

Good and Bad Religion

Sermon at St Philip's, O'Connor; Lent 3, Year B, 4 March 2018

Revd Canon Prof Scott Cowdell, Honorary Associate Priest

Exodus 20: 1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1: 18-25; John 2: 13-22

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

Some words from our Epistle this morning: "For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ... Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (1 Cor 1: 18a, 20)

Friends, religion in Australia now has a bad name. For many sceptics and atheists, *all* religion is a bad thing: it only offers immature wish fulfilment, manipulation of the weak minded, and a whole lot of nonsense. And haven't we given people who think that way a free kick, with all the scandalous abuse and official coverups that we've been found guilty of as a Church?

For others it's chiefly one religion that's a bad thing, and that's Islam. The sort of nominal Christians who might hold up the Ten

Commandments, or bleat about our Christian heritage even if they don't go to Church, can be very critical of Muslims, who they see as a threat to our way of life. I think that what most offends them about Islam is that it represents religion daring to show a public face, whereas the modern West has come to prefer religion tucked way out of sight, kept private and invisible, so that politics and economics and social media can get on with dominating our brave new world.

For yet others, the problem is inferior versions of Christianity itself. I grew up in a nominal Anglican household where we were superior to the Irish Catholics next door, and where our sober acknowledgement of the Ten Commandments marked us out as decent, respectable people. I later recognised this as the attitude that St Paul condemned, when he referred to 'the works of the law'. He meant the self-justifying use of Old Testament law by Israel in order to mark itself out from outsiders, and by the Pharisees to big-note themselves against the common people. Likewise, Christians have turned the Ten Commandments, which we heard in our first reading this morning, into a mark of our own superiority, and of our tribal belonging.

But, friends, all this is what St Paul warns us about in our Epistle reading this morning. For Paul it's not religion that's bad, or any one religion, or those of our own religion 'over there' who aren't up to

scratch compared with us who are 'over here'. For Paul, all this misses the point. For Paul, it's not the so-called wise, the know-alls, the impenitent and arrogant, the clever debaters and pundits of this age, who rightly understand religion. And it's not the scribes, either—that is, it's not the high-status religious insiders and experts who like to pontificate. Instead, it's Jesus Christ who shows us what religion is meant to be, while exposing what religion isn't meant to be. And he starts with his own religion, upending a whole system of rorts that had grown up in the Jerusalem Temple.

There were those selling the many animals that were needed daily for the Temple's sacrificial cult, and no doubt at a mark-up—this included the sellers of doves, which were all that poor people could afford for their sacrifices. The money changers, too, who swapped people's common coins with their pagan images for ritually pure Temple currency, were no doubt giving themselves a good exchange rate. All this reminds me of the religious abuses that Martin Luther attacked in Europe fifteen centuries later, during the Protestant Reformation, when German Catholics were being fleeced by the Church to finance Rome's magnificent new St Peter's Basilica.

But, friends, Jesus redirects us to the heart of the matter; he restores a proper zeal for the Lord's house but, instead of that whole sacrificial commerce in the Jerusalem Temple, he points to his own

sacrifice, which will undo so much of what religion has come to mean for people. Jesus himself in his risen life with us becomes the new Temple, the new religion, the end of the old precisely because he fulfils and transcends the old. Here we see Jesus the faithful son of Israel affirming rather than denying his religious heritage, but he does so by challenging it, reforming it, supercharging it and setting it up to go viral.

Now, it's in light of what Jesus shows us and teaches us in this Gospel reading that I want to come back to the Ten Commandments, from our first reading this morning. I notice that today's Gospel story begins under the shadow of the Passover (as does that later and greater confrontation with bad religion in John's Gospel, the crucifixion itself). Anyway, the Ten Commandments also start with the Passover—with a reminder that God has delivered the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt and, by inference, from the violent pagan religious culture of Egypt. The message is that sticking to the one true God, to Israel's God, is the best way for Israel to avoid falling again into slavery and violence. The Ten Commandments aren't about narrow, confining religious obedience and moral servitude, as some think—rather, they show us what liberation and freedom look like.

So, the Ten Commandments aren't just a list of dos and don'ts. They start with the identification of God as our God, as our saviour, as our liberator from slavery and, in that context, they set about ordering the life of God's people in thankfulness and mutual respect. Instead of a dog-eat-dog world of scarcity and conflict, the Ten Commandments imagine a world marked by blessing and solidarity. Here is morality in the service of God's good news, and as a dimension of what being the people of a generous God looks like. It's not about keeping our noses clean and keeping God off our backs! Friends, so much of what passes for Christian morality falls way short of this authentic standard; it's peevish, joyless and effectively loveless, when the invitation here is to inhabit life together in ways that are large-souled, joyful and compassionate.

Friends, this is the imaginative shift that our wonderful Psalm 19 envisages this morning. Psalm 19 pictures the world as open to God, ordered by God, and reflective of God. The natural world with its beauty and order is a sign of God's loving purposes, and so is our moral life as God's people according to the paired halves of this psalm. There's no self-contained moral autonomy here; instead, we admit our need for God's help to live the moral life, and to rightly inhabit God's world. Here's an ethical vision that's less moralistic and more sacramental, more contemplative. Here's the moral life, the life of the imagination and the life of prayer coming together.

It's this sort of life, this sort of religion, that St Paul commends to us in our epistle today. The cross of Jesus Christ brings bad religion into the light and foreshadows an end to it. This is the wisdom of God, which can't help but look like foolishness to lots of people: how could lots of people possibly imagine a world without in groups and out groups, without the superior maintaining their position, without the anointed pundits and self-appointed experts setting the agenda, and without religious leaders who talk innovation but who're in fact rusted on to the *status quo*? Jesus' agenda must look like folly to all such people. Instead, his more intentional, more self-critical, less self-righteous, less self-congratulatory version of religion is the real thing—though many religious people would reject it as folly, and many sceptics wouldn't even recognise it as religion.

Friends, in this Lenten season, and in this Eucharist where the cross and resurrection reach out to reclaim our religious imagination, we're invited to love, to wonder, and to recognize just how unconventional a thing it is to be Christian. It's religion coming good, beyond what the wise, the scribes, the debaters of this age, are typically able to fathom. And it has to seem at least a bit foolish, according to the world's reckoning, or it's not the religion of Jesus Christ, and of his cross.

The Lord be with you ...