

Sermon Archive 152

Sunday 14 May 2017

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: Acts 7: 55-60

John 14: 1-14

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Things can become interesting when people called Stephen share with others their ideas about God.

-ooOoo-

I'm not sure why it only hit our newsfeed this week, because it was actually in 2015 that Stephen Fry was interviewed on Irish television and ended up sharing some ideas about God. There was nothing particularly new about what he said. It was a basic re-run of what the philosophers spent the last two millennia calling "the problem of evil": if God is all knowing, all powerful, and all good, then why do bad things happen to innocent people? Either God doesn't know, doesn't care, or can't do anything about it. QED, God is not the good guy whom religious people worship. To Stephen Fry's credit or cost, he delivered the argument in a theatrical way, declaring, with rhetorical flourish, that God was "a capricious, mean-minded, stupid God"!

This was too much for one television viewer, who complained to the Irish Police. The Police investigated the interview under the provisions of an Irish law against blasphemy.

At this point the Irish atheists became over-excited. Here we had a popular comedian being investigated for having expressed an atheistic opinion. Firmly of the view that a prosecution of Fry would advance the atheist cause by causing a public backlash, they uploaded Fry's words onto their website, along with 25 blasphemous statements of their own. "Come and get us" they cried!

Nobody came to get them. It seemed that Ireland wasn't too bothered that atheists don't believe in God. And the Police ended up not pursuing the Fry complaint either. It was decided that one complaint from a single viewer, possibly about something not obviously imperilling civic order, didn't justify the

deployment of Police resources. Interviewed by the “Irish Independent”, about the closing of the investigation, the complainant said: “I did my civic duty in reporting it. The [police] did their duty in investigating it. I am satisfied with the result.”

The atheists’ hoped-for tsunami, turned “storm in a tea cup”, did spread a few ripples as far as little old Aotearoa New Zealand. In parliament, David Seymour noted that our statutes **also** include provisions for the prosecution of blasphemers. Section 123 of the Crimes Act 1961 allows for blasphemers to be imprisoned for a period not exceeding one year. David was keen to put a private member’s bill through to have the statute gone by lunchtime.

Although there’s a bit of disagreement about which parliamentary process is the best tool for getting rid of the law, everyone seems to think that the law should go. David Seymour says “it’s terrible to have ‘arbitrary laws’ that are not usually enforced. Most people are breaking some law at some time, and whether you get done for it depends on whether you’re a popular or unpopular figure”. From the legal community, Geoffrey Palmer noted that the blasphemy law, having lain idle since 1922, would be hard to re-enact, since it doesn’t sit well next to newer principles in the Bill of Rights Act - namely the principle of freedom of expression. For the Anglican Church, Archbishop Phillip Richardson said he saw no point in the legislation. His God is “bigger than needing to be defended by the Crimes Act”. Up at Auckland’s University of Technology, Paul Moon, a professor of history said “from a Christian point of view, it’s much better that people have the freedom to talk”. Most objections to blasphemy laws have been couched in the terms of free speech and the honest exchange of ideas. Down here in Canterbury University, however, one of our own law lecturers, Ursula Cheer, offered perhaps a more direct and honest assessment of the situation. She’s reported to have said “in this day and age” there was no reason for keeping the laws. Perhaps the use of the phrase “in this day and age” is shorthand for “we’ve outgrown that kind of thing; nobody actually cares”. If that’s what she’s saying, I think she probably speaks for many New Zealanders. I think a good lot of us really don’t care anymore about what other people believe - or don’t. Part of it’s because we think of religious belief as something individual and private - up to the other. Perhaps part of it also, though, is that we think beliefs about God don’t really matter. What difference do they make? If Stephen doesn’t believe in God, or believes that God is evil, we don’t really care.

That’s why we’re going to struggle with what happens when another Stephen

speaks about God. No stranger to public debate, increasingly famous for making good points in defence of his religious beliefs, **Biblical** Stephen (not Fry) finds himself brought before the High Priest, to answer some accusations. He delivers a long address, covering many historical events through which he believes God was revealed: the call of Abraham, the lives of the patriarchs, Moses and the exodus, the building of the temple, the coming of Jesus, the unity of Jesus with the godhead.

Stephen is expressing religious belief. Does anyone care?

Lots of people care! Having spent a bit of time grinding their teeth and fostering fury, now they drag him out of the city, kick him to the ground, and beat him to death.

From our culture of indifference about religious belief, what do we make of that? And indeed, what do we make of its modern re-enactments? Al Queda kills 12 journalists in the Paris office of the magazine Charlie Hebdo - because the magazine expressed religious scepticism. What do we make of Iran's fatwa on Salman Rushdie for writing a book imaginatively critical of the prophet? And of the stabbing murder of Rushdie's Japanese translator, Hitoshi Igarashi?

And, to show that Stephen's re-enactment isn't exclusively enshrined in Islamic examples, what do we make of a prayer group at a Charleston Methodist Church, being attacked by a man raised in a Lutheran church, because the Methodists had gone on record as saying "Black lives matter to God". Christian against Christian - Dylan Roof kills nine people at prayer, because a religious belief had been expressed.

So, indeed, what **do** we do, when a Western culture that believes it's outgrown worrying about what people believe meets another culture (or sub-culture) that reacts violently to belief statements it doesn't share? What do we do?

One thing we **could** do, I guess, is tell the people of the belief-caring culture to grow up and get over it. Give up worrying about belief! (That is, after all what we've told ourselves "in this day and age".) Another thing we could do is mirror the violence we see. They've killed Stephen; so let's kill **them**! Mirroring behaviour is such an easy option. A third option is to lock the door, draw the curtains - withdraw from the world so we don't need to interact - maybe build a wall.

Here's an alternative model.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me” Jesus says. To disciples who are struggling to express what they believe, struggling to articulate where they have seen God, Jesus counsels them not to engage in fear. Don't take a troubled heart into the process.

Go into the process in the knowledge that God's house has many rooms. Don't enter the conversation assuming that there's no room. Would he have told us that there was room, if there wasn't? No, don't carry that anxiety into the engagement. That's what he says.

Both Thomas and Phillip, though, have trouble letting the anxiety go. **Thomas** says “I'm lost; I don't know the way. I have no idea”. Jesus says “yes, you do. **I** am the way, and you've seen me; it's actually quite simple. **Philip** says “show us the Father, Jesus. We need to see the Father”. Jesus says “You've seen the Father, Philip; don't be troubled. There's plenty of room for you in the Father's house.”

Much of what Jesus is giving the disciples in this little passage is reassurance, permission not to act in fear, encouragement to relax into a simplicity that is greater than the world's power to complicate. Believing doesn't need to lead to argument. If belief is expressed in a peaceful heart, then room, reception, welcome and peace can be the harvest. Maybe **those** are our rules of engagement.

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We hear Jesus asking his disciples to put aside their troubled hearts, to look, to listen, to adopt a mode of calmed spirit. Don't make things more anxious than they need to be. Know that there is plenty of room - plenty of room. I wonder how some of our world's fractious lines might calm if people approached them in that calmer kind of way. Does stoning always have to be the way? Does Stephen always have to die? Jesus says “don't be scared - believe in God - there are many mansions.”

We keep a moment of quiet.

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