

Whose Authority?

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 10 March 2019

A Contemporary Reflection by Kevin Dallas

Lent 1C

Romans 10: 8b-13; Luke 4: 1-13

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XG9Z44JNUww>

The subject I've chosen to consider this morning is Authority. And there was a moment, when I was reading through my notes this morning when I thought "I don't have any authority to talk about authority"! So, with that qualification, here we go.

Initially, I'm thinking of the way established institutions within civil society have, by their behaviour and actions, relinquished their claim on Authority. From Church to Governments and Major Corporations, individuals within their ranks have come up well short, whether it's the Banking Royal Commission just recently, or the painful Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, we have been presented with countless examples of Authority and power abused and misused.

As a result, at almost every level of society we are confronted with far less trust and respect for any Authority. However the context of my remarks today will focus on the term "Scriptural Authority" because that too is under pressure - and given the way it's often interpreted, perhaps rightly so.

The reading from Luke today records the commencement of Jesus ministry, Jesus is subjected to forty days' worth of temptation and fasting - a tussle or power struggle, the forces of evil attempting to claim Authority over the force for good. I think the reading implies that the good presence prevails.

As so often happens in scripture the number 40 occurs in numerous Old Testament passages:

- Moses was on the mountain with God for 40 days
- Scouts were sent to explore the Promised Land for 40 days and nights
- Goliath challenged the Israelites to fight each day for 40 days
- Ezekiel bears the punishment for Israel for forty days.
- God postpones the destruction of Nineveh by 40 days giving the city time to repent. And so on.

In the ancient wisdom tradition, all this adds weight or Authority when given the correct context.

Scripture, through the ages, seemingly inevitably adds Authority when the context is so tied to Ancient Wisdom, unless from our 21st century culture perspective we allow a line from that well known song to pop into our head *"It ain't necessarily so, the things that your liable to read in the Bible. It ain't necessarily so."*

Or if, these days, you happen to be a devotee of Richard Dawkins and reducing the imagery to stereotypical lampooning of all Christians as blindly accepting, in a literal sense, each word written advances their own Authority agenda, elevating the authority of science above theology and religion.

The other reading, from Paul's letter to the Romans, speaks of the rich blessing of all who call on the name of Jesus with the offer of full salvation. A passage widely harnessed, often with great authority as a formula by Evangelicals in their quest to convert and commit non-believers into the Christian Faith. The question is, does reducing the gospel to bite size formula do The Jesus Way full justice? Does it really advance our understanding of scripture?

I have no doubt that many here today recall the clarity and certainty with which these very passages (specially the Reading from Romans) have been used to bring a powerful, confident, expert understanding of scripture by placing a strong emphasis on belief, (what we believe as a way) to Faith and Salvation from Sin. Indeed in many places of worship today they will continue to be used in this way, often linked with the term "the Authority of Scripture".

As a newly minted septuagenarian I often wonder how much deeper my biblical understanding would be if I could replace the time I have spent listening to a lifetime of sermons with a strong scholarly critical examination of the old and New Testament scriptures? There is still time!!

I hasten to add how richly blessed we are at Pitt St that Margaret speaks to us from a deep understanding and practice of Biblical scholarship.

To further my point and make it personal I'm going to share an extract from a letter Judith and I received from a minister of a church we briefly attended prior to moving to Pitt Street in late 2003. But, before I do, some brief personal background will help give the letter context. (Some of you already know this).

For those not familiar with the faith Journey undertaken by Judith and myself, we were both raised in the tradition of the Salvation Army, As we grew we both became more involved in leadership and the musical life of that organisation. With the opportunity to migrate to Australia in 1982 we took our place within the then bustling life of Sydney Congress Hall – just around the corner in Elizabeth Street.

In early 1992, ten years later, we decided to leave the Army and we continued our Church life at a local Baptist Church until a business assignment took us to Melbourne in early 2001. The revelation and introduction to such visiting speakers as John Shelby Spong and Richard Holloway at St Michaels Collins Street (which we attended), plus the not inconsiderable input from week to week of the Rev Francis Macnab, came to represent a radical change in our theological understanding.

Returning to Sydney in early 2003 and back in the family home we decided to link locally with the Anglican community and begun to settle into the life and work of that place.

Around the same time Bishop Spong again visited Australia and spoke here at Pitt Street; we attended. The proceeding Sunday at the Anglican Church we were rather taken aback to be warned from the pulpit about attending and being taken in by what the “winsome” Jack Spong had to say!!

Shortly after, we left that Church and began attending Pitt Street. However, shortly afterwards we received a letter from the Minister at the Anglican Church. It’s an extract from that letter that I want to share with you now. In writing to us, the Minister said:

While I wish you well in this change to the city church, I would want to express some anxiety in acknowledging the theological struggles that we are in today. I am aware that we face considerable tensions concerning the authority of scripture and the way in which we apply it to many of the social issues that confront us in this day and age. While I acknowledge that Christian men and women of goodwill can arrive at different conclusions on a range of matters looking to the Scriptures as their authority source, I think our great dilemma today on a number of the biggest issues is such that we have begun to approach the scriptures in a way that they will destroy any authority they have in due course because we consistently try to contextualise them in order to accommodate pressures from our secular world. On one hand, I do not want to be a right wing fundamentalist approaching the Bible with a non-critical attitude, but on the other hand I am deeply concerned lest we end up in a position of having no authority in the Scriptures because we have so stripped it of any timeless Word of God to His peoples.

It is a letter I felt (at the time) unable to respond to. I do wonder, 15 years on, would it be a different letter?

Needless to say our period as Salvationists (from childhood to adults) gave us a clear Authority framework. The Army’s military like structure and conservative theology with many levels of Authority and clear set of beliefs (contained in its 11 Doctrines and so called Articles of War for commissioned soldiers). Sadly this sometimes meant that any alternative views were often dismissed as lack of faith or evidence of sin leaving some open to correction and even admonishment.

Going through our home library recently, I came across a small book retrieved from my parents’ collection, when our family home was broken up when my mother went into a home. It had my father’s signature in it; it’s 20 years since he passed away. I am thrilled to think he read it! He certainly never discussed it! (Together with my mother they were, throughout their lives, serving Salvation Army officers – they were Ministers). The book was Bishop John Robinson’s *Honest to God*, written in the early 1960’s. At the time it caused a storm. Robinson, the then Bishop of Woolwich, was greatly criticized by many of the so called Authority figures of his day. Ultimately of course it cleared the way for John Shelby Spong, Richard Holloway, Marcus Borg, and many more to move the faith and understanding of those in the church suffering doubt and disillusionment within the Church, secretly questioning authority, feeling guilty about the fact that could no longer literally believe many of the things they had read.

Robinson at that time, writing of the widely held understanding of the God up there or out there, in the book’s introduction, asks the question “*Under what influence and out of which tradition does our God image emerge*”

There are countless Denominations and sects that purport to hold a true understanding of scripture. If we had the time to dialogue with them now and discuss that question: *under what influence and out of which tradition does your God image come? Jehovah’s Witness? Mormon? Seventh Day Adventist? Sydney Anglican?*

It would be an interesting discussion, but we are much more of the view that although they have named sex and they have their own doctrine, it is the individuals understanding – millions and millions of the separate individual's understandings of that image of God. We each have that.

So, it is not easy to reframe one's understanding of scripture often formed and imbedded over a lifetime.

Simply stated the Authority of Scripture, often sits alongside the school of thought aligned with the "*Inerrant Word of God*" - that scriptural understanding, the Inerrant Word of God.

My earliest faith tradition image of God is clearly outlined in the first of the 11 Salvation Army Doctrine, which reads:

"We believe that the Scripture of the old and New Testament were given by inspiration of God and that they only constitute the Divine rule of Christian Faith and Practice."

Literally interpreted, this could extend to the control and influence some Authority figure within a denomination wishes to exercise. As distinct from individuals taking seriously the critical thinking and study required, plumbing the depth and insights contained in Biblical wisdom for Christian living, really getting to grips with scripture.

By way of contrast I seem to recall the Uniting Church basis of Union reads:

"The Uniting Church lays upon its members the serious duty of reading the scriptures"

In the 2016 Common Dreams on the Road, here at Pitt Street, the Rev. Robin Meyers from the USA eloquently described his understanding of Biblical text in his Science and Religion lecture. He said: "*No author of Biblical text knew they were for inclusion in "The Bible", text being better described or understood as overheard conversations about God, akin to being on our knees at the keyhole listening to an ancient conversation*".

Therefore, today I feel comfortable in stating that, for me, I often find The Bible complex, confusing, contradictory and chaotic!! The challenge, as Christians, comes in making this relevant to a 21st century world and the language we may choose to illuminate and sustain our understanding - with much less 'Authority' talk. How do we best distil the essence of Christian living?

To this end, I have found the insights of Keith Ward's writings helpful and would like to share an extract from his book "*What the bible really teaches*". Formerly Regis Professor of Religion at Oxford, in the chapter headed Biblical Moral Principles (as distinct from Scriptural Authority) drawing from Paul's letter to the Romans Chapter 10 v 4 "*Christ is the end of the Law*", Ward writes:

'If the first-generation Church is any sort of pattern for the modern Church, it is a pattern of radical and creative change, of readiness to question all written rules, and to move to a new understanding of what faith requires, under the direction of the Spirit of God, both responding to and transforming the new historical contexts in which the gospel of new life in Christ is proclaimed'

Further, he said: *A pattern of attitudes and disposition, not of rules and prescription" is the final test of authenticity of Christian Faith".*

Just recently, I was encouraged and intrigued to listen to NSW 2019 Australia Day address, delivered this year by social researcher Hugh McKay. Entitled *A Culture Of Compassion*, it's worth a listen, because after 60 years of partaking in rigorous social research Hugh reached some pretty confronting conclusions, particularly regarding the breakdown of what he calls social cohesion leading to social isolation. He specifically quoted research that shows one in four Australians report feeling lonely for at least half of every week. He believes this possesses a great threat to health than obesity.

In response, at the end of his speech, Hugh says:

“As a starting point, I believe we need a radical culture-shift in the direction of more compassion, more kindness, more tolerance. More generosity, more forgiveness, greater mutual respect in our public and private lives. We need to abandon the relentless and fruitless quest for personal happiness and adopt, as a way of life, a greater responsiveness to the needs of those around us”.

It's just as well Hugh has no formal links to any Church, because in my humble view he is about as on message in embracing the Christian Faith as anyone can be! Perhaps if he had links, people would have been less inclined to accept his message.

However I see this as further evidence the broader Christian Churches sometime abdication of this “essence of Christian living” (resulting in a vacuum now gratefully and encouragingly being filled by those outside its walls)

To further reinforce my point, I came across a reference in Val Webb's book *“In Defence of Doubt”*. Here she is quoting the world-renowned religious scholar, Karen Armstrong, who unbeknown to me, (and I have done some research to find that this is so) in 2007 was awarded a monetary TED award to pursue her dream of a global community, where people live together in mutual respect:

Val writes, in introducing the charter, which I'll read in a moment, she says:

“While religions should be at the forefront of this, many focus instead on secondary issues of sexual practice and obtuse doctrinal definitions. Out of this concern Armstrong has initiated a Charter for Compassion, written by leaders across religions.

Of course, she's an expert on Islam, Judaism as well as Christianity – in fact she claims that her moment of enlightenment came when she first delved into Judaism and Islam. So, she's calling for restoration of the Golden Rule to the heart of religions to counter voices of extremism intolerance and hatred.

Armstrong's Charter reads:

Compassion impels us to work tirelessly to alleviate the suffering of our fellow creatures, to dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and put another there, and to honour the inviolable sanctity of every single human being, treating everybody, without exception, with absolute justice, equity and respect. To act or speak violently out of spite, chauvinism or self-interest, to impoverish, exploit or deny basic rights to anybody and to incite hatred and denigrating others—even our enemies--- is a denial of our common humanity. We acknowledge that we have failed to live compassionately and that some have even increased the sum of human misery in the name of religion.

I fear the painful events of the past weeks have only added weight to the last sentence. As Armstrong has been quoted as saying: *sadly sometimes religious people prefer to be right, rather than compassionate.*

As we enter this period of lent together, as a small but significant community, we can be truly grateful that the essence of these messages are not lost on those here today who so passionately share the themes I have chosen to highlight. Compassion and Justice often exercised against prevailing Authority.

Compassion and the need for justice motivates and drives significant action by many gathered here today. Visitation of detention centres, refugee advocacy, aligning with organisations such as Greenpeace, care for the earth, climate change advocacy, the Sydney Alliance and its concern for homelessness and many more examples of individual acts of compassion caring and kindness.

My personal capacity for compassion was often severely tested when I was fortunate to embark on a serendipity career as a Financial Counsellor when I retired from mainstream business life. This resulted in over 7 years of hands on appreciation and advocacy on behalf of families and individuals burdened with debt and its many significant consequences (a window onto a world of woe), mental health, single parent families and domestic violence - just some aspects for which I now have a much greater understanding. For me it was a master class in compassion in action, an opportunity for which I shall be forever grateful

To return for a moment to our social researcher, when he attempts to answer his own question "*How might we build a culture of compassion?*" I think Ward summed it up by saying: a pattern of Attitudes and Disposition. I find that fits well with a culture of compassion. I need to say at this point, it is my personal experience that folk that I have known drawn from both conservative and progressive traditions do show incredible and amazing role models for exercising Justice and Compassion.

So, finally, let us all leave this place today with a continued resolve in ways large and small to embrace "A culture of compassion"

Compassion inevitably calls us to venture beyond boundaries, just as in Jesus day the call to step outside tribal boundaries was so earth shattering in its concept.

The reading from Romans concludes with the words: "*everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.*" As a small but vital Christian community our combined compassion is in the name of the Lord, to a world where people are suffering increasing levels of social isolation.

As the words of the first verse we will join in singing now remind us:

"We are your people; Spirit of Grace, you dare to make us to all our neighbours, Christ's living voice, hands and face".