

Christian Ethics

*This group met in June and July 2022 on Tuesday evenings at 8pm.
Everyone is welcome to come along. Invite others too*

Biblical passages are not printed here to conserve space so you will need a Bible. The quotations originally used came from the New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha Anglicised Catholic edition.

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Session 1 ~ Who makes the decisions and how.

What is unethical behaviour? Look at newspapers/online and identify stories which raise moral issues.

This course will look primarily at *how* we make moral decisions, in reality and ideally. We should never forget, however, that the fact that we make moral decisions reveals we are beautifully and wonderfully made in the image of God. We also never lose sight of the goal: union with Christ of the whole of creation, “a new heaven and a new earth.” The whole of creation is to be redeemed but our ability to make decisions is part of our unique formation in the image of God. Animals are not morally responsible for their actions.

Our Lord

Jesus Himself says that He has come to fulfil the law (St Matthew 5:17). There is no claim that the moral law remains unaltered by our Lord’s coming. One important Article within the documents of the Church of England states concerning the place of the Old Testament (Article VII): “The Old Testament is not contrary to the New; for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to mankind by Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and man, being both God and man. Wherefore there are not to be heard which feign that the old fathers did look only for transitory promises. Although the law given from God by Moses, as touching ceremonies and rites, do not bind Christian men, nor the civil precepts thereof ought of necessity to be received in any commonwealth; yet, notwithstanding, no Christian man whatsoever is free from the obedience of the commandments which are called moral.”

St Paul in the New Testament

St Paul writes: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,” (Philippians 2:5). Elsewhere he writes that he struggles to make decisions (Romans 7:14-24).

In I Corinthians 8, St Paul covers the subject of eating food sacrificed to idols. What’s important about the debate here is that it is not just a question of whether something is wrong or not, but whether it offends others or not.

What is our conscience?

Ethicists use it to mean different things: a general awareness of a moral law; an objection to a particular action and also the “superego,” a psychological prolongation of parental and other influences. The general awareness is

seen by St Jerome as a flicker of light that continues to burn in human beings after the Fall (The Fall is when Adam and Eve sinned and human nature is thereby damaged as part of the spread of sin, called Original Sin in to which we are born). Conscience is sometimes thought of as the movement from principles to decisions.

Catechism of the Catholic Church 1778 "Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognises the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed. In all he says and does, man is obliged to follow faithfully what he knows to be just and right. It is by the judgment of his conscience that man perceives and recognises the prescriptions of the divine law."

Catechism of the Catholic Church 1785 "In the formation of conscience the Word of God is the light for our path, we must assimilate it in faith and prayer and put it into practice. We must also examine our conscience before the Lord's Cross. We are assisted by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, aided by the witness or advice of others and guided by the authoritative teaching of the Church."

Stephen Holmgren, (b.1956) "Ethics after Easter," an Anglican, wrote, "Conscience must be followed, but conscience must also be educated."

Sources for our decision-making:

Scripture. The Bible was not created with its principal purpose of giving us in 2022 a moral framework. It is the history of how God has interacted with His people. It is inspired by the Holy Spirit; it is the word of God. Primarily it records the life and teaching of Jesus. The Gospels are the most important part of the Bible. Many moral questions are complicated by the fact that the Bible appears to give contradictory advice. This is impossible because God cannot contradict Himself and He is the supreme authority behind the Bible. However, what might have been right in a particular context may not necessarily be the case today. These issues become knotty for these reasons especially issues of sex and marriage.

Tradition. The technical definition is that which is handed on. However, sometimes people justify things using tradition meaning it was once allowed somewhere. Tradition is normally defined by the teaching authority of the Church, the Bishops, sometimes called the Magisterium, especially in ethical thinking.

Reason. This is sometimes linked with “experience” or (rarely) separated from it. Whether our reason is correct or not it will always be something we deploy in making decisions. Do I think this is right? One of the tensions within our faith is that on the one hand we are made in the image of God and this is true of all human beings. However, the capacity of human reason has also been universally hindered by sin and therefore without illumination from God we are limited in our ability to make good decisions. More conservative elements within the Church believe human reason could not form an individual entirely in to a morally upright agent, whereas the more liberal element believes it could.

The post-Reformation Anglican tradition was that we have all three in our armoury when making decisions.

Session 2 ~ Sin and grace. Learning to walk while falling over.

What is sin? Sin is that which offends God and disrupts our relationship with Him. We can only realise our sin aided by divine revelation. Only God can forgive sins, hence the shock when our Lord asserts this of Himself (St Mark 2:7).

Evil does not exist: it is not a thing. It is a parasite and so needs us to give it room to exist. The Fall as described in Genesis 3 reveals sin getting a foothold in the world through a decision made by a person. The fall of the angels is not described in detail but our Lord refers to it (St Luke 10:18; Revelation 12:9).

St Augustine, *Confessions* 8.5.11

St Augustine is bewildered by his desire to steal fruit as a youth even when he wasn't hungry: “Theft is punished by your law, O Lord, and by the law written in men's hearts, which iniquity itself cannot blot out. For what thief will suffer a thief? Even a rich thief will not allow him who is driven to it by want. Yet had I a desire to commit robbery, and did so, compelled neither by hunger, nor poverty through a distaste for well-doing, and a lustiness of iniquity. For I pilfered that of which I had already sufficient, and much better. Nor did I desire to enjoy what I pilfered, but the theft and sin itself. There was a pear-tree close to our vineyard, heavily laden with fruit, which was tempting neither for its color nor its flavour. To shake and rob this some of us wanton young fellows went, late one night (having, according to our disgraceful habit, prolonged our games in the streets until then), and carried

away great loads, not to eat ourselves, but to fling to the very swine, having only eaten some of them; and to do this pleased us all the more because it was not permitted. Behold my heart, O my God; behold my heart, which You had pity upon when in the bottomless pit. Behold, now, let my heart tell You what it was seeking there, that I should be gratuitously wanton, having no inducement to evil but the evil itself. It was foul, and I loved it. I loved to perish. I loved my own error— not that for which I erred, but the error itself. Base soul, falling from Your firmament to utter destruction — not seeking anything through the shame but the shame itself!

St Augustine, *Confessions* 2.4.9 ~ “Thus came I to understand, from my own experience, what I had read, how that *“the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh,”* (Galatians 5:17). I verily lusted both ways; yet more in that which I approved in myself, than in that which I disapproved in myself. For in this last it was now rather not *“I,”* (Romans 7:20) because in much I rather suffered against my will than did it willingly. And yet it was through me that custom became more combative against me, because I had come willingly whither I willed not. And who, then, can with any justice speak against it, when just punishment follows the sinner? Nor had I now any longer my wonted excuse, that as yet I hesitated to be above the world and serve You, because my perception of the truth was uncertain; for now it was certain. But I, still bound to the earth, refused to be Your soldier; and was as much afraid of being freed from all embarrassments, as we ought to fear to be embarrassed.

Original Sin

St Augustine, *Confessions* 1.7.11 ~ “Hearken, O God! Alas for the sins of men! Man says this, and You have compassion on him; for You created him, but did not create the sin that is in him. Who brings to my remembrance the sin of my infancy? For before You none is free from sin, not even the infant which has lived but a day upon the earth. Who brings this to my remembrance? Does not each little one, in whom I behold that which I do not remember of myself? In what, then, did I sin? Is it that I cried for the breast? If I should now so cry — not indeed for the breast, but for the food suitable to my years — I should be most justly laughed at and rebuked. What I then did deserved rebuke; but as I could not understand those who rebuked me, neither custom nor reason suffered me to be rebuked. For as we grow we root out and cast from us such habits. I have not seen any one who is wise, when *“purging”* John 15:2 anything cast away the good. Or

was it good, even for a time, to strive to get by crying that which, if given, would be hurtful — to be bitterly indignant that those who were free and its elders, and those to whom it owed its being, besides many others wiser than it, who would not give way to the nod of its good pleasure, were not subject unto it — to endeavour to harm, by struggling as much as it could, because those commands were not obeyed which only could have been obeyed to its hurt? Then, in the weakness of the infant's limbs, and not in its will, lies its innocency. I myself have seen and known an infant to be jealous though it could not speak. It became pale, and cast bitter looks on its foster-brother. Who is ignorant of this? Mothers and nurses tell us that they appease these things by I know not what remedies; and may this be taken for innocence, that when the fountain of milk is flowing fresh and abundant, one who has need should not be allowed to share it, though needing that nourishment to sustain life? Yet we look leniently on these things, not because they are not faults, nor because the faults are small, but because they will vanish as age increases. For although you may allow these things now, you could not bear them with equanimity if found in an older person.

See also **Romans 5:12-17**

The result of original sin is that we are hindered in our capacity to make good decisions and we are inclined to sin (concupiscence).

Freedom

Galatians 5 and Romans 8:21.

Freedom always acts within limits and decisions freely made limit future decisions. The freedom of one should not impinge on others. Issue relates to euthanasia where the freedom of one to be helped to die might mean others are cajoled into ending their life.

For Christians, freedom is not doing whatever we want, but whatever God wants.

The Pelagian Heresy

This named after fifth century controversy which over emphasised the freedom of individuals and our capacity to be good. This diminished the doctrine of original sin and undermined the baptism of infants.

The Donatist Heresy

This fourth century heresy related to whether a sin was forgivable or not. Remember our Lord says there is only one unforgivable sin, that against the

Holy Spirit, though His precise meaning is not clear (St Matthew 12:31-32). The Church decided there was no sin that obliterated that adoption received in Baptism nor one that meant a priest could cease to function as a priest.

Grace

All we have and are comes from God and is His gift. Grace enables us to live in intimate union with God and helps us to overcome our inclination to sin. We need to cooperate with it.

Discuss

How much does someone's experiences justify their actions? Should those who have had a difficult childhood be punished less for the crimes they commit or be held less responsible for their sins.

Session 3 ~ The Law.

What innate sense of right and wrong do we have and how does this relate to the Bible?

As we saw last week, original sin limits our ability to make decisions and this affects all people. Yet we do have an innate sense within us of what is right and a desire to do it. The eternal law is the phrase used to describe God's understanding of the world, which supremely contains all we need to know. However we can only know that fully when in Heaven. The presence of natural law assumes that God has made a world where it can only be possible that certain things are wrong.

Mosaic Law

God gives His people the Law on Mount Sinai through Moses (Exodus 20). Many of it contains that which might be easily discerned and seen as obvious (see below) but some would be a struggle to know from observing the world, eg. the second commandment on Idolatry (Exodus 20:4-6). The process of this law being given emphasises the need for revelation of the law: it wasn't discovered by Moses through internal prayer, but revealed by God up a mountain.

Natural Law

In the Bible there is some assumption that the Gentiles may too share in the promises of salvation (Amos 1:3-2:8). There is also in Romans 2:14 an acknowledgement from St Paul that it is possible for those not bound by the Law of Moses to fulfil its requirements. This perhaps ought not surprise us

when we consider that God created everything and that the world reveals something of who God is and how He is to be praised (Psalm 19; Wisdom 11:20). For this reason too have Christian writers sought wisdom from pagans (eg. Paul in Acts 17:22-28 and St Thomas Aquinas often quoting Plato and Socrates).

See Romans 1:18-25.

St Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) articulates natural law in his *Summa Theologiae* and teaches that some principles are shared among creation, including the preservation of life, the protection of offspring and the creation of a human society where individuals can know God. Certain injunctions flow from these three core principles, Aquinas asserts, but they can be overridden by divine law (eg. the command to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22). Aquinas reminds us that natural law cannot be a substitute for knowing God.

Natural law becomes a contested area in **modern ethics** concerning issues like contraception, but is less contentious when it comes to workers' rights. Some debate whether natural law permits exceptions. For example, can abortion be permissible in some instances but not in others?

When it comes to the inherent right to life the question of a **Just War** inevitably comes up. There are situations when the Church envisages a war could be fought: as a last resort, if success is realistic and would lead to peace, if legal and seeking only to correct committed wrongs. The way the war is fought must also be proportionate. Bishop George Bell argued in the House of Lords during World War II that UK bombing of German cities was in breach of this code as civilians were being killed.

From natural law comes the language of **rights** and the assumption that these are inalienable. It should be noted that societies at different times have gone against these eg polygamy.

Recent Catholic teaching has emphasised how an understanding of natural law means Christians can work with non-Christians for the common good with a shared language **Pope Benedict XVI** speaking in 2007 in a speech entitled, *The Human Person, the Heart of Peace*:

“The transcendent “grammar,” that is to say the body of rules for individual action and the reciprocal relationships of persons in accordance with justice and solidarity, is inscribed on human consciences, in which the wise plan of God is reflected. As I recently had occasion to reaffirm: “we believe that at the beginning of everything is

the Eternal Word, Reason and not Unreason.” Peace is thus also a task demanding of everyone a personal response consistent with God's plan. The criterion inspiring this response can only be respect for the “grammar” written on human hearts by the divine Creator.

“From this standpoint, the norms of the natural law should not be viewed as externally imposed decrees, as restraints upon human freedom. Rather, they should be welcomed as a call to carry out faithfully the universal divine plan inscribed in the nature of human beings. Guided by these norms, all peoples —within their respective cultures—can draw near to the greatest mystery, which is the mystery of God. Today too, recognition and respect for natural law represents the foundation for a dialogue between the followers of the different religions and between believers and non-believers. As a great point of convergence, this is also a fundamental presupposition for authentic peace.”

Some recent Christian moral theologians, Stanley Hauerwas and Oliver O’Donovan, state there is an ontological (being) and epistemological (knowing) difference. The existence of the natural law and its dependence on God is undeniable. The **knowledge** of it, however, is harder to gain without revelation. There is some unease in certain moral discussions in labelling certain things as natural, especially concerning sexual ethics. There is also increasing awareness that it is difficult to say somethings “just are” in distinction to others. One commentator, Michael Banner, reflects: “what is known as natural cannot, as a matter of fact, be securely naturally known” (Christian Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems, 1999).

Legalism

Influential in Christian twentieth century was the Protestant writer, Karl **Barth**. He generally denied the presence and reliability of a set of laws innately at work within us. Nor did He see the Bible as providing such moral universal rules. In contrast he emphasised the revelation of God in His Son Jesus Christ. There’s a danger that this becomes individualistic: “God has told me this is right and therefore I can do it.” Barth perhaps also showed that although he spurned natural law he was actually still influenced by universal laws in articulating, for example, that self defence of nations was a just reason to go to war.

G.K. **Chesterson**, “Orthodoxy,” (1908), “Those countries in Europe which are still influenced by priests, are exactly the countries where there is still singing and dancing and coloured dresses and art in the open-air. Catholic

doctrine and discipline may be walls; but they are the walls of a playground. Christianity is the only frame which has preserved the pleasure of Paganism. We might fancy some children playing on the flat grassy top of some tall island in the sea. So long as there was a wall round the cliff's edge they could fling themselves into every frantic game and make the place the noisiest of nurseries. But the walls were knocked down, leaving the naked peril of the precipice. They did not fall over; but when their friends returned to them they were all huddled in terror in the centre of the island; and their song had ceased."

Pope Francis has apparently said, "Attachment to the Law ignores the Holy Spirit. It does not grant that the redemption of Christ goes forward with the Holy Spirit, it ignores that. There is only the Law... It is true that there are the Commandments and we have to follow the Commandments – but always through the grace of this great gift that the Father has given us, His Son, and the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Vatican Reports on CNA, 2016)

The Law of the Spirit

Remember the passage looked at last week from Galatians 5: the life of the Spirit to which we are called still necessitates a certain set of behaviours.

Are some issues outside the concept of universal laws? What do we think about fox hunting, genetic engineering, climate change, for example? Are they easily fit into laws? Are there other similar issues?

Is there a conflict when, for example, bringing up children or setting up educational policies in schools, between creating a sense of wonder and independent learning, and insisting there are certain universal norms?

Session 4 : Duties and Consequences

Note: neither of these schools of ethical thought are essentially Christian.

It's worth remembering that there are three elements to a decision which impact its moral character: circumstance, object and intention. These are given varying preference in the categories below.

Deontological Ethics

This comes from the Greek word for duty.

The rightness of an action is the all important thing in this mood of thinking. **Immanuel Kant** (1724-1804) was the main proponent, arguing that our will and its intention to do good are the most important thing when

discerning what is morally right. In line with Enlightenment theories he believed individuals should not be influenced by their own inclinations nor reason garnered from experiences nor external moral authorities but only reason that is pure. The existence of God, Kant argued, cannot be proved and His will is ultimately indiscernible. Such reason, Kant argued, can create categorical imperatives, i.e. universal rules we would want to follow obtained by unalloyed reason, eg. a parent who says to a child, "what would happen if everyone scribbled on the walls of this room?" The categorical imperative that trumps all else is a will to do right. Another mode for discerning whether something is right is to extrapolate a universal principle from your action, for example is it always right to borrow money from someone, saying you will pay it back while knowing full well you won't?

Some argue whether the pursuit of pure reason is realistic and therefore whether it is fair to expect individuals to arrive at these imperatives? A further question is whether everyone really has to reinvent the wheel for themselves if there are no external moral authorities? Kant was sometimes quite extreme: in one debate he argued that it was not alright to lie to protect the life of someone if the would-be murderer asked where someone was.

Christian ethics, especially where influenced by Aristotle, have emphasised the pursuit of happiness and flourishing. This aim cannot be considered important if pursuing a deontological goal of strict observance of duty: here principle seems to be more important. This criticism can be made of some rigorous Christian ethicists as well as of Kant and the Deontological school. Some modern Christian writers, like Pinkaers, believe more emphasis should be given to the Beatitudes (St Matthew 5:1-12) and St Paul's teaching on being united to God, alive with the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). Indeed Jesus warns that it is not right simply to adhere to laws and neglect the needs of others (St Luke 11:42 ~ "But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and herbs of all kinds, and neglect justice and the love of God; it is these you ought to have practised, without neglecting the others").

Duties also conflict with each other. A parent has a duty to feed a child but does this ever override the duty not to steal?

Some Christians have tried to harmonise the Faith with Deontology, eg. Paul Ramsey. He observes that we believe God creates a covenant with His people with responsibilities and obligations.

Consequentialist/Teleological Ethics

Within this school of thought is **Utilitarianism**, articulated by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1842) and continued by John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). There are in life, he argued, pleasures and pains. Inevitably our decisions will cause pain for some and pleasures for others and so, he argued, the measure against which we make our decisions should be the greatest good for the greatest number of people. This has proved attractive to non-religious people as a pragmatic way of articulating a common morality which is garnered from common sense. Mills' work focused on the reform of the administration of justice in Britain at the time.

The definition of pleasure and happiness is tricky though: can a delight gained from eating nice food or listening to your favourite music be equated to showing a love for another?

One major problem with this way of doing things is that we can't always determine what the consequences of our actions will be. It is difficult to know what the consequences of sexual activity will be or indeed who will get hurt when we say or do something. A further complication is that it could be argued that anything is permitted as long as the majority of people benefit, eg. stoning someone for adultery could be seen as good if everyone else in the town feels better and is reminded of the sanctity of the marriage; it doesn't matter if one person dies as long as everyone else is happy. Imagine a large person is blocking the exit to the cave, which means a group of people cannot get out. The tide is rising and everyone will drown unless the large person is removed. The group have a stick of dynamite. Are they permitted to blow the person up so they can escape?

A further problem is that the ends can justify the means, i.e. it could be perfectly moral to do anything if it created a greater good. Is it alright to kidnap and torture the daughter of a terrorist if it means he will reveal where a bomb is in a large shopping centre?

Session 5 : Virtues

In our day-to-day life we habitually make decisions about what we are going to do in a split second. We don't have time to consult the authorities or to consider different options: we just do it. Sometimes we need to slow down so we make better decisions. The formation of character also ensures when we have to make decisions at speed we are still making the right decision. We're not meant just to make generous donations but by forming

ourselves into being generous people we will make better decisions at how we are generous.

Scripture Passages

See Romans 5:1-5 and Wisdom 8:7.

Introduction

St Thomas Aquinas defines virtues as the “**disposition to act well.**” The Church inherited talk of virtue from the Greek thought that existed before Our Lord’s birth. Plato (fifth century BC) articulated four virtues which became the cardinal virtues of the Christian Faith: courage, temperance, prudence and justice. Aristotle (fourth century BC) developed the idea of virtue emphasising the need to practise so as to become virtuous and the understanding of a virtue as a mean between two extremes (eg. courage being the happy middle between cowardice and rashness). They didn’t believe in God but they did assert that these virtues were best acquired through seeing the world as a substantiating of eternal forms.

We’ve seen in Galatians 5:22-23 a **list of qualities** of those driven by the Spirit and we might look to I Corinthians 13:3 for others. St Ambrose, St Gregory the Great and St Augustine of Hippo make concrete the Christian adoption of the language of virtues. To the cardinal virtues (above) were added the theological ones of faith, hope and love. Aquinas emphasises that the theological virtues need to be infused by God.

The Christian writers on the moral virtues are united in thinking they work hand in hand with each other, one will not excel in three but not on a fourth.

The Cardinal/Moral Virtues

Prudence has nothing to do with being prudish or unadventurous. It is practical wisdom. Prudence is the source of the other virtues. Josef Piper, “To the contemporary mind, the concept of the good rather excludes than include prudence. Modern man cannot conceive of a good act which might not be imprudent nor of a bad act which might not be prudent. He will often call lies and cowardice prudent, truthfulness and courageous sacrifice imprudent.” Prudence links to our conscience’s ability to discern what is good and to the implementation thereof. Piper suggests the prudence can be encouraged through fostering a good memory, encouraging an open-mindedness and a detachment in life that enables us to decide calmly. Applying Scripture to everyday life will aid us in this endeavour.

Justice is “the constant and firm will to give their due to God and neighbour,” as defined by St Thomas Aquinas. Modern society has restricted the sense of justice somewhat, associating it to the righting of wrongs but the virtue is considered in a broader context. It ensures the individual is put in a proper ordering within society. In a democracy the responsibility is placed upon an individual to vote according to her/his own interest alongside the wider benefit.

Charitable giving is a realm where we might consider what it is prudent and just for us to give.

Fortitude is firmness in the face of difficulties in pursuit of the good. It assumes a vulnerability: angels cannot be courageous as they have no such openness to attack. In St Matthew 5:39, we see Our Lord’s teaching to turn the other cheek yet when Jesus is Himself struck He challenges Him (St John 18:23). Fortitude is a willingness to die. It works in partnership with the other virtue through an assessment of real danger, ensuring one is not foolish and that one pursues a just cause.

Temperance again has modern connotations which must not mislead us. Do not think nineteenth century American movements abstaining entirely from alcohol. Temperance is about self-control and self-love. One danger with modern understandings of temperance is that there is an assumption the physical is bad and the spiritual is good whereas we believe God made us spiritual and physical, and He gazes upon both elements of us and sees that they are “very good.” Temperance is not to be a fear of exuberance. Pieper: “Temperance is selfless self-preservation” i.e. we look at ourselves without becoming turned in on ourselves. If self-love becomes the end, it is perverse.

The Theological Virtues

Faith is the “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen,” (Hebrews 11:1). Even those who do not believe in God live in some sense by faith, for example that some things will flow from actions even though they may not fully understand why (eg. lights turning on when you press a switch; car switching on when you turn a key). The virtue of faith is not, however, simply a generic ability to believe in stuff. Faith is belief in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Hope is a recognition of the restlessness with which Christians live as they seek to be more closely united to God (St Augustine of Hippo: “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you, O Lord,”).

Love is the greatest of the virtues (I Corinthians 13:13). It is sometimes referred to as charity, but without the connotations that go with it, sometimes linked to pity or disdain. Love unites us to God and enables supreme participation in His life.

Some contemporary Christian commentators like Alasdair MacIntyre have argued that deontological and teleological approaches to ethics like utilitarianism (see last week's notes) have become **defunct** because the moral debates have changed and become more complicated such as for example, access to healthcare and equality of opportunity. He also argues that these schools of thought failed because they tried to replicate the products of the Christian Faith without appealing to the authorities of the Church and the Scriptures.

MacIntyre has emphasised the needs for virtuous communities where morality can flourish. This has been taken up over the last thirty years by many writers.

Virtues and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit

St Thomas Aquinas makes the following connection with the gifts listed Isaiah 11:1-3:

Charity ~ Wisdom

Hope ~ Fear of the Lord

Faith ~ Knowledge

Prudence ~ Counsel

Justice ~ Piety

Fortitude ~ Fortitude

Temperance ~ Fear of the Lord

Further readings

One book worth reading if you wish to follow up more on these issues is Alasdair MacIntyre's *After virtue* (1985). A lot of today's examples have come from Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*.

Session 6 : Protestant and Catholic

Introduction

We will perhaps realise there are few overall differences between the approach of the main division within Western Christianity, which may surprise us. There has also been a convergence in the last fifty years. I don't claim to know enough about Pentecostalism to see how clearly it falls in to the Protestant camp. Often the divisions within Christianity on such issues are not between Catholic and Protestant but conservative and liberal. There will be some overlap but, for example, not all Conservatives are Catholics.

The relationship of the Church of England between these two camps is not necessarily some middle way. Richard Hooker (1553-1600) defined the post-Reformation Anglican settlement as being both Catholic and Reformed. He articulated that certain moral issues were not covered by Scriptural teachings and other authorities were needed, which differentiated Anglican belief from Protestant practice.

The Place of Commandments

Two schools of thought Nominalism and Voluntarism of thirteenth century lead to an academic debate of could God command someone to hate and if He did and the person obeyed, would that person be doing the right thing? William Ockham, of these two schools of thought, believed God could.

Edward Dowler asserts that this leads to commandment-heavy approach in Catholic ethic thinking but wonders if this might be being reviewed in, for example, *Veritatis Splendor* (The Splendour of Truth) published by Pope St John Paul II in 1993. This document begins with the question posed by the rich young man in St Matthew 19:16-22.

The Splendour of Truth, 1993

8. People today need to turn to Christ once again in order to receive from him the answer to their questions about what is good and what is evil. Christ is the Teacher, the Risen One who has life in himself and who is always present in his Church and in the world. It is he who opens up to the faithful the book of the Scriptures and, by fully revealing the Father's will, teaches the truth about moral action. At the source and summit of the economy of salvation, as the Alpha and the Omega of human history (cf. Rev 1:8; 21:6; 22:13), Christ sheds light on man's condition and his integral vocation.

10. The moral life presents itself as the response due to the many gratuitous initiatives taken by God out of love for man. It is a response of love, according to the statement made in Deuteronomy about the fundamental commandment: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children" (Dt 6:4-7). Thus the moral life, caught up in the gratuitousness of God's love, is called to reflect his glory: "For the one who loves God it is enough to be pleasing to the One whom he loves: for no greater reward should be sought than that love itself; charity in fact is of God in such a way that God himself is charity," (Pope St Leo the Great).

119. Such is the consoling certainty of Christian faith, the source of its profound humanity and extraordinary simplicity. At times, in the discussions about new and complex moral problems, it can seem that Christian morality is in itself too demanding, difficult to understand and almost impossible to practise. This is untrue, since Christian morality consists, in the simplicity of the Gospel, in following Jesus Christ, in abandoning oneself to him, in letting oneself be transformed by his grace and renewed by his mercy, gifts which come to us in the living communion of his Church.

This is part of the **Eythphro** dilemma which asks whether something is wrong because God's ordains it or does God ordain it because it is good.

Protestantism has little concept of tradition other than with reference to how Scripture has been interpreted. Protestantism has perhaps been more comfortable in recent years with thinking about kingdom values and the effect of being reborn in Christ on the way individuals behave. This leads to a language of virtues and a lesser reliance on the Commandments.

The Nature of Good Works

The emphasis on Justification by Faith in Reformation Protestantism meant some sects became so wacky that they even questioned whether moral behaviour was in anyway necessary for someone to live in union with Jesus Christ. The famous example from history is a small German town called Munster where in 1534 the Anabaptists took control of the city and compelled everyone to be baptised again. Within a year they had become

even more extreme and polygamy was compulsory. The city was eventually sieged and reconquered.

Martin Luther is the source of the priority of faith for Protestant Reformers and so there is a question within Protestantism about whether those without Faith can do anything truly good if it happens outside of the Church.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, (1937) criticises his own German Lutheran Church for preaching a cheap grace: "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline. Communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

"Do we realize that this cheap grace has turned back upon us like a boomerang? The price we are having to pay today in the shape of the collapse of the organized Church is only the inevitable consequence of our policy of making grace available to all at too low a cost. We gave away the word and sacraments wholesale, we baptized, confirmed, and absolved a whole nation unasked and without condition. Our humanitarian sentiment made us give that which was holy to the scornful and unbelieving. We poured forth unending streams of grace. But the call to follow Jesus in the narrow way was hardly ever heard."

Catholic theology always makes space for considering someone's intent when discerning whether an action is good or not.

The Place of Scripture

We will remember that the triple mechanism of Scripture, Tradition and Reason classically has different emphasis within the Christian traditions. Protestants focus on Scripture and Catholics will also include Tradition. With the dawning of new situations (medical ethics, living in a world where individualism is rife) Protestantism has had to think afresh about Revelation in God revealing His will on issues which were not imagined in the Scriptures.

One Anglican ethicist has observed: "Interpreters who think they can determine the proper ethical application of the Bible solely through more sophisticated exegesis are like people who believe that they can fly if only they flap their arms hard enough."

Since Vatican II in the 1960s there has been much a greater emphasis within Catholic teaching on the Scriptures.

The language of sin

By and large, Catholics will talk of *sins* and Protestants of *sin*. The question emerges early of how to reconcile individuals within the Christian community (see for example St Matthew 18, below). At different times in the Church's history there have been declared certain things to have been unforgivable, such as the Novatianist heresy of the 250s where Novatian was proposed as pope by a faction who believed those who had lapsed in the faith during the previous persecution could not be readmitted to Holy Communion.

It was in 1215 that the Church first formulated an annual requirement on Christians to make their confession once a year to their priest. This focuses intently on particular events in individual's lives which can sometimes be unhelpful if it ignores the broader picture but can also be extremely valuable.

In Catholic theology there is a distinction between a mortal and a venial sin. This is from the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

1854 Sins are rightly evaluated according to their gravity. The distinction between mortal and venial sin, already evident in Scripture,¹²⁹ became part of the tradition of the Church. It is corroborated by human experience.

1855 Mortal sin destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God's law; it turns man away from God, who is his ultimate end and his beatitude, by preferring an inferior good to him.

Venial sin allows charity to subsist, even though it offends and wounds it.

1856 Mortal sin, by attacking the vital principle within us - that is, charity - necessitates a new initiative of God's mercy and a conversion of heart which is normally accomplished within the setting of the sacrament of reconciliation:

When the will sets itself upon something that is of its nature incompatible with the charity that orients man toward his ultimate end, then the sin is mortal by its very object . . . whether it contradicts the love of God, such as blasphemy or perjury, or the love of neighbour, such as homicide or adultery. . . . But when the sinner's will is set upon something that of its nature involves a disorder, but is not opposed to the love of God and neighbour, such as thoughtless chatter or immoderate laughter and the like, such sins are venial. (St Thomas Aquinas)

1857 For a sin to be mortal, three conditions must together be met: "Mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent."

1858 Grave matter is specified by the Ten Commandments, corresponding to the answer of Jesus to the rich young man: "Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honour your father and your mother." The gravity of sins is more or less great: murder is graver than theft. One must also take into account who is wronged: violence against parents is in itself graver than violence against a stranger.

Protestants by-and-large do not make individual confession of their sin but it is covered by general confessions during public worship.

The Church of England's understanding of Confession is often misunderstood. Its presence is assumed in her post-Reformation liturgies, eg. from the Visitation of the Sick in the Book of Common Prayer below.

See St Matthew 18:15-22.

Book of Common Prayer, The Visitation of the Sick

Then shall the Minister examine whether he repent him truly of his sins, and be in charity with all the world; exhorting him to forgive, from the bottom of his heart, all persons that have offended him; and if he have offended any other, to ask them forgiveness; and where he hath done injury or wrong to any man, that he make amends to the uttermost of his power. And if he have not before disposed of his goods, let him then be admonished to make his Will, and to declare his debts, what he oweth, and what is owing unto him; for the better discharging of his conscience, and the quietness of his Executors. But men should often be put in remembrance to take order for the settling of their temporal estates whilst they are in health.

These words before rehearsed may be said before the Minister begin his Prayer, as he shall see cause.

The Minister should not omit earnestly to move such sick persons as are of ability to be liberal to the poor.

Here shall the sick person be moved to make a special confession of his sins, if he feel his conscience troubled with any weighty matter. After which confession, the Priest shall absolve him (if he humbly and heartily desire it) after this sort.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath left power to his Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in him, of his great mercy forgive thee thine offences: And by his authority committed to me, I absolve thee from all thy sins, In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Discuss What would Jesus do with refugees to this country?

Session 7 ~ Modern Developments

How does Black Theology, Feminism and Science affect the way we make ethical decisions?

Liberation theology was a name given to emphases that emerged in the 1960s from the experiences of the Latin American churches.

This session more than others looks at political ideologies, which it might be worth defining at this stage:

Free market capitalism believes the industry of the nation is best managed by individuals rather than by the Government/the State.

Socialism asserts that that this control of the means of production should be owned by the community, usually through the Government.

Marxism was founded by Karl Max, a great critic of the Christian faith and its emphasis on humility and abasement. **Communism** abolishes private ownership so that individuals own nothing except that which is given them by the State.

Some generalities on Liberation Theology:

- practice is more important than theory
- negative view of established attitudes and practices

Latin American Liberation Theology

In the 1960s, those who led the Church were concerned that the Church had too often colluded in keeping the poor trapped in poverty. **Gustavo Gutierrez** was one such leader. Born in 1928 in Peru he is a Roman Catholic priest and Dominican. He was wheelchair bound as a teenager. who said this in an interview:

“Our context today is characterized by a glaring disparity between the rich and the poor. No serious Christian can quietly ignore this situation. It is no longer possible for someone to say, “Well, I didn’t know” about

the suffering of the poor. Poverty has a visibility today that it did not have in the past. The faces of the poor must now be confronted. And we also understand the causes of poverty and the conditions that perpetuate it. There was a time when poverty was considered to be an unavoidable fate, but such a view is no longer possible or responsible. Now we know that poverty is not simply a misfortune; it is an injustice.

“Of course, there always remains the practical question: what must we do in order to abolish poverty? Theology does not pretend to have all the technical solutions to poverty, but it reminds us never to forget the poor and also that God is at stake in our response to poverty. An active concern for the poor is not only an obligation for those who feel a political vocation; all Christians must take the Gospel message of justice and equality seriously. Christians cannot forgo their responsibility to say a prophetic word about unjust economic conditions. Pope John Paul II’s approach to the phenomenon of globalization is a good example. He constantly asks: “How is this going to affect the poor? Does it promote justice?”

“We can see from the Magnificat that, when Mary rejoices in God, she is also celebrating the liberating action of God in history. Mary rejoices in a God who is faithful to the poor. Our service of others must be wrapped in this joy. Only work embraced with joy truly transforms.”

There is an emphasis on economic oppression and **conflict** being necessary to resolve injustice, perhaps as seen by our Lord in overturning the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple (St John 2:13-25). Gutierrez has written: “Universal love is that which in solidarity with the oppressed seeks also to liberate the oppressors from their own power, from their own ambition and from their selfishness.” There was always a wider recognition in Christianity that the Church was not just concerned with saving souls but helping folk, eg. Pope St John XXIII in *Mater et Magistra* (“Mother and Teacher”):

“Though the Church’s first care must be for souls, how she can sanctify them and make them share in the gifts of heaven, she concerns herself too with the exigencies of man’s daily life, with his livelihood and education, and his general, temporal welfare and prosperity.

...

“When Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life,” (St John 14:6) “I am the light of the world,” (St John 8:12) it was doubtless man’s eternal salvation that was uppermost in His mind, but He showed His

concern for the material welfare of His people when, seeing the hungry crowd of His followers, He was moved to exclaim: "I have compassion on the multitude," (St Mark 8:2). And these were no empty words of our divine Redeemer. Time and again He proved them by His actions, as when He miraculously multiplied bread to alleviate the hunger of the crowds.

Bread it was for the body, but it was intended also to foreshadow that other bread, that heavenly food of the soul, which He was to give them on the night before He suffered.

One of Pope Francis' documents, "**Fratelli Tutti**": "The right to private property can only be considered a secondary natural right, derived from the principle of the universal destination of created goods." (§120) This continued the tradition earlier in Papal documents (**Quadragesimo Anno**, 1931): "The function of the rulers of the State, moreover, is to watch over the community and its parts; but in protecting private individuals in their rights, chief consideration ought to be given to the weak and the poor," (§25).

"For they have always unanimously maintained that nature, rather the Creator Himself, has given man the right of private ownership not only that individuals may be able to provide for themselves and their families but also that the goods which the Creator destined for the entire family of mankind may through this institution truly serve this purpose. All this can be achieved in no wise except through the maintenance of a certain and definite order.

"Accordingly, twin rocks of shipwreck must be carefully avoided. For, as one is wrecked upon, or comes close to, what is known as 'individualism' by denying or minimizing the social and public character of the right of property, so by rejecting or minimizing the private and individual character of this same right, one inevitably runs into 'collectivism' or at least closely approaches its tenets." (§45-46).

Emphasise the need to read the **Scriptures** from the point of view of the oppressed. Passages like the Exodus are important: God wants His people released from the oppression of Pharaoh. Elsewhere the exploitation of others is condemned, including **Micah 2:2-3** "They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress householder and house, people and their inheritance. **3** Therefore, thus says the Lord: Now, I am devising against this family an evil from which you cannot remove your

necks." Jesus reinforces this message proclaiming good news to the poor (St Luke 4:16-19) and warning the rich (St Matthew 19:24).

There are problematic passages in Liberation Theology, perhaps, like the exhortation in **Romans 13:1-6** to follow the governing authorities: "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. **2** Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement. **3** For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; **4** for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. **5** Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. **6** For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing."

The relationship between Christianity and the **ordering of society ('the class system')** has always been tricky. Pope Leo XIII in writing *Rerum Novarum* used the analogy of body and members in Romans 14 as a model for society, encouraging folk to bear with patience their lot in life. 70 years later, Pope John XXIII seemed to modify the position somewhat: "Both workers and employers should regulate their mutual relations in accordance with the principle of human solidarity and Christian brotherhood. Unrestricted competition in the liberal sense, and the Marxist creed of class warfare; are clearly contrary to Christian teaching and the nature of man." (*Mater et Magister*, §23).

Movement of St Oscar Romero to the the practice of the preferential option for the poor. God's love, it is argued, is both universal and particular: God loves everyone and loves us individually and as such will love the poor in a way He does not the rich. In St Matthew 25:40, we're told that when we serve those less fortunate we are serving Jesus. In the Old Testament the formulation is usually "The widow, the orphan and the stranger" in Deuteronomy 16:11-12, Exodus 22:21-27 et al.

There is a language of Kingdom values within liberation values, linked to the judgement envisaged in Matthew 25:31ff, our Lord's words on the first and the last (St Matthew 20:16) and His teaching on the humble being exalted (St Luke 18:9-14).

Black Liberation Theologies

Starting point of the South American Liberation Theological hermeneutical cycle (i.e. the way they read the Bible) is the experience of oppression. Similarly in Black Liberation Theologies, the conversation begins with the experience of racism. eg. **James Cone** (1938-2018). Cone was a Methodist from the United States and believed White Church could not not possibly understand the plight of the oppressed and the message of Jesus. In 2010 he wrote: "The black theologian must reject any conception of God which stifles black self-determination by picturing God as a God of all peoples. Either God is identified with the oppressed to the point that their experience becomes God's experience, or God is a God of racism. ... The blackness of God means that God has made the oppressed condition God's own condition. This is the essence of the biblical revelation. By electing Israelite slaves as the people of God and by becoming the Oppressed One in Jesus Christ, the human race is made to understand that God is known where human beings experience humiliation and suffering. ... Liberation is not an afterthought, but the very essence of divine activity."

Discuss

Is protest ever the right Christian option? What form should it take? How is it different to striking?

How much profit should individuals be able to make on selling items? Should this be regulated?

Should people be allowed to charge interest on loans?

Feminist Theology

Much of the life of the Church could be attacked as being evidence of a male dominance: use of male pronouns for God (Him/His), male-only priesthood, predominance of male figures in the Bible and among the Saints.

Sex is a biological differentiation between men and women but gender is generally seen as a set of social norms which an individual can elect. It's a minefield and one that increasingly complicated to navigate. Kindness and respect must always be foremost in our dealings with others.

Susan Parsons *Feminism and Christian Ethics* argues that there are three paradigms which can help improve theology. (1) Liberal, emphasising the similarity between men and women and the Lord's own close relationship with women in a way seen as radical at the time. (2) That much of what

people believe it is to be a woman is a social construct rather than biological inherent, eg. rational vs emotional. There is a debate here often about the level of expectation placed on women to look after their children. (3) There are some natural differences in approach to subjects that separate men from women, the latter being more caring, the former preferring rules. Society, it argues, is programmed to favour male approaches.

Often there is overlap in individuals who argue for these various liberation theologies and they will differ in which they think is more important, eg. is racism a more important problem than feminism? Some theologians of colour prefer to use the term womanist rather than feminist to distinguish themselves from white middle class theologians.

Discuss

Is abortion an issue related to feminism?

Science

It affects the Abortion debate by introducing another reason some give for having an abortion, namely that we now know that someone will be born with particular disabilities or conditions.

Science will continue affect the way we make moral decisions.

Does our awareness of how the brains of animals work mean society understands they have feelings and therefore feels less inclined to kill them for food?

We can artificially sustain human life. It therefore feels like we are ending life when questions arise about turning off life support machines.

Would discovery of evidence of intelligent life on a different planet undermine the Christian Faith? Answer: no.

Bibliography for the whole series

Fr Morris is indebted to two main works through this series, which you may wish to read to explore issues further: Neil Messer, *Christian Ethics* and Edward Dowler, *Theological Ethics*.