

On Being Right

Hazel McHaffie

I like visual images.

I have a simple mind, and pictures help to anchor my thoughts, so that the gist of the message stays with me. Ahh yes, I remember the talk was about ... time ... or stained-glass windows ... or running marathons ... And that visual image prompts a thought process – a bit like a mind map, I suppose – linking the points made from that starting point. And the older I get, the more I appreciate these aides-memoire.

So, today I want to give you an image to hold in your head. And I want to link it to a take-away message.

The image is that of a tricycle. And the message? I want to suggest that there are more important things than being right.

So, the tricycle...

The inspirational writer, Franciscan friar, Richard Rohr, compares Christian faith to a tricycle. He says, we're guided by three wheels – experience, tradition and the Bible. But for him, experience is the front wheel. Why? Because it's through our experience that we understand our traditions and the Bible.

Author and Professor of Philosophy, Jared Byas, takes this analogy further: he says, each of the three informs the others. And this squares with my own experience; yours might bring you to a different place.

So today I want to explore with you how I've tried to steer my personal tricycle through the years, and why I think our community hasn't always got the balance quite right.

In my growing up years, I was taught that all the answers were in the Bible. And it was incumbent on each one of us to know it thoroughly, inside out, so we could quote chapter and verse in answer to every issue. In our family we played games to help to imprint Biblical facts in our heads. I still remember the blind rote answers I knew off pat to some of the questions.

Who slew a lion in a pit on a snowy day? *Benaiah*.

Another question was about the depth of the water the man in Ezekiel was measuring with his rod: To this day I recall the exact words on the card, *Ankle, knee, thigh, water to swim in*. I ran them all into one long word, but I understood nothing whatever of the context or meaning. I'm not criticising those who taught me; it was my deficiency not grasping the difference between head knowledge and real understanding. I was on a unicycle. The Bible was my mode of transport.

This was reinforced by the weekly proofs. Every Sunday School lesson required us to find verses to 'prove' doctrinal points. Memorise them. Be able to quote them under exam conditions. All from the AV of course. All without context. All by rote. But back then, I had supreme confidence that all the things we were being taught could indeed be 'proved'. I placed all my trust in my unicycle. I had right on my side. Even my baptismal interview was a long quiz about my Biblical head knowledge. At no point did anyone ask me why I wanted to be baptised.

But as I grew up, left home, moved to new pastures, I came into contact with people who'd come from different backgrounds, who'd reached different conclusions, people who reckoned they too were right, that they could prove their points. I listened, I pondered, and I felt my unicycle start to wobble.

I also became more analytical about tradition – why we had to do things in a certain way because that's what our church did. These other Christians had their traditions too, their second wheel. Bicycles rather than unicycles. Potentially more stable because they have two wheels to balance on, extra support to carry us along the road of life.

And even when we add in experience as a third wheel, those back two wheels have to be the same size and move in tandem to function properly, don't they? And so it is with Biblical knowledge and the traditions which characterise our particular brand of Christianity. They fit on the same axle. Together they steer us along the path of life in the church.

'Here, in our church, we do things this way because the Bible and our constitution or our statement of faith say so.' And we do need cohesion, that common ground, that marrying of the two, to function smoothly as a community. If we were all making it up as we went along, our journeys would be terribly fragmented and uneven and unworkable, wouldn't they? We would lose our identity.

But at the point in my life where my understanding was being challenged, I certainly didn't feel I had it all sewn up. What's more, this church I belonged to constantly told me I wasn't right. I was in the wrong, and sinful, and I must change. So, experience was threatening my security, rocking my balance, playing a much bigger role in my thinking and my understanding of the Bible and our traditions. My front wheel was, for now, much more dominant than hitherto. A few examples might help to illustrate my point.

Instability

In my professional life, I worked in the NHS¹ in various capacities. I listened to many, many people in real trouble. And over time, my slick, learned responses developed jagged edges and hollow insides.

Not long after I began my studies, when I was still in my teens, a tragedy in our family – the death of a young relative in his twenties – made me jam on my brakes. Oh wowwwah! My vehicle wasn't so stable any more. The Bible didn't have all the answers to the questions I was now asking. Church tradition gave cold comfort. Experience of real life destabilised me.

And then I got it very wrong myself, in my own life experience. Even my front tyre wasn't as robust as I might have hoped. It was 50 years ago. I sat across the desk from a consultant paediatrician hearing him say that my little baby boy, aged only three weeks, would not live. And even if, by some miracle, he were to survive, he'd be seriously impaired, both physically and mentally. I can still remember – vividly – going home on the bus that night, praying that if the doctors were right in their prognosis, our baby son would die rather than face a life with severe disabilities. Back then parents weren't involved in decision making; nowadays, I'd have been asked what I wanted to happen next. And I'd have been so wrong. Because ... that baby survived. He's now 50 years old, perfectly normal, physically and mentally, with nothing worse than flat feet to contend with! He's an active, productive, successful man, a husband, a father, and a much-loved son.

However, though I might indeed have been wrong in my judgement, in this instance, I was nevertheless motivated by love. Because, unbearable as it felt to contemplate losing our precious

¹ National Health Service

baby, my over-riding concern was for him. I would survive the devastating grief; but I didn't want him to suffer.

In my professional life, some years later, I moved from working in clinical practice to medical ethics. And here too, the stability of my tricycle was in doubt; experience radically altered my direction of travel. Let me try to explain.

The dictionary definition of ethics is moral principles that govern a person's behaviour or the conducting of an activity. And inherent within that is a judgement about what's right and what's wrong. So, as you can see, I have a vested interest in this whole issue of 'being right'. But a curious thing happened – the reverse of what you might expect, in fact. The more I examined right and wrong, the less black and white my own opinions became. The more I knew, the more I realised I didn't know.

Although there are certain moral principles that obtain across the board, in real life, medical dilemmas throw up so many nuances, that we so often end up saying 'Well, it's not categorical, it depends ...' What's right in one situation, for one family, for any given individual, is not necessarily right for another. And the more you know, the more this is the case.

William Shakespeare put it rather neatly in *As You Like it*: *The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool.*

Naturally enough, my interest in ethics has influenced how I think about issues in the church too. Ethical questions underpin topics like abortion, assisted dying, homosexuality, transgender issues, relationships, dementia, infertility, oppression, misogyny ... you know the kind of things that exercise Christians everywhere, and our community is no exception. And sometimes here, an insistence on 'being right' can have dire consequences.

Far too often, well-meaning Christian people (who actually know very little about these subjects) do what I used to do – trot out verses completely out of context, and talk about things our church stands for, with no sensitivity to the profound emotions involved, no recognition of the advance of science and medical understanding since the Bible was written. And they dictate what is or is not acceptable. But they're relying on their interpretation of the Bible, and their understanding of church tradition. Their notion of 'right'. Even whole ecclesias can close ranks, and indeed their doors, against those struggling to come to terms with what's happening in their lives.

And in so doing they add heavy burdens to the shoulders of those who are already crushed by experience. Even to the point of driving them away at times. This grieves me sorely. Because experience tells me that what troubled people really need is love and compassion and support, from their spiritual families, not judgement. Our churches ought to be havens for the anxious and doubters. Or to borrow from a famous quote, hospitals for sinners, not museums for saints.

Compassion

It's a message we all ought to heed. As James says:

Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgement without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgement. (James 2:12-13)

Love matters more than proving that you're right. Compassion trumps head knowledge. And I personally believe that God's grace is sufficient for all.

As I say, I'm still on this journey too. Even in the last two years my direction has changed. But the pandemic has given me unexpectedly golden opportunities. Isolated at home, meeting others online, I've been free to be myself. Free to think rather than being constantly busy. Free to be honest, without fear of ruffling feathers or upsetting consciences or leading others astray. Free to attend other services, take part in lively debate, be part of worldwide discussion groups. Free to grow. I've been challenged to share my own thinking more openly. I've had time to read much more widely. I've tried to prise open my mind to allow it to consider all sorts of alternative ways of seeing things. I've mended the tyres on my tricycle.

And as I travel – now with more confidence, it has to be said – I find I naturally gravitate to those people who don't pontificate; who also leave room for manoeuvre. They too have helped me evolve. They've helped me see blind spots. To re-examine the baggage I've stored in my panniers.

And gradually, through this process, I've come to a new sense of wonder. I don't need to have all the answers. It's ok to say, 'I don't know'. I don't have to be right. The world doesn't stop revolving if I question or doubt. And I've found it so liberating to accept that reality. By locking myself into a religious fortress, I had somehow shrunk God to a size I could contain and

comprehend. Trusting in him despite my doubts and wonderings, opens the doors to a better appreciation of the amazingness of his grace.

But I think we also have to accept that we all see things differently. Remember those photos of dresses or shoes that circulated on social media a while back? Some people genuinely saw the dress as blue/black; others as white/gold. The shoes were pink and white to some people; grey and mint green to others. That was what they saw.

And certainly, when it comes to spiritual matters, no one has the monopoly on absolute right. The reality is, we all see through a glass darkly, as Paul reminds us:

For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. (1Cor 13:12)

Our understanding is always dim, always partial. And this applies to you, me, everyone, without exception. God's plans, his ways, his thoughts, are infinitely above ours.

Now, please don't think I'm suggesting that anything goes. Knowledge and wisdom from God's word form the bedrock of our faith and our church. But I really don't believe God is looking for me to be able to recite the names of the eunuchs in the Book of Esther, or to know the derivation of every obscure word, or to have a flawless argument to prove a case for every conceivable question. He wants to know I've done my best to understand the real truth of what he wants of, and for, me. He wants me to be the best person I can be, and to keep trying, even though I know I fail often.

I see this as a kind of wisdom-truth – the kind of truth that helps us navigate life well. It's the moral of the story, if you will.

Jesus knew this. In the Bible, he asks 307 questions – yep, somebody actually counted them! Someone actually wrote a book on the subject! He asks 307 questions. Other people asked him 183. He directly answers 3. He wasn't about giving categorical answers, in neat boxes, but rather about helping people, helping you and me, to make nuanced decisions. He was about influencing behaviour, not head knowledge. And I think that's what God's looking for from me: how knowing Jesus affects my behaviour. This pithy little quote gets to the heart of it, I think:

One of the most important things I've learned in life is to ignore most of what people say. I watch what they do instead. (Amanda Patterson)

If you were accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

Being, not Knowing

Søren Kierkegaard (a Danish philosopher and theologian) summed up what I'm trying to say about love mattering more than being right, rather well. He said:

What the goal should be, is to BE Christian, not to understand it. Trying to be right keeps us from loving like Jesus. (Søren Kierkegaard)

I want to repeat that bit: Trying to be right keeps us from loving like Jesus.

Jesus was all about action, about behaviour, about being. It's a sobering thought, isn't it, for those of us brought up to believe we were the only ones who'd got things sewn up; we were right!

But it's a picture that's reiterated several times in the letters of John: Words don't cut it. We shouldn't just believe in love, we should walk in it.

Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth. (1John 3:18)

It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us. (2John 4)

I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth. (3John 4)

And this isn't using 'the truth' in the sense some people use it, to mean 'our particular set of doctrines'. 'The truth' is Jesus.

I am the way and the truth and the life. (John 4:16)

We should walk in him. Being Christ-like is something that should characterise our ordinary, everyday, walking-around lives.

And it's an ongoing process. We are all in the process of becoming. It's a journey, a process of discovery, balancing on all three wheels of our tricycles. How close is our real self to the self we want to be? We each need to be authentic, true to ourselves, aware of our imperfections, ready to change. I've certainly been struggling to accept all my life that it's ok to be myself; to be honest, to be unsure, to be evolving.

But what's really comforting, I think, is the thought that there's beauty in imperfection. Think of the ancient Japanese art of repairing broken pottery, *Kintsugi*, where special tree sap lacquer dusted with powdered gold, silver, or platinum, is used, celebrating the unique history of each artefact by emphasising its fractures and breaks instead of hiding or disguising them. Or the

artists and craftsmen in various cultures who deliberately introduce flaws into their rugs to remind themselves that blemishes are an integral part of being human.

Most of us don't need to manufacture imperfections in ourselves, and I'm most certainly in that category. The flaws are there. We need to work at being the best version of ourselves we can be. And we need to acknowledge this reality in the way we treat others who also have their weaknesses.

There's some very useful advice on this in Romans 14. A fair summary might be: Don't quarrel over disputable matters: ask rather, does salvation depend on this?

Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarrelling over disputable matters... You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you treat them with contempt? For we will all stand before God's judgement seat... Therefore let us stop passing judgement on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. (Rom 14:1,10,13)

It's not about head knowledge. It's not about being right. It's about how we are living our lives, putting our faith into action. To quote Richard Rohr again:

We do not think ourselves into new ways of living, we live ourselves into new ways of thinking. (Richard Rohr)

And when it comes to showing love and not forcing our point of view, we have the perfect example. The one who put love above everything. He didn't say, tell everyone how right you are. He said: Love. Love God. Love your fellow humans. It doesn't require certainty on our part – being right – only confidence. And that's what faith is. Not certainty in *what* we know, but confidence in *who* we know.

Back to our take-home message. There are indeed more important things than being right.

If you have to choose between being kind and being right, choose kind and you will always be right.