

Fear the Lord or Follow the Crowd?

Sermon for the 13th Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, 18 August 2018

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor, ACT, Australia

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Proverbs 9: 1-6; Psalm 34: 9-14; Ephesians 5: 11-21; John 6: 51-58

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

This week the Senate only narrowly defeated a bill allowing mainland territories to enact their own euthanasia legislation, as the states are able to do. According to a recent survey, euthanasia is now supported by up to four out of five Australians. I think that this is because nowadays it's hard to imagine any sort of obligation beyond protecting our own comfort, independence and self-interest, and because no-one can tell *us* what to do any more, can they?—not the government, and certainly not the churches.

Still, some of us Christians continue to believe that what we do with our bodies, with our unborn children, and with our aged and frail relatives, isn't entirely up to us. Yet these traditional Christian convictions are widely perceived as the pernicious legacy of a bygone era and as an intolerable imposition on people's freedom.

But wait a minute. What about the scourge of Australia's poorly regulated cosmetic surgery industry, which was exposed on *Four Corners* this week, with lots of grim stories and grisly pictures of women who'd been gouged, disfigured, even blinded, who'd never achieve the beauty of their favourite social media influencer, or the figure of Kim Kardashian, or the sex appeal of their dopey boyfriend's favourite porn starlet? So in the euthanasia case, the cry is for freedom. Yet in the cosmetic surgery case, perfectly healthy women—and some men—readily sacrifice their freedom to the enticements of social media, to the airbrushed ideals of celebrity good looks, ultimately to the demands of a highly imitative culture where freedom degenerates into obsessively following the crowd.

My point is that the real enemies of our freedom, of our self-determination, of our dignity and worth, lie in our other-directed fixations, mediated through the smart phones and social media platforms and media organizations and crowd behaviours that loom so large in people's imaginations these days. My point is that freedom is largely an illusion for many of those who go on most about it, but who in fact are trapped in the vacuity of the herd mind. And the end of such self-delusion is ultimately death: death in the nursing home by the hand of a friendly doctor; death in the breast-enhancement clinic at the hand of a poorly trained nurse; or simply

ending up on the scrapheap of life for failing to compete successfully in whichever game we've unthinkingly signed up for.

Now, friends, the alternative isn't a return to religious repression, and I'm not advocating an authoritarian Church. That horse has bolted, and good riddance. Still, our readings today are very uncompromising. We have a psalm commending the fear of the Lord, with a Proverbs reading inviting us to prefer Godly wisdom. Ephesians calls us to shun the works of darkness for a sober life, while John's Gospel sees all this in terms of living bread from heaven—of being caught up in Christ's life. Friends, all these images form a seamless whole. They offer an alternative to following the crowd in pursuit of an illusory freedom. Yet none of these images from our readings today, and none of our ritual actions here together in the Eucharist, entail anything toxic or confining or anti-humanistic—quite the contrary. Let me show you what I mean.

First, our psalm today commends the fear of the Lord. What does this mean? Does it mean that God is a jackbooted bully, or a manipulator—an enemy of our maturity and our thriving? Well, apparently not, when the rest of our psalm presents this fear of the Lord in terms of relationships marked by wisdom and grace, and of a flourishing life. To fear the Lord means looking to the Lord as our primary reference point, as our imaginative true North, and not

settling for anything less. So, bringing it right down to earth, I'd say our choice is between fearing the Lord and fearing the smartphone; between the fearing the Lord and fearing social media; between fearing the Lord and fearing the Murdoch press, with its many angry minions, or else fearing whichever faddish obsession of the politically correct left. In other words, to fear the Lord is not to fear the mob—that is, not to follow the crowd; not to be enslaved to groupthink, not to outsource our guiding aspirations to anyone or anything less worthy, but to cherish instead an independence of mind and a freedom of action oriented towards the living God.

And this fear of the Lord calls us away from envy and rivalry, according to the psalmist, likewise from all the unfruitful works of darkness that we read about in Ephesians today. This is what Godly wisdom means, we're told: to know and follow God's will. The one concrete example we're given, and there are more to follow in Ephesians, is to avoid debauchery and drunkenness, setting a different sort of celebration at the heart of life: a celebration of our thankful spiritual togetherness marked by joyful singing, looking to God in Christ, which refers of course to the Church's Eucharistic celebrations. And, friends, this represents anything but wowserism; this refutes the unwritten rule I grew up with in a nominal Anglican household: that Christian life meant being conventional, respectable, and boring. Instead, it's an invitation to find joy together in Christ

beyond the escapism and the empty carnality that our supposedly freedom-loving culture contents itself with, as the best approximation available.

As for the divine wisdom that's mentioned in Ephesians, we also have the classic passage from Proverbs today. God's wisdom is presented there as an inheritance, as an undeserved gift, as a spacious and sturdy home that's purpose-built for us, and as a festive table set especially for us. God's wisdom is a dwelling place, an abode, a habitat. God's wisdom is our address; God's wisdom is our birthright.

And, friends, it's no accident that the imagery of bread and wine used for wisdom in Proverbs reappears in Jesus' bread of life discourse from John's Gospel. Jesus is the bread of life: Jesus' word proclaimed, Jesus' body given in the bread and wine of our Eucharist, and Jesus' risen life that we share together as his Church, mediating his life to others. This bread of life is our share in Jesus' own life-giving freedom, taking us beyond more usual versions of freedom that in fact deliver their opposite.

The Lord be with you ...