

Ethics, Emotion, Empathy

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Come with me, if you will, to a Scottish wedding. It's going to be the complete deal with kilts and bagpipes and eightsome reels! Outside it's one of those relentlessly wet days that makes hat-brims sag, and all those carefully-crafted ringlets unravel. But inside, there's joy in the air. The service is really emotional – even the bride's Dad is in tears.

Because of the rain, everyone stays indoors for the photos and reception drinks, so there's lots of greeting and hugging and chatter, and the mood is high when we eventually enter the dining area for a full and very delicious meal.

Seated on my right is a lady from a conservative branch of our church whom I know by sight; now I have plenty of time to get to know her better. Steer clear of religious topics, and all should be well. And all does go well, until she asks me what I do. "I'm a researcher in medical ethics," I say. Well, you'd have thought I'd said 'lap dancer' or 'public executioner'! She rises up in her seat and leans away from me, before saying in tones of righteous indignation, "I don't know how you can possibly do that! There's nothing to research. We ... have ... all the answers." I'm afraid she takes me so much by surprise, I'm rendered speechless.

This happened some 20 years ago, but I've never forgotten it. Her summary was so far away from my experience. The more I studied the subject, the less black-and-white the issues became; there always seemed to be exceptions to the rules, grey areas, caveats. And the more I looked at ethical issues in a religious context, the less I felt everything was signed, sealed and delivered.

In the cold light of an ordinary day, of course, and in a different setting, I would have defended my subject at a very fundamental level. Ethics and morals are concerned with principles and conduct; how we make wise decisions in our everyday lives; what's good and right at both an individual and societal level. Isn't that what living a Christian life is also about? And in

both the secular world and the religious, rules and principles must be applied with sensitivity and care. And that's what I want to talk about today.

I've had the great privilege of running workshops around ethical questions in a variety of settings, and I've been impressed and greatly heartened by the responses I've seen at the Christadelphian events – thoughtful, open minded, with a willingness to accept there might be more than one way to look at these difficult issues. But this tends to be a self-selected group. Sadly, there are still too many people who say the answer to everything is in the Bible, and it's categorical. "It says x, y or z in Isaiah 63 or Romans 11." End. Of. Discussion.

On an intellectual and personal level, it's disheartening; on a practical, real-life level, it's positively harmful.

Let me illustrate. Take Joe Right, a very well-intentioned, much-respected, church elder. He's one of those people who has everything buttoned up. His line is: The Bible prohibits the taking of innocent human life. The Bible says that the life of a foetus or baby is innocent. The Bible prohibits the taking of innocent embryonic or foetal life. Ergo: abortion is wrong.

He flicks from Exodus 20 and 21, to Deuteronomy 30, Psalm 139, Isaiah 44, Jeremiah 1, Matthew 5 and Luke 1. A single verse here; three verses there. Utterly convinced. Leaving no margin for doubt. But all without reference to either literary or historical context, or human emotion. His intentions may well be entirely praiseworthy. He may be trying to show consistent leadership – to guard against worldly influence. But sadly, what comes across is that he has no concern for the sensitivities of people for whom these issues and choices are real and tragic.

Think of ...

- The disabled woman with learning difficulties who can't even care for herself, never mind a baby.
- The distraught teenager, who's a victim of incest.
- The older mother of four, whose mental health is seriously compromised already.
- The young wife who's just been told her longed-for unborn baby has a fatal abnormality, and she faces a terrible choice: abort now, or carry to term and watch her precious infant die within hours of delivery.

That's where I see serious damage being done.

Maybe Joe Right's never even *thought about*, certainly never met, any of these situations. For him, abortion equates to sexual promiscuity. Maybe he's an alpha male who simply can't bring

himself to say, “I don’t know.” Maybe it hasn’t occurred to him that Jesus said nothing at all about abortion.

I saw a challenging quote recently:

ABORTION: the only word that can make followers of Jesus vote against everything Jesus ever talked about, because of one issue he never talked about!!

Maybe Joe really does believe the Bible is a rule book and medical textbook and scientific treatise all rolled into one. But this is where I should hold my hands up, too. I was raised on a diet of proof texts. Every Sunday we had to find verses to prove points, learn them off by heart, be able to regurgitate both reference and exact words for exam purposes. I used to quote them blindly without context when I was a teenager. And I believed my arguments were incontrovertible – they were PROOFS after all! – there, indelibly, in the Bible. From the safety of my naivety, I thought I had right on my side in any dispute, as long as I stuck to the text. The Bible says...

However, time, and experience, and a lot of heart searching have brought me to a very different place now.

- The depressed young man who sees no future and craves the oblivion of death...
- the family who are at their wits’ end with an elderly demented relative who constantly gets into dangerous situations...
- the abused wife who cowers in the locked bathroom as her husband comes up the garden path...
- the parents who will do anything – anything – to save the life of their sick child
- the adolescent who turns away from religion because she sees a complete mismatch between what’s said on the platform and what goes on behind closed doors...

They’ve all taught me that life is messy, there are very few rigid boxes, one size rarely fits all. Context matters, details matter – in both biblical response and real life. And let’s not pretend these things wouldn’t, couldn’t, happen within our own community. They can; they do.

By both nature, and training in my professional life, I’m a listener, and I know from people who’ve confided in me – vulnerable people who are grappling with major challenges in their lives, big questions of conscience – that stalwarts like Joe Right in their own neck of the woods have said things that, far from comforting, have added greatly to the burden they carry.

- When your child has just died, it's harrowing to be made to feel he has paid the price for your failings.
- When you're facing a major decision about a life-limiting illness, it's demoralising to hear this is God trying to teach you a lesson.
- When you're in the depths of depression, it's crushing to be advised you have only to pray and read your Bible, and all will be well.

Whatever the anguish, it's soul-destroying to be told you have somehow earned disaster; you have failed. And sometimes it's not a specific answer to a specific question, but condemnation of a complete way of life. And here I'm thinking particularly about issues relating to sexuality or gender.

(Why is it that Christians are so hung up on sexual matters? Our Lord wasn't. Remember his gentle way with prostitutes and adulterers and the marginalised? And the very same passages in the epistles that talk about same sex relationships, also list greed and idolatry and envy and gossip. Oh dear! Jesus' words echo uncomfortably: "*Let him that is without sin cast the first stone.*" But that's a whole subject in itself.)

To return to those who are most commonly singled out nowadays, homosexuals, how desperately sad it is to hear: "I dare not tell the ABs in my ecclesia." Or: "I'd be ostracised or even thrown out if I let anyone know."

Too many conflicted individuals have turned away from the community they grew up in because they hear texts – again, often no more than a couple of verses – trotted out without sympathy or wriggle room – Sodom and Gomorrah, 1 Corinthians 6, Romans 1 – telling them they are amongst the "wicked who will not inherit the kingdom." Again, with no reference to context, not to mention a nod in the direction of modern scientific understanding of sexuality.

As a Democrat senator memorably said to a staunchly conservative and devout Roman Catholic mother of seven children, who was running for high office in the United States: "Dogma lives loudly within you."

In some cases, I'm sure, dogmatism stems from inherent insecurity, and the fear that lies behind a constant need and longing to be certain. Black and white, tidy complete answers, feel safe. Closing the box. Once you start saying, "Well, it depends," the edges become wavy. Opening the lid to a softer, less clear-cut approach, and where will that end?

For me, it could well end in a kinder and more empathetic form of Christianity – less judgemental, gentler, more forgiving, more loving and caring. All the things that pervade the whole of the gospel message brought by Jesus. Because there are far, far more references to love and compassion in the Bible than there are specific texts which appear to condemn certain behaviours. Hundreds more. Literally. And I say “appear to condemn,” because too often texts are taken completely out of context and quoted as if they are universal incontrovertible commands written in English by the very hand of God.

The world of the Bible was completely different from that of modern times.

- Devils caused mental illness and epilepsy and bent spines and heavy bleeding in those days ... remember?
- Assisted conception was taking your wife's handmaid into your tent.
- Assisted dying meant a tent peg through your temple.
- Organ transplantation ...?
- Vaccination ...?
- Persistent vegetative state ... ?
- Ambivalent gender identity?

All unheard of. And yet, thousands of years on, with all we now know about medicine, science and psychology, judgements – judgements carved in stone – are still made, based entirely on instructions or letters by and to those who were of that time.

All these observations make me very sad, because the image that's projected is of a God who is punitive, inflexible, narrow-minded, bent on moulding a tiny minority of his creation into a rigid uniform shape. And this isn't the God I believe in at all.

The God Jesus told us about, the God he showed us, is merciful and loving and full of compassion. Not willing that any should perish. Watching and waiting with open arms for his erring sons and daughters to turn to him. Jesus himself didn't condemn the troubled, the weak, the downtrodden, the guilty. He brought opprobrium down on his own head by deliberately consorting with such socially-unacceptable people ... listening to them ... caring for them ... helping them. No, the people he reserved his strongest condemnation for, were the Pharisees and elders, who were so blinkered by laws and rigid interpretation, and their own righteousness and superiority, that they could see no room for flaws or human weakness or imperfection. As the apostle Paul might say to us: “Such were some of you.”

There's nothing like personal experience for teaching us hard lessons. But of course, we can't, and won't, experience every situation or dilemma personally – although regrettably that doesn't necessarily stop Joe Right pontificating! And even where we do endure hard knocks, our reality won't be exactly the same as someone else's. Our own history, our upbringing, our personal faith, will colour and influence our reactions and responses.

It's never wise to say, "I know exactly how you feel."

"No, you don't. You're not me. Come alongside, by all means; share your wisdom if that's useful; empathise if you can; but please don't tell me how I feel, and certainly don't force me to conform to your solution. I need to find my own way through this mess."

And one way of learning sensitivity and awareness is to walk alongside others treading these difficult paths through life. With an open mind and a listening ear. There are plenty of personal stories out there to give us insight into lives lived in difficult circumstances – both real and fictional. Stories help our finite minds to grasp both temporal and eternal truths. They help us find meaning. Jesus himself used encounters with characters like Zacchaeus, and the blind man, and the widow in the temple; he used parables like the lost coin, the Good Samaritan, the publican at prayer, to teach us how to live the lives God wants of us.

Such stories inch us closer to the lived reality. Help us to develop understanding and sympathy and empathy. Stop us crashing in with hob-nailed boots to fracture the fragile hope and peace of mind others are desperately clinging to or seeking.

Just after the first lockdown in Scotland was eased, I was out for my morning constitutional, when I saw a very upright figure of a late-middle-aged woman cycling on an old-fashioned bike up the centre of the road. Even when the road divided at a roundabout, she remained in the middle, straddling and effectively blocking both lanes, so that no vehicles dared to pass her. She'd built up quite a tailback. And she made me think of those dogmatic blinkered people we all know, who hog the moral high ground, so sure they are right, and so vocal in their opinions, that they make it extremely difficult for others to bypass them and branch out to a different lane. They can potentially hold a whole community back from exploring a more enlightened way of treating others in trouble. They may well be unaware of current knowledge on a topic, or personally lacking in emotional sensitivity, or oblivious to the image they're projecting. But the effect of their responses is to compound a sense of frustration and guilt and hurt and alienation. Not just inconvenient, but positively damaging.

Of course, there are boundaries, just as there are rules of the road. And God's word is our highway code. But let's open our minds to the possibility we may not have all the answers.

Let's not fall into the trap of equating opinion and debatable interpretation with fundamental truth.

Let's not lose sight of the big picture of the message Jesus brought: one of amazing grace and bottomless love.

Let's open our doors to the troubled and needy, not close them behind the self-righteous few.

And may our Heavenly Father, whose mercy and compassion surpass our wildest dreams, give us all, humility, sensitivity and kindness, whenever we're considering what's right and wrong in this imperfect and flawed world.