

## On Being Right

*A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 29 January 2012, by David Gill. Readings for the fourth Sunday after the Epiphany were Deuteronomy 18:15-20, 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 and St Mark 1:21-28.*

The responsibilities of a prophet, in biblical times, were truly awesome. He was called and commissioned, as they saw it, to speak for God. Heavy stuff.

No wonder Jeremiah pleaded for the assignment to land on someone else: Lord, don't ask me, I'm only a kid, I don't know how to speak. No wonder Isaiah cringed at his utter inadequacy: Woe is me! I am lost! For I am a man of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen the King, the lord of hosts! No wonder Jonah ran from the very idea – literally! Commanded by the Lord to prophesy to the Assyrian city of Ninevah, Jonah took to his heels and raced off in the opposite direction, towards Tarshish instead.

The first reading, this morning, offered a glimpse into why the prophetic role was so scary. First, the true prophet was raised up by divine appointment, not anyone's personal inclination. Second, the prophet's task was to convey God's thoughts, not his own. Third, he could look forward to a mixed, often hostile, reception. Worst of all, he was under immense pressure to get the message right. Remember the way our Deuteronomy reading ended -- "Any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak – that prophet shall die".

Get it right – or else! There's a recipe for sleepless nights. Who in his right mind would want to be a prophet?

You and I, fortunately, don't belong to that club. We're not prophets, just ordinary mortals coping with the thrills and spills of everyday life. Yet we do have something in common with those great figures of biblical faith. For, in less dramatic ways, we too struggle to make sense of ourselves, our world, our relationships, our responsibilities. We, like them, are caught up in trying to get things right.

Which begs one mighty big question: how can we know what is right?

At one level, you might say, the answer is: conscience. We all have one. Use it. But those moral memory banks we call consciences have to be shaped and filled. Where to look for the necessary input? And consciences can be seriously miss-shaped. Where to find the necessary correction?

The Church offers a threefold answer to that.

*First, it says, immerse yourself in the faith of the bible.* Note: I'm not saying read the whole thing cover to cover – there are better ways of using your time. And I'm not suggesting you go hunting for proof texts that address whatever dilemma you're facing – a person can find a bible quote to prove anything, and anyway the bible is not a magic book full of readymade answers. Never forget that the bible bears the fingerprints of its authors – who like us were children of their own time, were shaped by their own cultures and had their own blind spots.

What's important is the bible as a whole, a remarkable collection of literature that links us across the centuries with an extraordinary community on its long and definitive journey of faith. When Bob carries the bible into St Stephen's at the start of every service, it's not just a quaint bit of ritual. It's an acknowledgement that the biblical story is our story too, a recognition that pondering these writings we too glimpse the mystery of grace.

*Second: you're not on your own.* Learn from the wisdom of the Church. Yes I know the Church has its faults. But it has its virtues too, lots of them. There's more wisdom and courage in the Church than its gets credit for. Greatness, even. Let this remarkable community be your teacher and guide.

True, it can be irritating when synods or assemblies, or outfits like the World Council of Churches, say something with which you don't agree. But maybe disturbance like that is God's way of shaking us up and saying: there's something important here that you're not seeing, something you're not feeling, something that's not registering on your radar screen. Being challenged by our fellow Christians, particularly those of other denominations, in other places and at other times, may sometimes make us uncomfortable. But it's good for us.

*Third, listen to what the best of human wisdom may be saying.* Don't let biblical assumptions alone determine your thinking about the legitimacy of slavery or whether the state should provide social welfare, about how to deal with psychiatric illness or what's the best treatment for leprosy, about whether women should speak in church or society legislate to permit same sex marriage. In two thousand years the world has learned a lot, thank God. It is still learning. We Christians had better make sure its insights find a place in the decisions we make and the consciences we form.

Sounds like a tall order? A tough assignment? A big ask?

Indeed it is. Many years ago Davis McCaughey, one of the founding fathers of the Uniting Church, was addressing a conference of the Australian Student Christian Movement. "Your Christian vocation," he told those students, "is to think till it hurts. Then think some more". Good advice, and not only for students. God didn't give us brains so we could leave them hanging on hooks outside the church door, but so they too could be brought into the service of Christ.

The bible. The guidance of the Church. The best of human wisdom. In the interaction of all three, we find the insights that should be shaping and correcting our consciences. But let me offer two bits of advice, for your struggle to get things right.

First: never, ever, lose sight of the fact that you could be wrong. The world has more than enough people who are 110% convinced they have the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. It does not need more fanatics.

Second, if you are going to make mistakes – and we all do -- try to ensure they are on the side of compassion, not condemnation; understanding, not judgement. If you err on the side of love, the gospel seems to suggest, you'll never go too far wrong.

For there is something more important than just being right.

St Paul reminded us of this, in today's second lesson. Remember it? One of the things causing tensions among those Christians in Corinth, apparently, was

whether they should eat food that had been involved in ritual offerings to idols – presumably meat from animals that had been slaughtered in temple sacrifices.

The “right answer” for Paul would have been: go ahead. We don’t believe in idols anyway. Such food has no magical power. So eat, drink and be merry. Enjoy.

But that’s not the answer Paul gives. Evidently, for some in the congregation the consumption of such food would have been very troubling indeed. Don’t ride roughshod over their sensitivities, he says. Take their feelings into account, and adjust the way you deal with this issue accordingly.

It’s an echo of how Jesus sat loose to the law – for example, when he taught the sabbath was made for people, not vice versa. Being right, whether in ethical behavior or in doctrine, must be set in the context of God’s person-centred caring. It’s not just about winning an argument, it’s about sensitivity to the people around us.

When getting things right is foremost in our minds, we almost always end up getting relationships wrong. That goes for conservatives, progressives and all the rest of us in between.

Remember today’s gospel? It suggests that Jesus got it right. He taught, we are told, “as one who had authority”. He didn’t rant and shout. He didn’t dazzle with his intellectual brilliance, mesmerize with his rhetoric or seduce with his story telling.

He was different. He spoke with a directness that touched people’s lives. He acted with a compassion that outweighed the law. He embodied a power that genuinely set people free. He lived with integrity a life that really did match his words.

God grant that you and I, and the Church today, may echo *that* kind of authority. Being faithful, for followers of the man of Nazareth, entails more than being right.

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