

Christian Ethics 1

by John Sandys-Wunsch

If you read the *Anglican Journal* or the *Diocesan Post* regularly you will be aware of a certain amount of commotion going on within the Canadian Church about some Anglicans betraying the essentials of the faith by crumbling under the pressure of the world and so on. I must admit that I too am appalled - not by supposed apostasy but by the lack of knowledge and even clear argument in some of the contributions. Much of the debate centres around ethics which is not a county in England like Thuthex but the grounds on which we decide between right and wrong.

One should always return to the great classical statements of ideas, so in the case of ethics I like to begin with the standard work on the subject namely a very old record by Flanders and Swan called *At the Drop of a Hat*. If you ever find an old copy buy it. One of the items on it is a song about a small boy who refuses to eat his dinner - not of itself unusual - but in this case since he belongs to a cannibal tribe there is a moral component to his case. As the song goes on, in answer to his father's reasonable arguments about cannibalism, the little boy simply digs in his heels and repeats "Won't eat people, won't eat people, eating people is wrong." Finally the father solves the problem by suggesting that you might just as well say "Fighting people is wrong" which the boy readily agrees is ridiculous.

This lack of consistency in ethical thinking is not unrelated to those who get quite vehement about one special issue in sexual morality but seem somewhat imperturbed by things like hunger, poverty misery, and a rising tide of crass materialism.

So in the next two sermons I would like to discuss Christian ethics; today I want to talk about our Lord's ethical teaching as found in the New Testament and next Sunday I hope to discuss the issue of whether Christian ethics can change.

I sometimes hear talk about biblical ethics as if it were one, simple, uncontested system clearly laid down in the Bible. I would have thought there was quite a gap between Leviticus' law that adulterers should be executed by stoning and our Lord's dangerously liberal attitude to the woman taken in adultery. But what is the situation?

To read the Sermon on the Mount is an inspiring experience; one can think of various phrases "Blessed are the peacemakers" or "It was told of old time that you should do such and such, but I say unto you...." But how does it work in practice? When I was university teacher I always thought that it was my basic right to afflict my students. So when I came to the Sermon on the Mount I would say to them, let's assume that we are setting out to live our lives according to the Sermon on the Mount and let's see how this will work out.

Then I would give them a little problem to solve. I said, suppose you are on a limited budget and all you have to buy a week's groceries for your family of four is \$100. Obviously this is not a great deal of money - you will have your work cut out to get even the basics for this amount of money. So you set off. As you are on your way you pass through one of the less fashionable parts of town you are approached by a grubby character who asks you for a handout to go and buy a

glass of warm milk and behind him you see a whole row of similar people who if you give to the first will also ask you for money. And you know that whatever else they will be buying it will not be milk though it will be a beverage found in the sort of dairy the government runs. So your first reaction is to say no, but then you remember that in the Sermon on the Mount it says "Give to him that asks, and from him who begs withdraw not your hand." So I would say to the class, what do you do?

The answers would be of two types, neither of them really tenable. To those who said, give these fellows the money I would say, so your family goes hungry in order to give a few deadbeats a good drink? To those who said, do not give him the money, I would say But the Sermon on the Mount, which only a moment ago you agreed to try to live by, says, give - it does not say anything about the recipient being worthy or about your own financial situation.

Having made life miserable for my students I would then suggest other problems such as suppose someone forces you to carry a burden one mile, should you offer to go the second mile if you have a heart condition? One question I used to set on exams which no one ever attempted was "should the motto of a Christian navy be, If someone torpedoes you on the port side, turn to him the starboard side also?"

The reason why all my classes without exception had trouble with these little problems is that they treated the Sermon on the Mount as a strict ethical system with laws laid down about what you should do in a given situation. In fact what the Sermon on the Mount is, is a collection of artificial examples showing what love would do in the abstract - nothing is there of all the circumstances that surround any real decision in everyday life - what will be the effect of your decision be on other people, is this really fair to you or to those whom you are responsible for, and so on. What we are given is a radically new and demanding insight into what love might be - how we apply that insight is sometimes very difficult indeed. The result is that Jesus' ethical teaching is an invitation to make decisions about how to express love in the mixed up world of everyday life where clear-cut choices between absolute good and absolute evil are seldom found.

One of the best interpretations of the meaning of the Sermon on the Mount is found not in the textbooks on the subject but in the novel *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoevsky where a parable is told about how a Grand Inquisitor rebukes Jesus for giving humans too much responsibility for making decisions:

Instead of taking men's freedom from them, thou didst make it greater than ever. Didst thou forget that man prefers peace, and even death, to freedom of choice in the knowledge of good and evil? Nothing is more seductive for man than his freedom of conscience and nothing is so a great cause of suffering. And behold, instead of giving a firm foundation for setting the conscience of man at rest for ever, thou didst choose all that is exceptional, vague and enigmatic; thou didst choose what was utterly beyond the strength of men, acting as though thou didst not love them at all... - instead of taking possession of men's spiritual freedom, thou didst increase it... in place of the rigid ancient law, man must hereafter decide for himself what is good and what is evil, having only thy image before him as his guide.

We have already seen how deciding for oneself is difficult, but another of the points that the Grand Inquisitor is making here is that in a system of laws there is a great deal of comfort in that there is little choice. Let me show you the difference in a rather humdrum way. When one comes to

pay one's income tax certain things are fairly clear - either you have dependant children or you don't, you moved because of your job last year or you did not, you are over 65 or you are not and so on. Admittedly there are grey areas of interpretation, but in most cases once you tell the truth and pay accordingly that is it. Painful maybe, but final - done, finished. Now look at other ways we give up our money - to our church, charities, organizations we belong to and so on. Here this is entirely within our own choosing - nobody will force us to give so much to any of these undertakings - we have to decide for ourselves. If we choose to give nothing the only person we have to answer to is ourselves. But if we feel that it is part of being Christian citizens that we should be willing to give money for what is worthwhile, the question is, how much? Where does one draw the line - how much of our legitimate enjoyments do we give for others? Yet a look at our chequebooks tells us where our values lie.

A Christian look at how we spend our money - or our time for that matter - is never completely satisfactory - there is always the danger that we will have to choose between some treat we promised ourselves and a real need we have become aware of. At least income tax once paid is over; the Christian freedom to express love in our lives makes decisions necessary and these may well make the most inconvenient demands - and often there are more important things than money at stake, this is only the tip of the iceberg.

Yet the result of taking the Sermon on the Mount seriously is, paradoxically, freedom - Christian freedom. If we decide that we will say no to panhandlers but yes to the outreach fund, if we have to say no to some of the unreasonable demands of a complaining relative but we can still try to be of some help, if we refuse to acquiesce in the unreasonable hatred some people show and yet treat them with the respect all people deserve, then in making these decisions we become free which means the love of God can be reflected in some way in our lives.

Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount bring out what the driving force of Christian ethics must be, not obedience to cut and dried rules laid down for all eternity, but the expression of love, even to those we do not like or who are absolutely undeserving, just like our Father in Heaven who makes rain, which in Palestine is rare and absolutely necessary for survival, fall on the just and unjust alike. Next week I would like to discuss how this works out in practice and whether Christian perspectives on right and wrong can legitimately change.