

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 6th September 2020

When I speak to children, either at Church or in the context of a school assembly, I simply enjoy telling them a story and to watch their faces as the denouement unfolds. You can see that often they are so caught up in the narrative and their imaginations are picturing the scenes that I attempt to set. Story telling is such an inspiring art, and I never moralise when I get to the end; I never say, "Now, boys and girls, what does that all mean?" I simply tell the story and leave it at that.

In fact, one wee boy in the Junior Department at Wellington School in Ayr , where I had the immense privilege of being the Chaplain until my retirement, got into the car at home time and said, "Mum, I love Mr Aitken. He's got no morals!"

I think I know what he meant!

Many of you will remember Rabbi Lionel Blue, the well-known British religious broadcaster and writer, his wry and gentle sense of humour brightening many a morning on BBC 4's "Thought for the Day", and who died four years ago, once commented that honesty is essential if morality is not to become mere moralising.

That assertion is true and the distinction between them is a very important one.

Morality seeks to discern what is right and what is wrong, and to live by what we find to be the truth. It a way of finding freedom, for ourselves and for other folk.

In contrast, moralising is about judging other peoples' behaviour, looking to find fault and seeking to impose our own moral values on them, while sometimes exempting ourselves from our own moral legislation. Moralising is generally an attempt to limit others, either because we can, which becomes a crude exertion of power over them; or because in seeking to limit them, we are recognising that we ourselves are not free.

Introducing honesty into the equation enables us to examine our motives, something that the Pharisees of Jesus' day were not very good at.

Moralising and legalism make very comfortable bedfellows, and I have witnessed over many years, both within the Kirk and outwith, moralism and legalism produce a blanket of security for people who never take risks either with imagination or life. You've encountered them, I'm sure, the "unco guid" as Robert Burns so beautifully describes them, the "holy Wullies" who are always pointing the finger and saying "Woe unto you and you and you!" They are still around. They are so busy looking for the speck in someone's eye and forgetting about the log in their own! It is time someone said "Woe!" to the "Woers"!

It is so easy to forget that laws are made for peoples 'guidance, protection and well-being, not to trip them up, especially those laws given by God to us His children.

On one occasion the Pharisees came to Jesus and they asked Him if it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife. Now their main objective was to test Jesus, to catch Him out, to see if He was prepared to acknowledge the Law of Moses as they themselves taught it. Their question was an attempt to find a weapon which they could use against Jesus.

The divorce law as it stood at that time sought to moralise. It laid down firm rules but was very one-sided in favour of men who could “put away” women at will, and leave them quite destitute.

Jesus was no fool. Fully aware of the Pharisees’ intentions, just as He had done on previous occasions, He turned their trickery into an opportunity to teach them a moral truth.

He stated quite emphatically that there is not to be one set of rights for men and another for women. They are to be equal in their treatment of one another. God made them, joined them and loves them equally. They are equal in their treatment of one another. This is a model for vowed relationships.

Above all else, Jesus was deeply concerned about justice, especially in our relationships. In first century Palestine, women and children came on the bottom rung of the status ladder. Yet, following His teaching on marriage, He sternly ordered that the little children should not be prevented from equal status with adults in their right to approach Him.

It is wonderful that in one very short exchange, Jesus diplomatically handles those Pharisees, then highlights and raises up ordinary men, women and children to take their rightful place as equals, in society, under the moral law, as properly befits a people made by God.

We are living in a world today which sadly places a greater emphasis upon what people produce than on their intrinsic worth, and Jesus is teaching us here that moral imperative about justice in our relationships, not just marriage, but amongst neighbours, in our communities, in the Church, between the nations.

Jesus wants folk to be free – He does not want to condemn them. You see, free people are people with a purpose, keen to grow, eager to change, living more and more in a state of becoming more authentically who God made them to be.

Over many years, I have seen in congregations that people who live with a sense of God-given freedom are far more likely to help to free others to be themselves. Free people are happy people.

And I have discovered that moralistic and legalistic people are cantankerous and really “mad, bad and dangerous to know”. They feel that they have to be God’s hit men and women, berating what they consider to be contrary to His will.

Of course, freedom can be hard road indeed, much harder than the comfortable security of legalism and moralising.

But Jesus’ teaching gives us the tools for the job and a superb yardstick by which to measure our natural responses to life’s questions.

Its essence is clear-sighted honesty.

Honesty is the key to morality.

The Revd Fraser R Aitken, Locum Minister