

The Church Facing Judgement

A sermon on 1 Corinthians 4:1-5 & Matthew 6:24-34 by Nathan Nettleton, 26 February 2017

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Message

While the final judgement of each individual is rightly left to God, we are called to ensure that we are found to be loving, merciful and trustworthy by the world around us.

Sermon

I had a spooky feeling this week as I read the passage of scripture that we heard read tonight from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Sometimes context is everything and what is going on in the world around you affects the way you hear something from the Bible.

This is not a passage that would normally catch my attention much, but this week it jarred. Bits of it sounded uncomfortably like things that might have been said by a pompous bishop or an arrogant church official trying to deflect the attentions of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Abuse. Listen:

To me it is of no interest how I might be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, and it is the Lord who will judge me, not you. Therefore do not presume to pass judgment before the Lord comes.

This week hasn't been as bad as some for the Church at the Royal Commission, but it has been a big one. This week we are finally hearing from the five Archbishops, the highest ranking clergy in Australia. So far it has sounded like they are beginning to learn their lessons. There have been acknowledgements that some of the church's actions have amounted to criminal negligence. They have been shown to be still a bit divided and unsure about what the confidentiality of the confessional might mean in relation to revelations of child abuse, but they don't seem to have further disgraced themselves this week.

That's not going to be much comfort though to the thousands of victims who have been raped and sexually abused by priests. The damage is horrendous and widespread and many people quite reasonably think that the church has forfeited its right to even exist as a social institution in the community.

The abuse itself has been appalling. The extent to which church leaders and officials colluded to cover it up and protect the reputation and assets of the church has also been appalling. And the arrogance and the self-righteous, above-the-law attitudes of some major church leaders have been utterly disgraceful and like salt in open wounds.

So it is rather confronting and unsettling to hear the Apostle Paul saying, "I don't really care what you or any human court thinks of me. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am accountable to God, not to you." I was almost bracing myself to hear him add, "We have our own internal processes to deal with these things, and we do not fall under the jurisdiction of this commission. There is no systemic problem here, just a few bad apples. We will deal with them appropriately behind closed doors and we don't have to give account to you."

Fortunately, Paul did not say and is not saying anything like that, but the appearance that he is being dismissive of the judgement of a human court still sounds jarring when heard against today's context rather than his own.

In his own context, it is a very different thing. What the Apostle is responding to is criticism from internal rivals who are nit-picking in order to undermine trust in his ministry. Rather than anything comparable with the Royal Commission, it is more like if someone from another Baptist church started saying that I should be sacked because I'm too liberal, or too orthodox, or too traditional, or whatever. So it is in the face of that kind of criticism that Paul is saying, "I don't really care what some self-appointed thought police think of me. I don't claim to be perfect, but I think I can hold my head up before God, and we can all leave the judgement in God's hands. And in the meantime, I'll continue on as I have been, thank you very much."

But that raises a question, doesn't it? Where is the dividing line between me or the Apostle Paul dismissing the "court of human opinion" of internal critics, and an arrogant church official dismissing the "court of human opinion" that wants answers about how and why the church allowed a culture of rampant child abuse to go unchecked? Why is saying "mind your own business and leave the judgement to God" okay in one case and irresponsible to the point of criminal in the other?

These are not easy questions, and one of the reasons that the abuse of power is so widespread in the church is that many of us are not at all clear on the answers. It is a lot easier for a priest or pastor to get away with corrupt, manipulative and even abusive practices if the people around them are not sure when it is appropriate to speak out and ask questions, and when it is best to leave the judgement to others or even to God. Corruption and abuse thrive when the perpetrators are regarded as beyond the reach of ordinary human criticism.

The Roman Catholic part of the Church has been a particularly extreme example of this problem, but we in other parts of the Church are certainly not immune to it. Though perhaps not as numerous, we have some very ugly examples of predatory leaders and abuse of power too, and we certainly have a lot to learn, both from the failures in our own groups, and those of other parts of the Church.

One of the biggest contributors is the tendency to put pastoral leaders on pedestals and treat them as terribly special, perhaps beyond reproach and even above suspicion. In Roman Catholic churches this is exacerbated by the belief that the priest is the essential dispenser of God's grace to the people. For a range of reasons, this tends to both elevate the priest, and distance him from the ordinary people. He becomes both revered and isolated, cut off from normal friendships and from any of the normal relational accountability structures that help most of us to see ourselves more clearly and learn to manage our failings and to grow and mature.

There are numerous other cultural factors too, but this combination of elevation and isolation can be very toxic and dangerous, and we can't pretend that it is absent from the evangelical sector of the church that we live in either. In recent decades there have been more and more examples of evangelical pastors being treated like rock stars, and we've seen a corresponding increase in scandals around the abuse of money, sex and power. In our evangelical churches, the victims have not as often been children, and that is probably the only reason that we

haven't attracted the same level of public outrage as our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters. We are probably getting off more lightly than we deserve.

We heard another section of Jesus's sermon on the mount tonight, and it made some interesting connections with this topic too. It began with Jesus saying that "no one can serve two masters; you cannot serve God and wealth." But of course, wealth is not the only thing that competes with God for our attention. It can be status and reputation and public image. It can even be the Church itself, and its status and reputation and public image.

Could it be that a few too many of our senior church leaders during this episode have fallen into the mistake of serving the institution of the Church in opposition to serving God in humility, transparency, and love? Yes, God loves the Church. It is the body of Christ, no less. But that doesn't mean that it is beyond question or above the law. It is full of fallible and wounded human beings, and some of them are corrupt and dangerous criminals. True love for the Church must be expressed in a bracing honesty that constantly ensures that the Church is not a place where predators can hide in the darkness, but a place where the searing light of love exposes all that is corrupt, holding people to account and challenging them to grow into the image of God in which they were created.

Jesus went on to speak of trusting God to provide for us and not anxiously fretting over what to wear or what to eat. This is not so much directed at those who are not getting enough to eat or to wear. It is directed at those whose anxiety is competitive. Being seen in the "right" clothes and partaking of the "right" foods and drinks are big status markers in our society, and they were in Jesus's day too. We can easily get caught up in anxiously stressing over how to keep up with our rivals in such matters. And this can become another dangerous preoccupation of those in power who are intent on preserving their rarified status and position. They can easily develop an inflated sense of entitlement that is expressed in an ostentatious hierarchy of special clothes, luxurious residences, and fine foods and wines prepared for them by skilled volunteers coopted from their churches.

No, says Jesus. Strive first for the culture of God, a culture of humility, love, mercy, simplicity, integrity, and sharing. Strive first for the culture of God, and all your needs will be taken care of.

Jesus is not condemning good clothes or good food and wine. He was well known, to the point of controversy, for his enjoyment of a good party with good food and wine. He didn't get accused of being a drunkard and a glutton by being wearing rags and eating nothing but bread and water. He is not condemning enjoyment. But he is saying that if you begin to competitively pursue those things as ends in themselves instead of simply enjoying them as they are given to you in the course of your pursuit of the kingdom of God and its culture of love, then they will consume you and poison your mind and corrupt your spirit. And that's true, whether you are a leader or not, although leaders are particularly susceptible.

In this congregation here, we have recently adopted a preliminary version of a set of "Safe Church" policies, and we are now working on discussing them more widely in the congregation and tailoring them accordingly so that they can more effectively achieve their aim of safeguarding the culture of this place against the sorts of abuses of power and predatory behaviour that we have been hearing so much about in the news. But, of course,

having good policies on paper is only a first step, and it will only be an effective step if they are owned and understood by you folks so that they truly shape our culture here.

We have already done a lot to create a culture of honesty and transparency here, and to ensure that there are structures and procedures in place that ensure that you can all have a voice in the leadership of the church, and that you can speak up if you see something that appears to be wrong or dangerous or questionable. But there is no room for complacency. The Royal Commission has been giving us daily horror stories of what can happen when an religious organisation becomes complacent about such things.

The Apostle Paul's words immediately before the jarring words I repeated earlier were that it is required of us as stewards of God's mysteries that we be found trustworthy. Perhaps that is the bottom line about when we need to step in and speak out, and when we'd be better to let things go. Let me be personal about it, as a leader in this place.

I make no claims to be perfect. I do my best, and I make mistakes. Sometimes those mistakes will hurt people and annoy people. Sometimes those mistakes have caused someone to get so angry at me that they have denounced me publicly and left the church. Some of those objections were completely justified, and I have had to admit my fault and seek to change and grow. Others of those objections were not so justified and I would, with Paul, say that I am a work in progress, and I can live with you not liking me and leave it up to God to sort out the ultimate rights and wrongs.

But if you ever see me not just making mistakes, but behaving in ways that are underhand and untrustworthy, that is a whole different thing. And if you ever have reason to believe that I am exploiting my position or exploiting people's trust in me to further my own interests or gratify my own vanity, that too is a whole different thing. If that happens, you have a responsibility to your brothers and sisters here to say something, to speak up, to ask for it to be investigated. That doesn't mean that you have to be brave enough to confront me directly. Speak to others. Speak to a trusted member of the Host Group, or to one of our Visiting Pastoral Overseers. Or if it is a more serious and urgent matter, go straight to the Baptist Union's Professional Standards Worker.

There is a little flowchart about how to lodge a complaint on the noticeboard over there, and although its wording is particularly around incidents of child abuse, the procedures are essentially the same for any sort of misconduct by leaders.

If we are people of integrity, and are open to learning and growing, then none of us have anything to fear from this kind of accountability. It is one of the means that God uses to lead us further into the light of truth, and into the love and mercy and maturity of God's culture.

And in the current climate where the Church's monstrous failures and crimes have been laid bare in the court of human opinion, our commitment to not only doing the right thing, but being seen to understand the desperate need to do the right thing, is part of how we bear witness to a watching world that we are indeed trustworthy stewards of God's love and grace for the world. And it is thus essential to sharing the love and healing mercy of God with a wounded and needy world.