet of Worms nearly five hundred years ago to hear of his excommunication, he famously said: 'I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God.'

Amen.