

Rugby, Freedom, and the God of Life

A sermon on Acts 5:27-32 & John 20:19-31 by Nathan Nettleton, 28 April 2019

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Message

When we crusade against the evil of others, we end up crusading against Jesus himself, for he asks us to become givers and lovers of life.

Sermon

As we heard in our first reading, the temple police brought the apostles in and had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching.” But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority.”

Next week the lawyers will bring Israel Folau before a Rugby Union Code of Conduct hearing, and they will say, “We gave you strict orders, in fact we wrote it into your contract, that you were not to publicly promote these beliefs, yet here you have filled Instagram with your teaching.” And Israel Folau will probably answer in very similar terms to the Apostle Peter, saying “I must obey God rather than any human authority,” or as he has previously said, “It’s about what I believe in and never compromising that, because my faith is far more important to me than my career and always will be.”

For the benefit of any of you who have no idea what I am talking about, Israel Folau is one of Australia and the world’s best rugby players, and is a zealous Pentecostal Christian. The [recent Instagram post](#) that could end his career contained three Bible quotes and a graphic that said “Warning. Drunks, Homosexuals, Adulterers, Liars, Fornicators, Thieves, Atheists, Idolaters. Hell Awaits You. Repent! Only Jesus Saves.”

What ever you think about the content of his beliefs, there is little doubt that Israel Folau believes these things deeply. He believes that most people are in serious danger of being cast into hell for eternity, and that the right and loving thing to do is to try his best to warn them and to show them the pathway to salvation and eternal life.

I have no doubt that if the things Israel Folau was saying were all things that we were in complete agreement with, then I and probably most of us would be lined up with those who are cheering him on and lauding him as a courageous martyr who is ready to pay the price of his beliefs. We’d be denouncing this outrageous assault on religious freedom and freedom of speech, and we’d be comparing Folau to the courageous apostles in the Book of Acts standing up to the High Priest and the Temple Rulers and insisting that they would obey God and not the Council’s orders.

Before I come to the other side of the argument, I should just acknowledge that although the public debate has been about freedom of belief and the like, the actual hearing will probably have very little to do with this and will instead focus on the details of clauses written into Folau’s contract with the Australian Rugby Union. These clauses are not so much about the rights or wrongs of expressing his faith, but about avoiding publishing opinions that alienate the game’s major sponsors and thus potentially cost his employers millions of dollars. The details of that legal argument are way beyond both my expertise and my interest.

But the public debate over Israel Folau's right to promote his beliefs is a significant question of faith that goes far beyond rugby and affects us all. And there are Christians on both sides.

Those who are opposing what Folau has said have mostly focussed on his inclusion of homosexuals in his list of those who are destined for hell. They say that research tells us that when young vulnerable homosexual people are subjected to moral and religious condemnations of their sexual identity, their risk of self-harm and even suicide increases. Therefore, they argue, when someone as influential as Israel Folau, who hundreds of thousands of people look up to as a hero, says that homosexuals are going to hell, it amounts to hate-speech and is destructive of the health and well-being of vulnerable people.

Now, if we were all being fair and reasonable here, we'd probably have to conclude that there are good arguments on both sides, but that people are talking past each other because the two sides are actually talking about different things. One side is talking about freedom of speech and the right to promote sincerely held religious beliefs, and the other side is talking about the psychological impact of judgement and condemnation. As long as we are conducting parallel conversations, we are never going to hear each other or reach any sort of resolution.

So I want to invite you to step back from these arguments a bit, and look at what is going on in the bigger picture of which this is just a small part. What is really going on here, and what does it have to do with Jesus and his life, death and resurrection? Spoiler alert: it's probably not quite as simple and one dimensional as Israel Folau would have you think it is.

The most striking thing about this debate has been the levels of vehemence and hostility on both sides. One of Israel Folau's most outspoken supporters has been Alan Jones, and as a Sydney radio shock jock, hostile and inflammatory speech is his default style, but he has had plenty of allies decrying the attacks on Folau as an assault on basic freedoms, as political correctness gone mad, and as a symptom of all that has gone wrong with our society.

On the other side, the side that usually likes to identify itself with tolerance and diversity and inclusion, the ferocious baying for blood has been anything but tolerant and inclusive. It's as though, having won the marriage equality debate, we've become a frenzied old testament army who want to march into the defeated territory and slaughter every man, woman and child to prove our zeal and rid the earth of every last trace of the despised enemy. Every surviving dissenter must have their tongue cut out and their legacy erased. When the winning side does this, it not only discredits their victory, but it makes martyrs of their opponents and reinforces their belief in themselves as the oppressed righteous remnant.

So on this, as on so many other things, we are polarising into enemy tribes intent only on destroying each other, and whatever side you look at it from, that doesn't look or smell anything like Jesus. We've now got both sides worked up into a frenzy of indignation and outrage, pointing angry fingers at one another and condemning one another as being the embodiment of all that is wrong with society and all that threatens the cause of righteousness and love and goodness and the kingdom of God.

The ugly and perhaps ironic truth is that the thing that really threatens the advance of the culture of God is our desire to identify someone else as the culprit, as the obstacle, as the source and cause of all that is wrong and dangerous and threatening. Which brings us directly to Jesus, because it was our need to prove ourselves good by identifying some other as the

problem that saw us turn on Jesus and chant in unison for his crucifixion. What some of us are now doing to Israel Folau and others of us are now doing to his “politically correct liberal” opponents is exactly what we did to Jesus. Regardless of the relative rights and wrongs, when we work ourselves into a frenzy over some other who we see as the embodiment of society’s ills who must be purged from among us and made an example of, we are crucifying Jesus again. Left, right; conservative, liberal; Jesus will always be there at the side of the one we have turned on and scapegoated, and if we split 50:50 as we usually do in our increasingly polarised world, he will be there on both sides as the victim of the other.

Which, if we return to our story from the Acts of the Apostles again, we can see is right up front in the argument. The priests are saying “You are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.” And although Peter is saying “yes, you had him killed by hanging him on a tree,” it would be a misunderstanding to hear Peter as saying “you, not us.” He is saying “yes, you have to take responsibility for this lynching”, but not “you as opposed to us.” It is “you and all of us.” As long as we are stuck in trying to identify someone else as the culprit, someone else rather than us, we are actually exposed by the cross as being still central to the problem. It is when we recognise and face up to ourselves and our own crusading zealotry as totally part of the problem that we are set free to start becoming part of the solution.

There’s one final thing I want to pick up in the Apostle Peter’s speech here – something that will lead me to pass judgement on Israel Folau. Not over his right to express his beliefs and keep his rugby contract, but over his theology, over the way he portrays Jesus to his 351 thousand Instagram followers.

Right after saying, “We must obey God rather than any human authority”, the Apostle says “the God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.”

What Peter is saying here is that God is all about giving life. It is human beings who are on about bringing condemnation and death. God raises this crucified victim to life, and exalts him so that he might bring about repentance and the forgiveness of sins. God’s part in the story is the resurrection part, not the punishing sin and demanding crucifixion part. God’s actions are all about life and mercy and liberation and more life. Condemning and judging and killing and casting into hell; that is what humans do. God raised him, but you people killed him.

In [Alan Jones’s defence of Israel Folau](#), he approvingly quotes a Sydney bishop who says that what Israel Folau posted on Instagram was “essentially a summary of the Bible.” And indeed if you scroll through [Folau’s Instagram page](#), warnings of hell are a prominent theme, so he may well see it as a fair summary of the Bible. But it is not a summary of the Bible as Jesus taught us to read it. If you do a study of the way Jesus quotes scripture, you will discover that he selectively leaves out references to condemnation and images of an angry vengeful God far more often than he leaves them in. Jesus called us to see God in a different light.

It is the Apostle Peter, not Izzy Folau, who has got Jesus more right here. The God made known to us in Jesus is all about life, about resurrection and mercy and liberation and more life. Condemning one another to hell is an entirely human characteristic and activity. The God made known to us in the risen Jesus reaches out to us with wounded hands and says,

“Look! This is what your ferocious condemnation of one another results in. This is where it ends up. You will crucify even the love of God in your frenzy of self-righteousness. Come, put your hands in my wounds. Touch the forgiveness that obliterates all concepts of hell. Touch the forgiveness and become givers and lovers of life.”

For one of the few attempts at balanced discussion of the competing legal rights in the Israel Folau case, see [this article by Tracey Holmes](#).