

Ethical Decision making....rules or justice focussed

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 4 October, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Dr Des Perry

Pentecost 18A

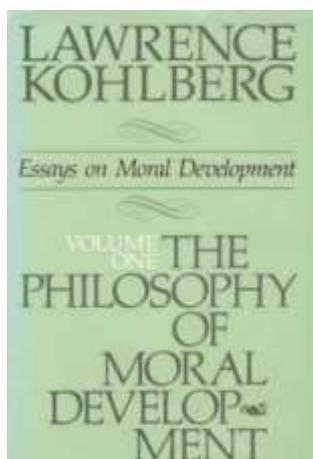
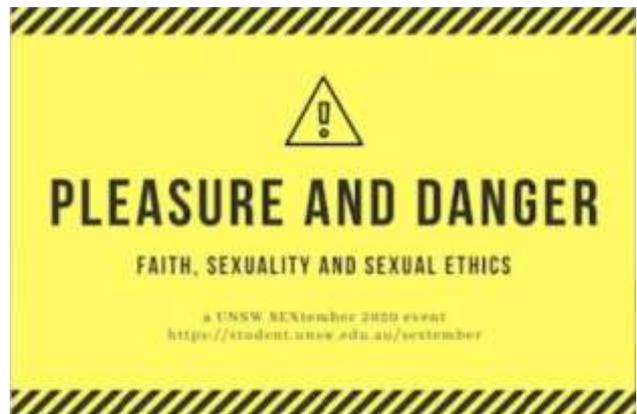
Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

In this reflection I want to focus on the idea of what is “right or wrong”, looking briefly at the Ten Commandments from the reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, and the views expressed by St Paul in the letter to the Philippians. As you will see, the ideas in these sacred texts form a basis for an analysis of the parable of the murderous tenants from the Gospel. You will of course realise that I am eminently qualified to speak on this topic because of my obsession with TV crime shows such as Law and Order, Midsomer Murders and of course Vera.

I will then share with you some of the ideas I presented on 21 September at the Zoom SEXTember Festival conducted by the UNSW.

The topic was *Pleasure and Danger: Faith Sexuality and Sexual Ethics*. It was about how LGBTI people navigate the various faith traditions: Buddhism, Islam, Unitarian Atheist and Christianity.



I represented you, the congregation of Pitt Street Uniting Church, so you are entitled to know what I said on your behalf. Part of this presentation referred to Lawrence Kohlberg’s Stages of Moral Development, which you might find directly relate to the three readings we have heard today – about moral decision making – deciding what is right or wrong.

Finally I want to focus on how more recent rethinking on theology, enables us to reimagine a different way of viewing right or wrong, referring to the parable of the murderous tenants, and how we might apply this in our lives.

Many of you will know that 21 years ago my partner and I entered into a contract agreement with two women friends, to conceive a child together. The agreement outlined parental and guardianship rights and obligations for all parties including naming, financial obligations, contact, extended family, travel, birth certificate, baptism, schooling, domicile and testamentary arrangements.

It was an attempt to encapsulate the basis of what us being parents entailed for both the child and the four parents. Naturally, the hope was that the signed agreement would not have to be referred to, and that the joint parenting would just occur in a natural, flexible and mutually respectful way. In other words the agreement would only be required in the event of a dispute between the parties or the relationships going off course.

Our son was born 19 years ago, but unfortunately there were a number of breaches to the agreement immediately, and despite requests for mediation, litigation commenced just 8 months after he was born. Bob and I had to proceed with litigation if we were to secure any parental contact with our son. At appeal the High Court decided that “*we had a right to be heard*” on the basis of the signed agreement as a statement of intent, my name being listed on the Birth certificate as the father, and an Article of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child – that a child has a right to contact with both parents. 1 year and 11 months after our son’s birth, a family court order made me a guardian, and granted contact arrangements.

The Ten Commandments outlined in the Hebrew Scriptures, are a similar agreement, as they were an attempt to give the Hebrew people or nation a sense of cultural identity. It was an attempt to encapsulate the basis on what being a member of the Hebrew people/nation entailed specifically in relationship to God and neighbour. Naturally the hope was that the “commandments set in stone” would not have to be referred to, and that being part of the religious community would occur in a natural, flexible and mutually respectful way.

In other words the commandments would be a reference point if things went off course. We can see this in the way that the psalmist of Psalm 19, also set for today, viewed the Law, not as burden or drudgery but as a source of celebration. I use the Hebrew name for God used in this psalm.

*The law of ADONAI is flawless, restoring and refreshing the soul or inner-self;
The statutes of ADONAI are reliable and trustworthy, making wise the thoughtless.
The precepts of ADONAI are right, bringing joy to the heart;
The commands of ADONAI are radiant, enlightening the eyes.
The reverence, respect and awe for ADONAI is good, enduring forever;
The decrees of ADONAI are firm and all of them are righteous.
They are more precious than gold, yes, than much pure gold;
They are sweeter than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.*

The legendary Moses narrative is said to have occurred between the 13 and 17th century BCE. But the story was written down during or soon after the Babylonian captivity of the 5th to 6th Century BCE. Another time, another place, when the sense of cultural identity was important to the Hebrew people or nation. It resonates with the contemporaneous view attributed to the prophet Micah, where it was stated “*Human; human being, you have already been told what is good, what Adonai demands of you — no more than to act justly, love mercy, grace and kindness and walk humbly in fellowship with your God*”. This must surely be what St Paul describes as the righteousness which comes from God through faith.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul of Tarsus credentialed himself by stating how committed he was to the letter of the law, excluding, rejecting and persecuting those who were strangers and outsiders, having gone through the right rituals, being of the right tribe, being a diligent scholar, enthusiastic for religious purity, and all together righteous or faultless.

Never-the-less, in retrospect, he considered all of this as garbage. Garbage compared to the new revelation or understanding he has awoken to. He sees himself on a different path – a new striving – a journey rather than having reached his goal or having arrived at his destination. It is a much less sure and a much more flexible position of discovery, as he enters into a relationship with the Christ focussed on justice and mercy.

The parable of the murderous tenants would make a great “Law and Order” episode. There are beatings, killings, plottings and loads of motive – the biggest being that if the land owner has no heir then the tenants can claim ownership. They can claim ownership of the property, according to the law of the day.

Most conservative commentators want to assert that the land owner is God, the vineyard is Israel, the tenants are the religious leaders of the time, the servants and slaves are the prophets, the son is Jesus, and that the new tenants, are the new Christian sect. There is a major flaw in presenting this as a *fait accompli* and the only explanation of the story. It undoes the whole purpose of a parable – an open ended story where the hearer is challenged to make what they will of the narrative.

This set of stories in Matthew’s Gospel, about Jesus telling parables, was written down between 40 and 60 years after the Easter events. By then the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, the main place of pilgrimage, had already been demolished. The synagogues, spread throughout the Roman Empire were the main places of worship. In the first instance Christians were a sect of Judaism.

There are many odd aspects to this parable which is why it would be wrong to extend the allegory too far – to try and read too much into it. The main issue seems to be that this land owner is rather peculiar and somewhat counter cultural. No right minded land owner would put up with tenants abusing and indeed killing their servants or slaves, when there was an agreement about what rent was owed to the land owner.

Never-the-less the land owner sends three lots of messengers – all with the same result, including the murder of the land owner’s son. This is an outrageous chain of events. However, this is a very patient landowner - some would say overly merciful. Jesus asks the question “*when the land owner comes, what will he or she do to those tenants?*” He does not answer the question and nor does he say that God is the land owner who will bring harsh retribution.

No! It is the listeners who want retribution. They want an eye for an eye, and they want new tenants given the opportunity to produce the fruit.

The writer of the Gospel, is aware that the Jerusalem temple has been torn down, and of the Easter events, and so he has Jesus speaking about a new cornerstone – one that even the builders may have rejected, because perhaps it didn’t meet their specifications or expectations. Something new is being built, the old way is being smashed, and the new approach is for people who will produce the fruit. This story is a challenge to the rules based approach to religion and to a more flexible justice-focussed approach to what is right or wrong.

By way of illustration, sexuality has often been the flash point between conservative Christians and a more liberal and egalitarian wider Christian and non-Christian community. The religious discrimination legislation being mooted, and of course the marriage equality plebiscite were and are examples of such flashpoints. In the September presentation I spoke about three aspects:

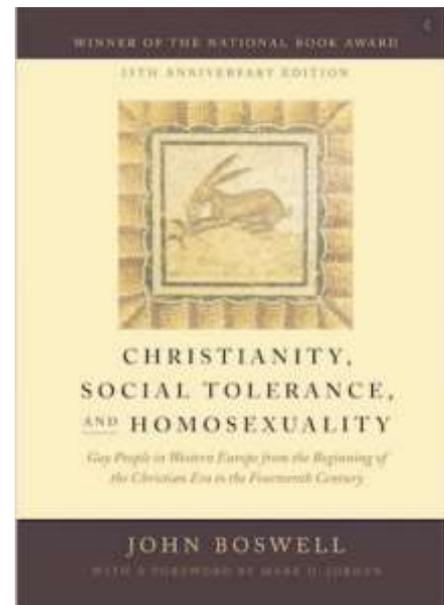
Firstly - sex and pleasure as a new phenomenon that Christianity has failed to appreciate.

Secondly - the relationship between stages of moral development and the dangers of recent Christian thought on sexuality and its impact on my personal journey.

And thirdly, the future – where do we go from here? – Christianity and progressive thought.

To paint the context:

The Judaeo-Christian attitudes to sex, and LGBTI sexuality in particular, are far from set in concrete, having gone through countless cycles over the centuries. The research undertaken by historian John Boswell published in his 1980 book *“Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality”* showed that in the first 18 centuries of Christianity there was a far less negative focus on queerness than has occurred in the past two centuries.



Secondly, sex and sexuality were pretty dire at the times of writing down the Judaeo-Christian scriptures (between 900BCE and 110 CE). Women and slaves were treated as belongings to be used up, polygamy for men was common, there was no contraception, people were living in crowded extended family environments - and for the heterosexually minded men (who for the most part wrote the scriptures and formulated doctrine and dogma) the concept of sexual orientation was far from their thoughts.

With the exception of a few deep friendships between men and between women, stories of homoerotic sexuality are simply absent in the religious writings. A miniscule number of abusive homosexual assaults or rituals are proffered and were considered examples of the wickedness of foreigners and strangers – especially the fertility cult religions. Israelites, and later the Christians, thought it important to stand apart from these pagan expressions.

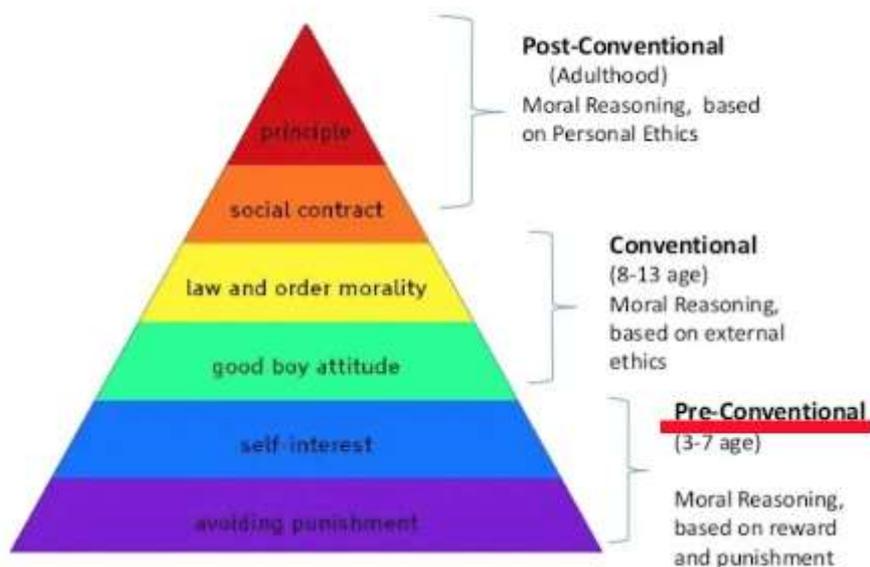
Thirdly, more recent, but none the less flawed Christian concepts of sexuality, marriage, monogamy, and morality were proposed in the 19th and 20th centuries with a much stronger homophobic focus. Christian fundamentalism was a reaction to the perceived threat of scientific knowledge. It was a digging in.

The Victorians, and before them the “Pilgrim Fathers”, have a lot to answer for for the spread of negative attitudes towards sex and sexuality throughout the British Empire, and throughout the United States. Christian fundamentalism took these small number of negative references to homosexual sex (exclusively between men) and re-contextualised them.

They took these often ancient culturally specific, somewhat obscure and indefinite writings and asserted that they referred definitively to inverts, Nancy boys, and to “the love than dare not speak its name”. This is the legacy which has permeated nearly all parts of Christianity – West and East, Roman Catholics, Protestants and Pentecostals.

In my own Life’s Journey as a gay Christian, my thinking and experience resonates with the stages of Moral Development proposed by Lawrence Kohlberg in the 1950’s and 60’s. Despite criticism that it is culturally and gender biased, I find it useful as a structure for understanding my developing reconciliation between my sexuality and religious faith. It also forms a basis by which I have been able to critique the flawed Christian thinking of the past, which were a danger to my sense of self, my place in the religious community and my life enjoyment.

Time does not allow in-depth overview of the theory but leave it to you to explore whether I have done it justice in my summary:



In stage 1, Children accept and believe the rules of authority figures without question, but may move on to consider consequences of not obeying. There is a fluidity from “do or think what I tell you to” to “what might happen if I don’t” – what is in it for me. So it’s about reward and punishment.

In the second stage, a kind of peer pressure within the community is the focus. As a child matures their sense of right or wrong is tied to personal and societal relationships. Children continue to accept the rules of authority figures, but this is now because they believe that this is necessary to ensure positive relationships and societal order – avoiding personal disapproval and acting for the common good. The focus here is on sameness, or a kind of cultural identity.

In the third stage, a person’s sense of morality is based on abstract principles and values – flexibility. People now believe that some laws are unjust and should be challenged, changed or eliminated. The focus here is on diversity, mutual respect for difference – and justice is the goal,

As a child and adolescent I think that I was stuck in stages 1 and 2, which lead to a lot of angst. A lot of self-doubt, denial of pleasure and ultimately to me remaining in the closet until my late 20’s. I resent this self-rejection which was imposed on me by religious institutions and people who were themselves stuck in an immature stage of moral development.

The danger for me and other LGBTI people is that much of Christian belief and action is based on religious people being unable to move to a mature moral thinking process, because they were overly focussed on certainty as sacrosanct, and on ill-informed understandings of sex and sexuality. In essence the key to reducing danger for LGBTI people in the religious community rests on the extent to which the community of faith is able to question long held beliefs, stories, rituals and dogma many of which are not found, or are not central, to their religious scriptures, history or tradition.

In the late 20th Century and up to today there has been a growing line of theological thought within Christianity which is termed “progressive”. It is not an attempt to scientifically explain religious stories – or explain them away (a common approach in the mid-20th Century called liberal theology) - but a reclaiming and re-imagining and of stories, to apply to a 21st century world – a post-modern world.

The premise is that religious stories are told and then later written in a cultural context in time and place. The challenge is to take the story and see if it applies in a new cultural context. And then to decide if the story is - or is not - culturally appropriate to our time and place. Whether it does or does not apply is a learning moment as it challenges our values and beliefs about meaning and application.

In relation to sexuality, and other divisive issues such as race, ethnicity, indigenous people’s rights and inclusion, environmental degradation, sexual abuse, climate change, economic management and refugees, it is based on scientific knowledge and research, but also acknowledges the power of story and narrative. It starts on the basis of a respect of difference and of diversity, and works backwards to reclaim stories of inclusion, equality, and Justice.

Just as the negro slaves of the southern USA reclaimed the stories of Moses and the slaves of Egypt as a sign of hope for emancipation and for equality, so LGBTI and other marginalised people emerge with their own stories of freedom, safety and celebration.

*“Human being, you have already been told what is good,
what Adonai demands of you —
no more than to act justly,
love mercy, grace and kindness
and walk humbly and in fellowship with your God”.*