

Sermon Archive 298

Sunday 14 June, 2020

Knox Church, Christchurch

A series of readings and reflections

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Preamble:

The cannabis referendum coming to us in September isn't about the medicinal use of cannabis. Medicinal use of cannabis was legalised in December of 2017, so medical professionals already are able to prescribe it for certain health conditions. The current referendum is about *recreational* use of cannabis - using the substance to relax - or to find a different perspective.

Although people of the Rastafarian faith interpret a couple of verses from the book of Revelation (verses about using the "herb" to heal the nations), as a command to use cannabis, most people acknowledge that the Bible has nothing to say directly about cannabis. The Bible has, however, quite a few things to say about alcohol, which we know, even those of us who use it, is a mind-altering substance - leading to good and bad outcomes. So, in terms of Biblical reflection, alcohol may be the best thing around which to hang our thinking about recreational cannabis use. People will note, rightly, that alcohol tends, much more than cannabis does, to create violence and family harm. Possibly so - but if we're looking for some kind of Biblical reflection, we have to begin somewhere. We can make adjustments as we go.

The purpose of these reflections is not to tell you how to vote. I wouldn't dare - nor I imagine would it work. Apparently, my great grandfather used to tell my great grandmother how to vote. She just smiled and went into her voting booth. I understand she enjoyed her long-standing practice of secretly cancelling out his vote. No, these reflections are simply to start your own discernment process. As ever, we look to our scriptures and our tradition, in the Spirit, for some form of light.

The first lesson.

The First Lesson: John 2: 1-10

A Reflection: A nice jar of wine

John's gospel is often referred to as the "book of signs". Jesus, beautifully announced in the prologue to the gospel, as the eternal Word, waiting to be revealed, goes about

doing certain things to show us what God is like.

He walks on water. He feeds the hungry. He heals the sick. He raises the dead - well that's what John says he does. And as he does these things, the world says "Ah, God is with us". The things he does are full of God, are true to God, reflective of the nature of God. They are "godly". The old God might have found expression through drowning the Egyptians in the Red Sea, or through raining sulphur down on Sodom and Gomorrah. **This** God, the One Jesus expresses, is revealed through the giving of good things, blessings for the people - abundant life.

And we are told, by John, that the first sign Jesus gave, to demonstrate the favour of God, was to turn water into wine. At a wedding, a celebration of love and commitment, the God of goodness gives wine - more wine - even after the people already have drunk the wine cellar dry. This has not been an abstemious event!

It would seem that Jesus had no problem at all with people drinking wine - using it to lubricate their happiness. If he'd have had a problem, he wouldn't have given them more - he'd have delivered, instead, a wee sermon on the virtues of moderation.

The Christian faith has, in pretty much every age, produced people who are suspicious of pleasure. From Jordan prophets who wear hair shirts and eat only locusts, to the Stylite monks who climbed up poles to sit on platforms away from the pleasures of the world. From the self-flagellators of the Middle Ages, to the American Shakers who died out because they felt they needed to avoid the pleasure of sex. From the Puritan iconoclasts who smashed up stained glass windows (because they were distractingly beautiful), to the early Presbyterians who resisted organs in worship, because the human voice was perfectly adequate in the praise of God. We're quite good at declaring "unclean" things that are perfectly fine, or better than fine, actually delightful. One day, at a critical turning point for the spreading of the Christian faith, God will say to Peter "don't you declare unclean what I have declared clean". And for today, Jesus expresses the goodness of God by providing an already celebrating people seven large jars of wine. There is nothing wrong with celebrating. There is nothing wrong with relaxing - in itself.

Let's sing a rollicking song of celebration.

Hymn: Sing praise and thanksgiving, let all creatures living

The Second Lesson: Genesis 9: 18-23

A Reflection: O, Noah

Well, here's the pointy end of the thing. Jesus may have blessed Cana with really good quality wine, but Noah's consumed way too much of it. Totally plastered, he takes off his clothes and passes out. His embarrassed family have to come to the rescue; and for their trouble, when the drunk Noah "comes to" again, get shouted at. The first thing the still drunk Noah does is to curse his family - those who were trying to help him. I think you can call this "family harm".

This may be an occasion where we need to note a few distinctions between alcohol and cannabis. While it's quite common for people to get rude and abusive on alcohol, violence is actually pretty rare among cannabis users - not many women or children get bashed. But sometimes, stoned drivers crash cars into innocent bystanders. Sometimes money for groceries go instead to the tinny house. Sometimes there is no role-modelling for the children of work ethic. Sometimes passive smoke clogs the children's lungs. There is more than one kind of family harm.

The same substance that goes on the wedding table a Cana, fuels the family harm in Christchurch. There is use, but also abuse. Does the herb come from the goodness of God, or from the serpent in the garden. I'm not quite sure - but Noah's really embarrassed himself, and needs re-clothing.

Hymn: Dear God, embracing humankind,

The Third Lesson: Luke 11: 46-50

A Reflection: A gang of Pharisees

Although he calls them "lawyers", he's doesn't mean barristers and solicitors. They're lawyers in that they're interpreters of the Law of Moses - Pharisees - religious experts - those who're meant to be shepherding the people into abundant life.

The problem that Jesus notes, though, is that the Pharisees don't care about the people. They do nothing to help the people. Quite the reverse, they have a long-standing history actually of persecuting and killing the people. They should be dealing in life - but they're dealing in death. Jesus has a problem with that - so calls them out, shouting "Woe to you, you bunch of killers".

It has been noted, for a long time now, that much of the cannabis trade in our country is controlled by the gangs. Gangs don't care for those to whom they sell. In keeping their part of the market protected, they're not afraid to use violence, intimidation, blackmail. On occasions nor are they afraid to add extra substances to innocent leaves - in order to hook clients on more expensive products. They lift

not a finger to ease anyone's burden. They increase their burdens - for the sake of money. Jesus has a problem with that.

One of the stated goals of legalising the cannabis trade, is to remove it from the control of the gangs - putting it instead into the hands of those who will do less harm to the people - proper regulation of sales, proper quality control of product, reduced likelihood of blackmail. It is argued that nobody's going to buy from a dangerous gang, when they have the option of going to a nice, clean shop.

One imagines, I guess, that the gangs would just shift tack a little, focussing instead on Methamphetamine, heroin and cocaine. The killers keep on killing.

I just don't know.

Hymn: Fold to your heart your sister and your brother

The Fourth Lesson: 1 Corinthians 6: 19-20

A Reflection: A shameless last go at the body

One of the few Biblical references cited in the Inter-church Bioethics paper, was 1 Corinthians 6. It's a plea to consider the body the temple of God, and so to treat it well - maybe by not inhaling large quantities of smoke into the lungs, maybe by not increasing the risk of psychosis and schizophrenia. Treat that body gently, carefully, respectfully - as if it were a gift from God. Bodies don't last forever, but praise God for what God has made . . .

Well, you may, or may not, have noticed that my body is not all that svelt. It seems that I am using it, perhaps a little too much, to enjoy life, with its food and drink. I try to preach, always, in the spirit of first taking the log out of my own eye, before attending to the speck in yours. So, I'm not the right one to "bang on" about treating the body well.

The question, I guess, is whether proper use of the body, is abstinence and discipline, or celebration and enjoyment - or some hybrid, somewhere in between. Is a rotund minister a sign of life not quite being properly managed, or of life being gratefully lived? Am I ruining my body - or just using it in the way that God intended? What's a body actually for?

Gosh; did that just become utterly basic and terribly complicated?

I think it may have. We keep a moment of quiet.

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