

7th October 2018

Thank God for forgiveness

Saturday's *Age* newspaper carried an article by Barney Zwartz from the *Centre for Public Christianity*. He addressed a perennial question that I am frequently asked about whether atheists can be as good as Christians. It is not uncommon for people who go to church to think that people who don't go to church couldn't possibly be as good as they are. And, of course, I have heard even more often the protest from people outside the church who insist they are better than many people they know who do go to church. So it's a pertinent question.

I love the way Zwartz put his answer so succinctly:

"Atheists certainly can be, and often are, as good as Christians – but only thanks to God, to whom they owe their understanding of good and their moral will."

Non-believers generally do not understand our Christian idea of human morality. Let's face it, many Christians don't either. But because we believe that every person is created in the image of God – giving every person inalienable worth and dignity – we believe every person has rational, moral and relationship awareness. It doesn't matter if a person acknowledges that those capacities have come from God or not.

To this effect Zwartz comments:

"However much we abuse these attributes, we can reason, we have a conscience, and we are made to love and relate to other people and to God."

It is up to each of us how diligently we reason, how carefully we inform and follow our conscience, and how generously we relate to others. Thus, when it comes to individuals, many non-believers do all these as well as Christians, while Christians obviously can fail badly.

In that respect he reminds me of a saying of William Wordsworth, who once expressed how sad he was for atheists, because when they see a beautiful sunset they don't know who to thank.

To the extent that a non-believer might protest that they fathomed out their own moral code, adamant that they owe nothing to religion, they are deluded. They have imbibed their values from the general culture in which they grew up, and absorbed them unconsciously. However much they might have adapted, or even rejected, such values later in life, they clearly imbibed their first principles from their Judaeo-Christian heritage.

This is one of the challenges for us living in a post-Christian world. Various Royal Commissions only highlight the extent to which we have too often failed to live up to values that are no longer being inculcated to succeeding generations.

The advantage we Christians have is that we know we are forgiven for our failings. The extent to which we are good is not a basis for merit, but for gratitude.

14th October 2018

Love God and your neighbour

This week's Gospel story is the one about the rich man who came to Jesus so sure of his own righteousness, but befuddled by the emptiness he still felt within. He desperately wanted assurance he would get into heaven, but Jesus pointed him to the need of his neighbours. And, at least at that moment, he wasn't able to make that shift and go there. It appears on the surface to be a story about money. I suggest it was a story about more than money. It was fundamentally a story about his disposition toward God and neighbour. His focus on material success quarantined him from recognising the greatest treasure of all – love for God and love for neighbour.

How much do you know about this bloke whose face adorns our \$50 note?

His name is David Unaipon. He was an indigenous evangelist. He was an inveterate reader as a child and grew up to be a remarkably intelligent and learned man with wide academic interests. Entirely self-educated, he was a natural scientist, who patented many scientific and technical inventions.



Newspapers dubbed him the 'black genius' and 'Australia's Leonardo.'

But for all his talents and eccentric interests, what he loved doing most was preaching the Gospel. He was an evangelist. With aboriginal people he preached in the Ngarrindjeri language but elsewhere he preached in English. And for all his learning he never lost touch with his Aboriginal roots, collecting and recording Aboriginal stories, and publishing books of Aboriginal legends.

It seems to me that for all his accomplishments he retained his first love for God and his people ... just as Jesus asked that rich man in our Gospel story to do. I think that is what he continues to call us to do.

21st October 2018

The fullness of God

A friend posted these thoughts this morning. They are so insightful and incisive of recent events in Canberra - a lack of due diligence in the senate, the ongoing awfulness of offshore detention, Adani, Fracking, ignoring the UN report on climate. So instead of writing my own column this week I offer these thoughts from Ps John Sharpe, my Church of Christ colleague in Ringwood (we've both since moved).

(Rev) Stan

"Creation explodes with energy, colour, generative possibilities and a rich excess of variety. There is not one kind of bird, but thousands, not one sound or song, but millions, not one kind of fish, but an extravagant universe of ways to be 'fishy', not one green plant but an explosive wonder of adaptability.

There is something about our origins in creation (however you might imagine that) that speaks right into the heart of community, neighbourhood, 'church' and family.

It is a strange thing on the face of the planet that despite our dynamic origins, human tribes tend to shrink the world right down into all the things that just seem most like them. The subjugation of the wild places, the rampant destruction of diverse ecosystems, the preference for mono-culture farming and mono-culture dominance, a sameness, a tameness and the oddness of animals we can dress up like children. The empires hungry for one language, one currency, one-way, one view, one type that all deny the inherent joyful imagination of God. The churches stifled in orthodoxy and face-forward, be quiet, shapeup or ship-out Black-Bibled aridness.

When Paul writes of the hope of the 'Body of Christ', he celebrates the ability of God to hold everything together for the outcomes, purposes and futures that we cannot imagine on our own. As messy as it often can seem we are better off in chaotic diversity than in a homogenised clump of bland. In a world of abundance, we somehow manage to look for the recognisable logos that promise predictable sameness.

I like a BIG TENT... there is room for everyone in the embrace and covering of God and it is really good for us to allow for 'otherness', because this is how we all grow and find the fullness of God."

John Sharpe

21st October 2018

The ultimate disruptor

Over recent times we have been hearing a lot about disruptive technologies. This includes things like Uber, MenuLog, Netflix, Cryptocurrencies and Airbnb just to name a few. A 'disruptive innovation' is defined as an innovation that creates a new market and value network and eventually disrupts an existing market and value network, displacing established market leaders and alliances. The term was defined and the phenomenon analysed by Clayton M. Christensen, beginning in 1995.

I've spent this morning in a workshop with the Rev. Assoc. Prof. Monica Melanchthon from our Pilgrim College pondering what we might preach in the coming season of Advent. We focused on the women who are part of the Advent stories in our scriptures. And to say that they are 'disruptive innovations' inserted in the text by our biblical writers is an understatement. I look forward to sharing some of those stories and pondering their meaning with the people at St. Andrew's during the Advent-Christmas season.

But we don't need to wait till then to encounter a story that disrupts the established values and systems of the time. This week the Gospel reading tells the story of how Jesus healed blind Bartimaeus as he and his disciples were leaving Jericho. You might remember that Jericho was the home of Rahab the whore who entertained and rescued the spies sent to check out the city. And amazingly, though she was a Gentile by birth, she appears in the genealogy of Jesus. That is disruptive. We will talk about that in Advent. But it is outside this same city that Jesus heals a blind man. Such maladies were still considered to be a consequence of sin – either his own or some ancestor's. And while the rest of the crowd elbowed him to the back of the line, outside of Jesus' eyesight, his cry imploring the Son of David to have mercy on him nevertheless made it to the ears of Jesus. Above the noise of the crowd Jesus heard the cry of the marginalised and rejected 'sinner' ... AND HEALED HIM. That was disruptive. But it was disruptive in a good way, a constructive way, a healing way, and gave him a quality of life the systems and values of the time denied him.

Surely we can expect Jesus to go on being just as disruptive of the systems and values of our time that continue to marginalise people and stigmatise people and deny people a place as brothers and sisters in God's family. And we as a church are called to be a centre of such disruption by the hospitality we extend to all God's children whatever their circumstance or their history. We can continue to be a centre of healing and hospitality in the name of God, the ultimate disruptor.
