

Sermon for Mattins on the 21st Sunday after Trinity, 16th October 2016
2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8 Where do Morals come from?

Will it be a good thing to declare a no-fly zone over Aleppo? Should the houses of Parliament have a chance to vote on the question whether or not the British government should give a notice under article 50 of the Treaty of Lisbon? Your last question for consideration is, are gay people to be allowed to marry in church?

I don't know whether you listen to a BBC Radio 4 programme called the Moral Maze. I like it very much. Ethical questions are debated in a sort of forensic format where the panel listens to various experts and witnesses who speak about the issues under consideration, and then they discuss the things which the various witnesses have said.

You usually have on the panel Melanie Phillips, who at one stage wrote for the Guardian, but now has lurched to the right; but more importantly, she is a sincere and practising Jew. There is usually somebody from an organisation called the Institute of Ideas, someone who sees everything in market terms and one of my heroes, the Reverend Dr Giles Fraser, some time canon of Saint Paul's Cathedral and now vicar of Saint Mary's Newington, near the Elephant and Castle.

He is sometimes portrayed as a sort of lefty vicar, although I think that's an underestimate. Dr Fraser was for a long time the fellow and tutor in philosophy at Wadham College, Oxford as well as being the vicar of Putney, and more recently he supported the Brexit campaign in a way which puzzled many left-wingers, myself included. He is a man of considerable depth of intellect.

That's the Moral Maze. I commend it to you if you haven't listened to it so far. But why is it that we decide to do the things that we do? What is a good thing so far as we are concerned? There are lots of moral questions which come up. Some of them one can deal with simply by saying that they are in fact also legal questions.

The triggering of article 50, and whether or not Parliament needs to vote on it first, is certainly something which the courts are going to pronounce on. The hearings are taking place now in the High Court. But the decision of the court will also bear on the principle of democracy, a philosophical, political question rather than just a legal one.

Aristotle, in the Nicomachean Ethics (1.1094b1), suggested that politics was the highest form of ethics, in the sense that the idea of the good didn't just affect one individual but the whole of the state and all the population in it.

So where do we get our moral authority from? Do we look at what is likely to produce the greatest happiness – are we utilitarians? Or, do we think that the end justifies the means? I think there might be some circularity in that, because you still need to decide what is a good end to aim at. How would we decide between two conflicting good objectives?

For example, in the question of possibly declaring a no-fly zone in Syria, one good objective would be to protect the people of Aleppo. But another good objective would be not to increase the violence in that area, that two wrongs don't make a right.

In our Gospel reading, Saint Luke tells us about Jesus' parable of the 'unjust judge': unjust, Jesus called him, because he 'neither feared God, nor had any respect for people'. I think it is an open question whether in fact those qualities actually do make him unjust. But, leaving that on one side, he seems to have granted an ex parte injunction to the widow because of the number of times she had applied to him, and no doubt because of her eloquence as an advocate before him. It's interesting that the story does not say that the judge gave in and granted what she wanted, irrespective of its being just or not.

She had asked, "Avenge me of mine adversary"; and he had said, "Because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her." Modern translations say, "I will grant her justice; I will see her righted". So the judge, although he doesn't fear God or man, still gives her her just deserts.

What standard is the judge referring to? In the second letter to Timothy, which was our first lesson, are the words, "all scripture is given by inspiration of God". That's a line which has created divisions among Christians ever since the time of the Reformation.

Martin Luther proclaimed the principle that 'Sola Scriptura', only Scripture, is the supreme authority in all matters of doctrine and ethics. Sola Scriptura doesn't deny that other principles may bear on Christian life and worship, but the Bible is held to be supreme. The Bible is held to be literally the word of God.

In relation to my questions at the beginning, you can of course answer more or less all of those puzzles simply by reference to lines in the Bible, by so-called proof texts. The problem is that sometimes you come to conclusions that are frankly counter-intuitive. If every word in the Bible is true, how do we account for the age of Methuselah or indeed the date when the world was created, for example? How do we cater for some of the nasty things said about women in the Bible?

In the so-called Pastoral Epistles, (1 and 2 Timothy and the Letter to Titus), where we had a lesson from the second letter to Timothy, in the first letter you will find that the writer (said to be St Paul but probably not) said that women should "adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety, not with broided hair or gold or pearls or costly array, but (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works. Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence."

Really? I don't think that we would find that literally true. We would tend to put it in the context of the 1st century AD, and Graeco-Roman society. Obviously, if you are a 'sola scriptura' Christian, you may well have difficulty with gay marriage. There are a number of sayings of St Paul and also in Leviticus which are condemnations of homosexual love.

Other people, just as in the way we look at the place of women today, would say that there is a perfectly good way of looking at homosexuals which is different from what is literally there in the Bible. My point today is not to debate the rights and wrongs of this, but simply to look at where we get it all from.

If you are trying to make up your mind in some moral dilemma, what would you regard as authoritative? Would you even think in that way? Would you say, what is the right thing to do, what is the good? What makes them right and good? Is it maximising happiness? Avoiding pain? Or is it 'the word of God'?

We could be believers in God, deists, without necessarily believing all the things that Christians believe. We could believe in God as a kind of blind watchmaker, who had made the heavens and the Earth and set creation in being, wound it up and set it going, but then had gone off to do something else, leaving creation to tick along by itself, perhaps using the mechanism of evolution as its governing principle; survival of the fittest. So that would throw up another possible principle, so called victors' justice.

But we as Christians believe that God actually took a much closer interest in his creation. He inspired the prophets. In the Nicene Creed, 'He spake through the prophets': and he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to be a man like us and to share in our life and our suffering. As Anglicans, we don't uphold the doctrine of 'sola scriptura': we're not descendants directly of Martin Luther. We believe that there is a threefold source of authority. We learn what the will of God is, partly from the Bible, partly from 'tradition', by how the church has interpreted things down the ages, and partly by reason, by common sense.

One of the important things in Anglicanism, and indeed in the beliefs of all those Christians who don't believe that the Bible is the only authority, is the thought that the Holy Spirit is at work, and has continued to be at work, since the time of Jesus. So although Jesus, in his three years of ministry, produced teachings which have changed the world, it didn't stop there. Can you imagine the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, for example, in South Africa, without the idea of loving your enemy in the Sermon on the Mount? But surely the Holy Spirit was there with Nelson Mandela, inspiring his generosity of spirit. He wasn't just looking back 2,000 years in order to get his ideas from.

One way that we Christians can approach moral questions is to bring Jesus into it. "What would Jesus do?" Love God and love your neighbour: but also that he has 'not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it'. The law being the law of Moses, the Ten Commandments and all the detailed rules that you will find in the first five books of the Old Testament.

The pastoral epistles, the letters to Timothy and to Titus, have to be understood against the background of a lot of the writings in the New Testament, that people thought that the end of the world was very close. The second letter to Timothy is perhaps not quite as apocalyptic in tone as some other parts of the New Testament. Possibly 100 years had gone by since the time of Christ, by the time that the letter was written, and the end of the world hadn't actually happened.

Now, 2000 years on, we tend to look at predictions of the end of the world rather in the same light as lengthy and complex horoscope predictions. In popular journalism, it's not very serious; certainly not something which would change your life. There's surely an echo of what we read in 2 Timothy: "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers having itching ears, and they shall turn away their ears from the truth and shall be turned unto fables'.

What do you think? What does it look like? Tony Blair and his government famously "didn't do God". I'm not sure what they did refer to in order to take the decisions that they did. Maybe we can even say that they did not 'endure sound doctrine'. Did they make moral mistakes as a result?

Maybe some of the new-age philosophies that some people pursue would come into the category of things that "appeal to itching ears". Isn't this rather more important than that? Isn't it time that we actually thought, a bit more deeply than we have so far, about where laws come from and what the good is, and what we are aiming for in our lives.

Is it good enough, simply just to try to pass through life as pleasantly as possible without getting into trouble; to have enough to eat and a roof over our heads? Nothing wrong with that, but is that all there is? Look at what Jesus said. 'When the son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?'

What do you think? What are we going to do about it?

Amen.

Hugh Bryant