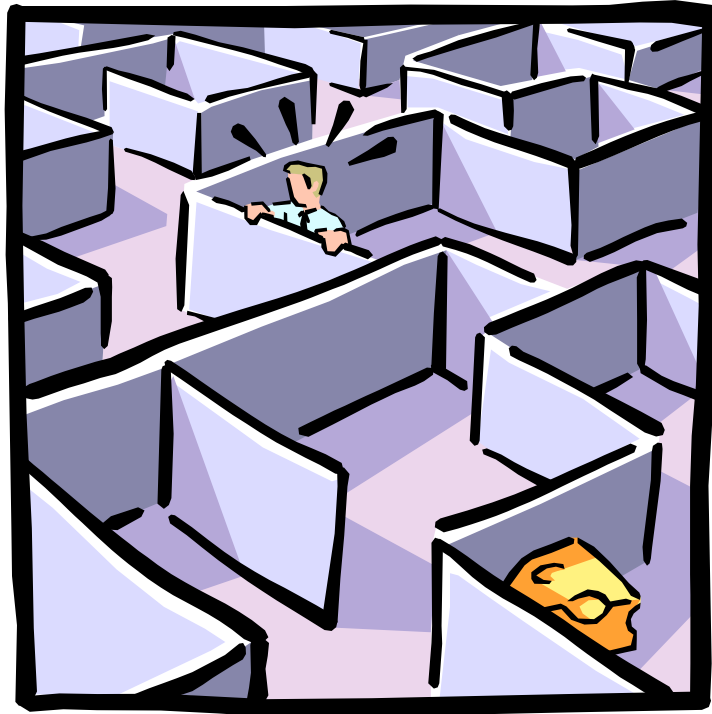


Ethics and the Bible



Entering the Moral Maze

‘This is the occupation of our life:
by effort and toil, by prayer and supplication,
to advance in the grace of God, until we come
to that height of perfection where with clean
hearts we may behold God.’

Saint Augustine

Prepared for Advent Bible Study Course
Reverend Charles Royden

Introduction

Using the Bible to do ethics

Ethics is that bit of our Christians faith which is concerned with how we act, it is the study of behaviour. Christians are very much concerned about the right kind of behaviour, Christianity is an ethical religion, this is not to say that Christians are always good, indeed many very wicked acts have been performed in the name of Christianity, by committed Christians. However Jesus encouraged his followers to behave in ways that were morally good. Some Bible studies are included in this course which help us to consider this. Undoubtedly our belief in God should be reflected in a lifestyle which is discernibly virtuous.

In considering ethics we find ourselves in extraordinary times. Whilst in some parts of the world certain societies are retreating into greater fundamentalism, in Britain and other parts of the world, there is a growing freedom and relaxing of moral restraint. The controls which were placed upon our ethical behaviour by the church and the state have been eroded and we are left in a society which has jettisoned many of the past codes of behaviour. Old traditional ways of doing things have been replaced instead with a rigorous questioning of past traditions.

This is not necessarily a bad thing. Education and access to information have led to an understanding that the ethical history of Christianity has not been something of which the church should be proud. It has been possible for the Christian conscience to become critically corrupted and downright evil. Subsequently, Christians have to be very careful in trying to take the moral high ground when Christianity has been responsible for providing divine justification for some very terrible things. The examples below show just a few of the evils which Christians have used their Bibles to justify.

The burning of witches was seen mandated by Exodus 22 v 18
“Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.”

Slavery was justified by Genesis 9:24. Races were considered descendants of the sons of Noah - white people from Jahphet,

Jewish people from Shem (Hence Semitic), and Black people from Ham. Ham's descendants were destined to be slaves.

Apartheid. This also provided racists with a biblical justification for segregation and apartheid. Humans were seen as either 'Aryan', 'Semitic' or 'African'. (See also Deut 32:8 & Acts 17:26)

Holocaust. If we want to find the roots for anti-semitism and the holocaust then we need look no further than one of the greatest Biblical Reformers, Martin Luther himself. In 1542 Martin Luther wrote a tract called, '*Against The Jews and Their Lies.*' which called them parasites and instructed 'set their synagogues and schools on fire.' The Jews had killed Christ, they should suffer a terrible fate.

It seems that often the very worst atrocities are committed by believers, whose crime is made demonstrably worse as a result of their faith. Often it is only time which exposes the paucity of our morals, we would think immediately of South Africa and apartheid which the church supported as a part of God's plan as set out in the Bible. This was exposed in our own lifetimes, but of course similar racist tendencies have been espoused by Christians across the world, in America and our own country. Segregation and apartheid are enormous sins of our generation, yet worryingly we seem to have been blinded to them.

Our ethical pronouncements have to be worthy of being weighed in the scales of justice and knee jerk appeals to religious superiority or greater authority cuts no ice. This study will seek to show that our ethical decisions need to be taken using the Bible and considering the traditions which have been passed down to us by Christians of previous generations. However this should not be done uncritically, we also need to include careful, prayerful thought about where things have gone wrong, and use the insight of other disciplines if we are to ask what may be applied in the future. Slavery was not stopped as a result of the Bible. The Bible is not a simple rule book and it is often ambiguous at best. Perhaps this is inevitable, since good ethics are often not a simple choice between God and the Devil. Our ethical judgement are more frequently complex choices between the lesser of two evils.

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral

This is a theory that is credited to John Wesley. The Quadrilateral says that there are four authorities that we should use for making our decisions - the Bible, Reason, Tradition, and Experience - explaining them as follows: These are the pillars of our faith

The Bible: If we believe in a transcendent God and the Bible is considered by the church to be the very highest written source of inspiration, then it should be treated as having extreme authority.

Reason: God has given us minds to think and make logical decisions. We need to listen to the best of human thinking to determine what can be learned from the minds which God has provided to help illuminate the subject. Disciplines from science, philosophy, indeed wherever we find intelligent input, should be engaged in the process.

Tradition: We need to consider what the church has thought about issues over a long period of time— the tradition of the church. If it was good enough for them, then perhaps there are good reasons why we might pay attention. Nevertheless we need to be mindful that the church has got it dramatically wrong in the past, with issues like women and slavery.

Experience: God has not written and given us a dusty old text book and then walked out of the class leaving us to get on with learning unaccompanied. As Christians we do believe that God's Word is a Living Word, made real through the presence of God's Spirit within the church. The church today wants to know the illumination of the Word through the Spirit, therefore we need to listen carefully to the experiences of others.

The Quadrilateral indicates that truth should ideally link all four parts together. In this course we are considering the Bible and not all of these four parts. However inevitably we will need to consider the other three components as we move towards forming our opinions.

So how can the Bible be helpful to us in making choices.?

Using the Bible is not an easy alternative

Any suggestion that using the Bible is an easy way of navigating through the moral maze is false. Indeed the presence of the Bible as such an important source of authority makes our task of ethics more difficult. Not only do we have to think carefully through all of our moral judgements using common sense, we also have to try and make them fit with what we think God might be saying to us through the Bible. Of course it would be easy if the Bible were a straightforward textbook with clear and detailed written instructions for life, but it is not!

1. The silence of the Bible on many ethical points

The first difficulty is that the Bible is **silent** about many ethical issues. As an example, obviously we would search the Bible in vain to find any mention of cloning or embryo research. The Bible never uses the word contraception and the idea of a contraceptive pill was unimaginable. Nevertheless this silence does not prevent millions of Roman Catholics being told categorically that the will of God is that they should not use contraception. To state the sin of using condoms in the face of massive HIV infection rates takes an extraordinary confidence that our ethical position is absolutely right. My own ethical journey would have to reflect that only the most superficial theology would pretend that the Bible provides easy answers to our moral dilemmas.

2. The apparent contradictions in the Bible

2.1 Thou shalt not kill

Many Christians who believe the Bible take quite **contradictory** positions over ethical subjects. Perhaps understandably a Christian living in the midst of fundamentalist Bible believing America might be expected to believe with the majority of his fellow Christians that capital punishment was God's mandatory sentence for those committing murder. A reference to Genesis 9:6 would suffice "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.' However many Christians are much less sure, especially in other

parts of the world where society has conditioned us to believe that it is always wrong to take human life. Some Christians would consider that the later provision of the Ten Commandments and the prohibition of killing, made any possibility of such capital punishment out of the question. The matter is complicated further when we consider that Abraham was praised for following what he believed to have been God's instruction to kill his child Isaac. Hence today we have the position of the suicide bomber who believes that they will be rewarded in heaven for fulfilling God's command to kill.

It is therefore understandable that some Christians are confirmed pacifists, whilst others consider that the indiscriminate killing associated with the aerial bombing of places like Baghdad can be justified as a 'just war.' The Bible can be used to justify both positions and just does not present clear unambiguous teaching which we can all agree about. The current American administration and our own Prime Minister openly wear their Christian credentials and appear to have no regrets over the decision to go to war in Iraq. Meanwhile church leaders across the denominational spectrum have voiced their opposition on the grounds of their Christian morality.

2.2 Marriage

Contradictions also appear when considering marriage. The often repeated claim that the correct Biblical norm for relationships is for a man and a woman in marriage, runs contrary to great spiritual leaders such as Abraham, David and Solomon. In the Old Testament men have sex with wives, concubines and slave girls. The emphasis seems to be placed more upon having children than fidelity to a monogamous relationship. Even the birth line of Jesus himself involves incest to produce a child when Lot has sex with his two daughters and the resulting offspring come to be Moab and Bennami. (Genesis 19:30)

Divorce is an equally divisive subject. Some Christians and churches follow the teaching of Jesus in Mark 10:11 that divorce and remarriage are tantamount to adultery. Other churches follow the teaching of Jesus in Matthew which allows for divorce and remarriage under certain circumstances Matt 19:9.

Recognising the historical context of the Bible

Perhaps one of the first questions to be considered before we begin the process of trying to apply the Bible to our problems, is 'what **did** it mean.' Before we can ask what the Bible means today, we need to understand what the Bible meant when it was written. Only if we try to understand the Bible within its historical and social context can we then try and apply it to our own. To do this is to treat the Bible with respect and not to simply make it fit our own preconceptions. If we fail to do this then we make the Bible into a collection of spells from which we simply select our favourites to use against those with whom we disagree.

Understanding the Old Testament context.

Let us examine the scene when Moses went up a mountain and came down with the God given law for the Jewish people. What happened? (Exodus 20:1-17 & Deut 5:6-21). Did he hear God speaking with a heavenly voice? Did Moses struggle with a hammer and chisel trying to keep up as God dictated? Was there a heavenly angelic scribe? What do you think happened? This is important because the way you answer will influence how you think about ethics.

The Ten Commandments are a magnificent gift by God to his people of divine law. The Ten Commandments are a wonderful example of moral codes for a people who lived thousands of years ago. However we need to remember that the Sinai Covenant of Moses is just like many other treaty forms which were widely in use in the ancient Orient in the second millennium BC. Moses used a framework which was current in other civilisations, specifically Hittite vassal treaties, and which he would have been familiar with.

The following are examples of the treaty style

1. A Preamble in which the King identifies himself and gives his names and titles,

'I am the Lord you God....'

2. A Prologue in which the king reviews his relationship between himself and the vassal, stressing his benevolent acts which obligate the vassal to perpetual gratitude.

'who brought you our of the land of Egypt'

3. Stipulations which state in detail the obligations imposed upon and to be accepted by the vassal. These forbid foreign relations and oblige the vassal to have faith in the King and not to allow bad words to be said about him. There must be annual tribute paid and a willingness to be called to arms.

The Israelites were told to serve only Yahweh and appear with sacrifice

4. Deposition A copy of the agreement must be deposited in the vassal's shrine and be read publicly to remind the vassal of the obligations which they were under.

(This has a parallel in the Deut 10:5, 31:9-13)

5. Witnesses are called to the treaty (*Josh 24:22,27*)

6. Sanctions are laid down in the form of blessings and curses for those who obey or disobey the treaty.

Blessings and curses are seen in Deut Chaps 27—28 and Judges 5:23

The reason why I want to start here is to identify that from the outset our scriptures appear to be framed within the language, thought processes and the legal context used by the wider society. It was not divine language spoken from another world, it reflected the best of human knowledge available at the time. This is not to say that the words were simply human words, it is to make the statement that even our best instructions from God comes to us within our very ordinary human framework. This is perhaps also to recognise that there is at work in our world a very ordinary natural law which many people possess who are not necessarily religious. Often we need to recognise that it is not only Christian people who think about the right way to behave. You do not have to believe in God to be good and many people who do not believe in God do lead very moral lives.

The New Testament

Understanding the context in which it was written is also important for our reading of the New Testament. It is also important that we appreciate the environment in which Christianity grew and was formed into organised religion. God has not spoken to his people in a vacuum and as Christian readers of the Bible we need to appreciate the special and profound impact which Western philosophy has had upon our faith. When we read the Bible we read a book which has been interpreted to us through powerful influences.

Christians — Deviant Jews

After the death of Jesus his followers were based in Jerusalem and they were essentially deviant Jews, struggling to come to terms with how to make their new faith in Jesus fit with the law of the Old Testament. The Apostle Paul risked his life trying to have Gentiles recognised as a part of the new community.

Then came the fall of Jerusalem, conquered by the Romans in AD 70 and the centre of gravity for the church changed. Now the main groups of believers were Gentiles and they were Roman and Greek. In 312 even the Roman Emperor Constantine was converted and Christianity became the state religion.

Christianity and Greek Philosophy This meant that the early Christian thinkers, the church fathers (*Patriarchs—Patristics*), were Gentile Greeks and Romans. What influenced their thinking, and ours subsequently, was the world of Greek Philosophy. It is worth thinking what this was, because it has had far reaching consequences for our Christian beliefs and for our reading of the New Testament. Christianity was born into the cradle of Greek Philosophy.

Pythagoras (c530BC), was more than just the man who speculated about the hypotenuse, he was a mystic. His maths was about more than just adding up, it was a way to contemplate the divine, maths was religion.

Plato, a hundred years later and along came Plato, who adhered to the Pythagorean line in Greek thinking and was also a mystic. His 'Doctrine of Forms' suggests that what is real comes to us from above. The only true tree or mountain or person is the one in the mind of God. The things which we see are only imperfect representations of the real forms, like shadows on the wall of a cave. For Pythagoras and Plato, goodness is something which comes to us from above. People left to their own devices, no matter how conscientious, were bound to get it wrong. Ethical standards, therefore, were best decided by the gods, and ethics became a matter of reflecting on the will of the gods.

Plato developed a sophisticated political and social philosophy which matched these ideas. By this, it was ensured that, in the perfect society, the ruling class would communicate to the people any ethical messages from the gods. The pattern for a theocratic (God-determined) and autocratic (class-determined) ethical system was in place. It is understandable that Rome and the church were both attracted to

Platonism. It justified the division of classes, in terms of both wealth and power. Platonism became the basis for much of Christian theology through 1,000 years of Christian history. A philosophy, such as Platonism, which suggests that everything in this world is faulty by nature, including human perception, is the enemy of science and human reason.

Gnosticism is a term for a wide variety of second century philosophical sects which held to this idea of a bad material world from which we must escape to be with a good spiritual God. The documents at Nag Hammadi contained many such Gnostic texts. Marcion the Gnostic is often referred to as 'The Pontic Mouse who nibbled away the Gospels.' Marcion and others disliked the stories which spoke of Jesus humanity and as a result cut bits out of the Gospels and denied the authority of any texts which claimed Jesus was fully human.

The early Christians thought and worked out their faith against this philosophical background. At the heart of this philosophy lay the view that this world was corrupt and changing and yet there was another world which is unchanging and eternal. Physical form was only a copy of real forms and the physical world was corrupt and needed to be left behind. This depreciation of anything physical; let alone sexual crept into the church of the second century from Greek Philosophy and Gnosticism and poisoned the Christian attitude towards such things as women and sexuality. Subsequently some Christians believed that the only way to obtain real goodness was by taking such passages as Matthew 19:12 literally, hence Origen, an important church leader, castrated himself.

Augustine. Platonism is seen in the Christian theology of St. Augustine (c. 400). His 'City Of God' characterized the Church as a pilgrim in the world. All human institutions were corrupt and faulty, having no mystical union with God. Only the Church could provide a haven wherein one could be saved. The price of salvation, of course, was utter subservience to the system. In this case, Christian ethics is a matter of conforming one's conscience to the mind of the Church. This explains the phrase *Roma locuta est, causa finita est* (Rome has spoken, the matter is closed).

Questions

Hopefully you can appreciate why this philosophical foundation is so important. In what ways can you recognise the profound and lasting effect which this philosophy has had upon our ethical decision making as a Christian church? (eg The church attitude towards women as Bishops)

Interpreting Scripture

As Christians we have at the heart of our faith and our belief system a core of written material, the Bible, which we hold to be sacred. It was written by human beings but we also believe that it is more than just human thoughts. We believe that it tells us much about the faith of previous generations and what they learned about God. The question is, to what extent can we use the ethical judgement in the Bible today?

When we read scripture we recognise different types of ethics. The difficulty which we have is one of reading scripture and recognising which ethics fall into which category!

1. Some were once good - but are now of no effect
2. Some were once good - and whilst the rules are no longer effective there are enduring principles
3. Some were once good and have enduring value

1. Some were once good but are now of no effect.

Into this category we would perhaps want to place such things as not eating certain foods and obedience to the Sabbath. The Levitical joke at the back of this booklet uses this as a basis. Of course Christians will disagree but every Christian will put some laws into this category from both the Old and New Testament. The fact that few women in our church cover their heads shows that they have felt able to disregard the Biblical injunction to do so. They are a part of a process which has determined that it is correct to adhere to some Biblical commands and to disregard others.

2. Some were once good and whilst the rules are no longer effective there are enduring principles

An example of this type of ethic is found in the teaching of the Apostle Paul 1 Corinthians 9:1-9. In order to justify living expenses Paul uses the teaching of Deuteronomy 25:4 '4

'Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.'

Here Paul is taking the principle behind the scripture and trying to make it alive within the new context. The Bible is a Living Word and not a dead history book, it is understood and interpreted to each generation by the Holy Spirit using God given reason and understanding. Here is the Apostle Paul demonstrating that process.

3. Some were once good and have enduring value

Into this category I would want to put the ethical teaching of Jesus as a starting point. The church has often been embarrassed by the behaviour of Jesus. In his lifetime he was considered a drunk and friend of sinners and ever since his tolerance and endless excuses for those who were considered immoral has been awkward. The Jewish faith from which we have all been born had a whole range of things which it was wrong to do. It was wrong to eat pork, it was wrong to break the Sabbath. Jesus knew about these laws, but he chose to publicly break them. Sin for Jesus was much more to do with hypocrisy, forcing your opinions on others and pointing the finger.

Jesus said that in his Father's house there were many rooms, and that access to God would not be by the exclusive narrow nationalism of the Jewish law, but directly through him. (John 14) This was a statement immediately inclusive, open and welcoming.

After Jesus, Judaism became much more complex in its legal framework as evidenced by the Mishnah and the Talmud. But, instead of trying to tie up life and human behaviour with complex codes, Jesus distils his law into simple commands to love. The new Jews which Jesus created, eventually called Christians, were called into a new law free existence.

*"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment.
And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'
All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."
Matthew 22:37*

Christians are called upon not to obey a book of rules, but rather to copy Jesus. They must love as God loved them (John 15:12) and the definition of a neighbour included people who were considered as enemies. (Matt 5:44) Jesus preached nothing less than universal love and forgiveness. The church grew in their understanding of this slowly but began to recognise that it extended beyond the boundaries of race, sex etc. (Gal 3:28)

Hence Augustine was able to say

‘ama et fac quod vis’ - love and do what you like.

The Christian rule of life moves from

coercion and command - to consent and consideration.’

Three Bible Studies for Ethics

As Christians we believe that the Bible does give us help. It does not tell us the **answers** clearly to many subjects and yet it is often an excellent guide to the **principles** which must inform our decision making and behaviour - our ethics. In 1 Peter 2:21 we are challenged to walk in Jesus steps and we are reminded time and time again by Jesus and throughout the New Testament, that we are called to be responsible and account for our behaviour and what has been entrusted to us. We are to listen to the words of Jesus and take them and apply them afresh to the situations of our time. I would like to take three pieces of Jesus teaching,

Bible Study 1

Matthew 25:31-46 The Sheep and the Goats

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' "He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

We begin with a passage which speaks about giving account for ourselves. Jesus teaches about the sheep and the goats. Jesus uses the idea that we have to answer for ourselves as a teaching method on human ethics. What is it that divides good sheep from the naughty goats? It is behaviour. The sheep went and gave food to the hungry,

water to the thirsty, home to the stranger, clothes to the poor, and visited the sick and those in prison. To put it more accurately it is proactive behaviour. The goats may not have caused the suffering but they did nothing to help. They were inactive and indifferent.

Bible Study 2

Luke 16:19-30 The rich man and Lazarus.

"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. "The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.' "But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.' "He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'

"Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' "No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

A beggar lies at the door of the rich man. The rich man does not kick him or abuse him and yet he is seen to suffer punishment and rebuke. What was the sin of the rich man? The rich man was indifferent to the plight of the poor man who was suffering and neglected. Henri Nouwen said

‘Christian compassion was often lost
somewhere between the heart and the hands.’

Bible Study 3

Luke 10:29-37 The Good Samaritan

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbour?" In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.' "Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise."

In this incident a man wishes to justify himself. He wants to be able to look himself in the mirror and know that he is alright with God. In the terms of Bible Study 2, he wants to be a sheep, to know that he is sufficiently acceptable to God as to be considered worthy of everlasting life. This is the ultimate test of our spirituality and of our ethical behaviour - to know that God approves and wants to reward us.

Jesus tells us that the spirituality which gave birth to the ethical action of the Levite and the priest was inadequate. The model for us to choose is that of the Samaritan. The priest and Levite may have lived very holy lives, have been very religious, have refrained from immoral behaviour. Yet the sin which they were guilty of was one of indifference, to pass by on the other side.

I use these examples to emphasise that the ethics of the Kingdom are more about what we do, than what we do not do.

Ethical studies

Having looked at some of the issues surrounding the Bible and considered some of the difficulties and opportunities which we are presented with, let us now turn to real issues which trouble us on a daily basis. Inevitably as I look through these problematic areas I will be doing so from my own subjective, culturally conditioned biased position. There is no way to do ethics in a moral vacuum. What may be most helpful as we consider the subjects is to think about how we apply principles.

1. Abortion

You will probably know that a church curate from Chester Diocese has won permission to challenge the refusal of police to prosecute doctors for performing a late abortion. Joanna Jepson is suing the Chief Constable of West Mercia police, arguing that the procedure on a foetus showing signs of a cleft palate was unnecessary. The abortion was carried out when the woman, from Herefordshire, was more than 24 weeks pregnant - the legal limit for abortions unless there is a risk of serious disability. Ms Jepson was born with a congenital jaw defect and spent her childhood persecuted over her appearance. However, she claims she is living proof of why it is wrong to abort a foetus simply because it is disfigured. She says that, after years of bullying, corrective surgery changed her life. Her initial application for a judicial review was rejected by a judge last month. But at the High Court in London Lord Justice Rose and Mr Justice Jackson reversed that decision.

Ms Jepson welcomed the court's ruling, saying: "Each step in this process has been taken with trepidation. I have been encouraged by the public's support. I hope that we shall succeed at trial and recognise again the value and dignity of our common humanity, disabled or able-bodied, no matter what we look like."

This incident is one of many which highlight what a controversial subject abortion is. No Christian would want to willingly endorse the killing of innocent human life, the big question is 'when does human life start?' For the Roman Catholic the message is straightforward, life begins at conception and any interference is murder.

The justification for this would be seen perhaps in passages such as this from Jeremiah the prophet who speaks of him being known by God from his mother's womb.

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."

You might want to decide that this was poetic phraseology, not literal truth - in the same way that we might decide that the episode involving Noah does not necessitate that we believe the whole world was covered in water by a flood. However, we can be certain from the progressive revelation throughout scripture that God does value life and that God creates life and that whilst we are involved in that process, life is not ours but God's. Human life is not human, it is sacred, it is divine. Therefore the Christian would be very careful of any argument which said that a woman should be allowed to decide herself about abortion because it is her body. Life is clearly of God, it is not ours to give or to take away.

Very important consideration needs to be given as to when we believe life starts. In the absence of any definitive answer I would personally err on the side of caution and go for a start date as early as possible. However the colour of ethics is often a muddy grey rather than a clear black and white and personally I am much easier about the use of a contraceptive pill or a very early abortion than late abortions of what is clearly a little human being which can feel pain after 15 weeks.

When the 1967 Abortion Act was passed many felt it was necessary, if sad, to deal with a minority of women in desperate situations. The Act has, however, led virtually to abortion on demand by allowing abortions to be performed on certain grounds. Amendments under the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act of 1990 brought in a new upper time limit allowing most abortions to take place up to 24 weeks, but also allowing certain exceptions with no upper limit set, thus permitting legal abortions up to birth. In 1968 there was a total of 23,641 abortions performed in England and Wales. By 1978 this had increased to 141,558 and in 1988 to 183,798. In 1998 the total number of abortions was 187,402. (Abortion Statistics 1998, Series AB No.25, Office for National Statistics, England and Wales, 1999). Up to 31 March 1997 nearly 4.7 million abortions had been performed in England and Wales in the thirty years since the 1967 Abortion Act was passed. (Written answer to a Parliamentary question, Hansard, 30 October 1997, col252)

Meditation

This is just something for you to consider

A group of medical students were discussing the various tests that can be made on the foetus in the womb to discover if there are handicaps. The lecturer said to all the students: *"About the termination of a pregnancy, I would like your opinion. The father had syphilis; the mother had tuberculosis. Of the four children born, the first was blind, the second died, the third was deaf and dumb, the fourth child had tuberculosis. The mother is pregnant with a fifth child. Given the conditions of the other children, should the mother terminate that pregnancy?"*

A vote was taken, and an overwhelming number said that she should have an abortion.

The lecturer replied: *"If abortion had been available in those days, and your advice was taken, you would have aborted the great composer, Beethoven."*

Questions

At what stage do you think life is created ?

Would you allow abortion in special circumstances for handicapped children, teenagers, or rape ?

(It is worth mentioning that nowadays with medical advances abortion requested after rape is extremely rare.)

How would you consider the aborted bodies should be disposed of?

Is it morally right to burn multiple foetuses without religious ceremony in crematoria? Do they have sufficient value to be considered worthy of respect, even if not afforded full the dignity which we expect of a baby with a birth certificate?

Homosexuality

The worldwide church is in a state of some considerable disagreement concerning the position which it adopts towards people who are homosexual. The most recent problem in the Church of England involved the appointment of Canon Jeffrey John as Bishop of Reading. When this happened it was as if a bomb had been detonated and it reverberated around not only the Church of England, but also many other denominations who are facing the same issue. Jeffrey John is a gay man in a longstanding, celibate, relationship with another priest. This lifestyle is one which cannot be countenanced by many people in the church, especially those drawn from the part of the church calling itself 'Evangelical.'

The anger was so intense and the actions of many so violent that eventually on the advice of the new Archbishop, Rowan Williams, Jeffrey John decided to resign from his new post. There was great deal of pain caused, priests had excrement placed through their letterboxes, hurtful words were spoken, by stepping down a crisis was averted. We all knew that some churches, small in number but rich in cash and influence would have forced a split in the church if the post was not recinded.

It was a climb down, but it had the desired effect. The Archbishop was able to go to General Synod in York in July and speak comfortable words which healed some of the divisions. He encouraged the church to make a blessing of a curse and we hoped there was a way forward.

Sadly feelings about homosexuality run as strongly as any I can think of and it is not so easy to escape from such an issue. In America Canon Gene Robinson was appointed as Bishop of New Hampshire. Robinson is gay, divorced and he has co-habited with a same-sex partner for 13 years. Unlike Jeffrey John he does not claim to be celibate. 62 Anglicans and Episcopalians met in Fairfax Virginia on July 23 and stated their opposition. Then Robinson's election was sabotaged by allegations of inappropriate conduct sent via a mysterious email to the Bishop of Vermont by a man called David Lewis. The allegations were investigated but could not be substantiated and Robinson's appointment was duly ratified on August 5. So what is the cause of the disagreement ?

At the heart of the issue is the belief by many Christians that homosexuality can never be a valid lifestyle. Homosexual behaviour is a sin and presumably, since Jesus said that what we think is important as well as how we behave, homosexual orientation also requires treatment.

The evangelical wing of the church has always tried to base its beliefs upon the Bible and they claim scripture as the source of authority. I would not want to enter into a huge theological exposition of the passages concerned but here is a glimpse of the issues and the Biblical sources are as follows

Old Testament

Genesis.

The creation story in Genesis shows God creating man and woman, for many this is the model which they see as the God given normal basis for human relationships.

Other theologians would wish to stress the importance made in the second account of the creation in Genesis Chapter 2 which tells that a man should not be alone and required a suitable companion. God creates other human beings for company, not just to enable procreation to take place. Many Christians prefer to see Genesis as a powerful story which shows that God created the world, rather than a prescriptive model of how God did so. As Christians have grappled with evolution there has been an understanding by many Christians that Genesis is not a scientific or literal passage.

Leviticus:

In Leviticus 18:22 it is quite clear that homosexuality is an abomination. The problem lies in the fact that Leviticus condemns us all. It forbids contact with menstrual women, Lev 15:19-24, forbids eating shellfish Lev 11:10, encourages slavery Lev. 25:44 and has many more prohibitions.

It is profoundly difficult to use passages from the Old Testament to define our moral codes. These laws were written by Bedouins who roamed the desert struggling for survival thousands of years ago. Their concerns and moral issues were very different from ours. It might have been right for them to allow selling of daughters into slavery, Exodus 21:7 but we would hardly suggest the same today.

The New Testament Passages are more difficult

Romans 1:26

'Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.'

1 Corinthians 6:9

'Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders, nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.'

1 Timothy 1:10

'We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders and liars and perjurers--and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.'

These three verses speak with differing degrees of clarity about homosexuality. However Christians disagree about how important they are for different reasons.

Interpretation

Some theologians will draw attention to the words used and the sentiment meant behind them. There is even disagreement about whether it is actually homosexuality at all which Paul is criticising but rather male prostitution. Is Paul angry about same sex committed relationships, clearly not in the manner proposed by advocates today, since it was not an option. Surely Paul would have harsh words to say about promiscuity, but this is directed against all forms of such behaviour heterosexual and homosexuality.

Context

The other problem is one of context. Even if the Bible is totally against homosexual expression, many people argue that this is not necessarily a problem. Many of us realised that this issue was going to engulf the church ten years ago when women were allowed to become priests. There are many passages in the New Testament which Christians have agreed are culturally very relevant to then, but no longer relevant to now. In the same way that the church once encouraged slavery the church was also once very prejudicial against women.

The apostle Paul said that the head of a woman is the man 1
Corinthians 11

'Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonours his head.

And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head--it is just as though her head were shaved. If a woman does not cover her head, she should have her hair cut off; and if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut or shaved off, she should cover her head. A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. and so women should have their heads covered to show this.'

In 1 Timothy 2:12 the Apostle tells us that women cannot teach men, or have authority over them, that they must be silent.

'I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing--if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.'

In spite of these passages the Church has agreed to move forward and women no longer have to keep silent in church or have their heads covered as we read in Corinthians. So the big question is clear -

If we do not believe that women have to do as Paul says, why should homosexuals?' The worry is that it might just be that homosexuals are more of a minority and just as men oppressed women for years, now we are oppressing homosexuals. The plight of homosexuals in the church has run parallel to the plight of women, albeit homosexuality struggles behind. Homosexuals are now using the same hermeneutics (theological methods) as women used to advance their cause. The reason they are not so far advanced is that they are less powerful, because there are fewer of them.

The early Christians did begin to see that Jesus laid down a new order where there was no male and no female, Galatians 3:28, where the old order of subjugation and dominance was done away with. It is for us now to try and interpret that teaching, to bring in an order of tolerance and understanding worthy of our founder.

The Bible is library of 66 books in the Old Testament and the New Testament. In these 66 books, you will find a total of 1,189 chapters containing about 31,273 verses. Homosexuality is mentioned in half a dozen and Jesus never actually even mentioned homosexuality. Can we not allow freedom of conscience to disagree in love about something which is just not very important.

Rowan Williams is now barred from conducting communion in 350 parishes because of his support for women priests, under the provisions of Section C of the Episcopal Ministry Act of Synod (1993). Do we want another set of flying bishops for people who do not accept homosexuals? We are at a watershed, can we seek to welcome and respect others and grant that that there is room for diversity of opinion.

Older church members tell me that not many years ago they were told as children that left handedness was a sign of the Devil! For many Christians homosexuality is no different from the diversity which we see with left handedness. They seek simply for tolerance on pragmatic grounds. They believe this debate should be conducted, like those over nuclear weapons, divorce, abortion and women's ordination, within the unbroken fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Euthanasia

Already a form of euthanasia is practiced widely in our hospitals. Doctors take decisions to control and alleviate pain, even though the administration of drugs has the direct effect of shortening life itself. This is described as the law of second effect, euthanasia by degree. But there are those who think that this should be taken further and people should be allowed to request the right to die.

A surprising 31 per cent of the 2,700 nurses questioned by Nursing Times magazine said they should be allowed to assist in a patient's suicide.

Most felt euthanasia should only be allowed only to the terminally ill, but 40 per cent said it should be permitted for patients in 'extreme pain or distress'.

Up to one in three nurses believe they should be allowed to help patients end their lives.

Four out of 10 have given a painkiller to a dying patient, knowing that it could hasten their death.

One in two nurses do not feel it is unethical to administer a lethal injection at a patient's request.

It is illegal in Britain to help anyone to die, including the seriously ill, but there is a growing sense in the NHS that there needs to be an open debate about the way patients face the end of life.

Diane Pretty, a motor neurone disease patient who went to the European Court of Human Rights to challenge the rules on euthanasia, won widespread support. She lost her case, but the House of Lords is to examine a bill on the right to die next year.

Many of the arguments concerned with Abortion might also be applied to Euthanasia. Since life is not our's but God's, perhaps we do not have an overriding right to decide when we die. It might also be said that doctors have a right to prolong life at whatever cost simply because as a society we fear death. The medical invasion of our lives needs to be understood by Christians within the context of God given life, what right have we to prolong suffering and keep people alive simply because the professionals cannot comprehend a faith which does not see death as failure but a transition into the presence of God?

Conclusion

Scientists are unable to decide which is the best soap. It is reasonable to presume that even if ethics was an exact science then there would still be intense disagreement. We would still disagree and be unable to come up with a set of absolute rules to which we would all be happy to conform. Ethics of course is not a science, it is as much an art and it seems to demand that we are flexible and able to react to different situations in different ways. Choices are difficult and legislation for the behaviour of others complex beyond belief.

We know that it is wrong to kill and yet even at this most basic level we will find sincere Christians who decide that they must break this most profound rule. Since the beginnings of our faith Christians have disagreed profoundly and today we should not be surprised that it is no different. Whether the issue concerns environmentalism, sex, armaments and national defence, or anything else, other people will never agree about the nature of the ethical problem, nor about what should be done.

We may not be conscious of it, but our own upbringing, environment, experiences and general moral formation will all inform our decisions for better or worse. It is important for us to be alert to influences which have played a part in our own moral development and why we might take particular positions. So many moral traditions are inherited, geographical and time related. We must all seek to avoid attributing to God our ethical rules which may be no more than the product of where and when we live.

Every generation has to listen to God and try to discern what God is saying. Jesus broke the Sabbath laws and declared all foods clean - contrary to Leviticus. Today we no longer obey this commandment at all. The Apostles did away with circumcision, contrary to the Old Testament laws. It is interesting to remember that the Apostle Paul and the Apostle Peter fought like cat and dog about who could be in the church. They were bothered about whether it was allowed by God to eat with Gentiles (Galatians Chapter 2). Today the fiercest arguments are still about who should be allowed in the church and who is considered unworthy. Just as those early Christians had to work out

their differences and find the way forward so must we. It is important for us to remember that the early Christians had to ignore the letter of the law and discover the leading of the Spirit. That's why Paul said the law brought death and Spirit life.

There are many different Christians denominations because sincere Christians who take the Bible very seriously, disagree about what it means. It is unhelpful to make pronouncements about what the Bible says about one thing or another. Shouting Biblical verses at each other in loud voices will take us nowhere. Instead we have to accept that sincere Christians who love the Bible understand it differently. We must never be so arrogant to suggest that people on the opposite side of the debate have not read their Bibles, are not as clever, or do not treat them as seriously as they should.

What is clear is that we all have to be open to realise that our own theologies can never encompass the mind of God. There is far too much that we will never understand, at best we see as the Bible itself reminds us, only through a glass darkly. I am reminded of the story of the frog at the bottom of the well. As he looked up he thought that the sky was only as big as the opening at the top of the well. How big is our sky? Are we willing to take the effort to jump up and see a bigger sky, or are we determined to stay in our little world at the bottom of the well?

I would wish to conclude with a plea. How wonderful it would be if Christians agreed to worship and pray together even when they disagreed about the ethical choices which face us. As we have been reminded throughout this study, the Christian Church is prone to change its mind on a whole range of subjects, divorce, slavery, women. Is it necessary to separate from those with opinions different from our own? Divisions happen so quickly and bankrupt the church, which sadly then has to spend many years trying to put itself back together again. In the midst of all our discussions, as we seek to discover how to love God and our neighbour, we need to learn that it is possible to have gracious disagreement.

The Levitical Joke

Dr. Laura Schlessinger is a US radio personality who dispenses advice to people who call in to her radio show. Recently, she said that, as an observant Orthodox Jew, homosexuality is an abomination according to Leviticus 18:22, and cannot be condoned under any circumstance. The following is an open letter to Dr. Laura penned by a US resident, which was posted on the Internet.

Dear Dr. Laura:

I have learned a great deal from your show, and try to share that knowledge with as many people as I can. When someone tries to defend the homosexual lifestyle, for example, I simply remind them that Leviticus 18:22 clearly states it to be an abomination. End of debate. I do need some advice from you, however, regarding some of the other specific laws and how to follow them.

1. When I burn a bull on the altar as a sacrifice, I know it creates a pleasing odor for the Lord - Lev. 1:9. The problem is my neighbors.

They claim the odour is not pleasing to them. Should I smite them?

2. I would like to sell my daughter into slavery, as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. In this day and age, what do you think would be a fair price for her?

3. I know that I am allowed no contact with a woman while she is in her period of menstrual cleanliness - Lev. 15:19-24. The problem is, how do I tell? I have tried asking, but most women take offense.

4. Lev. 25:44 states that I may indeed possess slaves, both male and Female, provided they are purchased from neighboring nations. A friend of mine claims that this applies to Mexicans, but not Canadians. Can you clarify? Why can't I own Canadians?

5. I have a neighbor who insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly states he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself?

6. A friend of mine feels that even though eating shellfish is an abomination - Lev. 11:10, it is a lesser abomination than homosexuality. I don't agree. Can you settle this?

7. Lev. 21:20 states that I may not approach the altar of God if I have a defect in my sight. I have to admit that I wear reading glasses. Does my vision have to be 20/20, or is there some wiggle room here?

8. Most of my male friends get their hair trimmed, including the hair around their temples, even though this is expressly forbidden by Lev. 19:27. How should they die?

9. I know from Lev. 11:6-8 that touching the skin of a dead pig makes me unclean, but may I still play football if I wear gloves?

10. My uncle has a farm. He violates Lev. 19:19 by planting two different crops in the same field, as does his wife by wearing garments made of two different kinds of thread (cotton/polyester blend). He also tends to curse and blaspheme a lot. Is it really necessary that we go to all the trouble of getting the whole town together to stone them? - Lev. 24:10-16. Couldn't we just burn them to death at a private family affair like we do with people who sleep with their in-laws? (Lev. 20:14) I know you have studied these things extensively, so I am confident you can help.