

Advent II: End Times, St Nicholas and the Declaration of Human Rights.

I'm sure I whetted some people curiosity when I announced that the theme of today's sermon was "End-times, St Nicholas and Human Rights"! Well, Advent is all about preparing for the End Times and today (6th December) is the Feast Day of St Nicholas of Smyrna and on December 10, 1948 - 61 years ago - the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It took until 1997 and our new constitution before we in South Africa started to take human rights seriously because the 1997 Constitution contains a Bill of Right modelled on the Declaration of Human Rights.

Twenty years ago, the Berlin Wall was breached. With that event communist repression disappeared granting liberty, freedom and human rights to millions. That same year, an American academic Francis Fukuyama declared that history was at an end. Perhaps he was having an end-time or Advent experience but his point was that liberal democracy was the highest form of government, and, because of this, history had nowhere else to go. Unfortunately, since Professor Fukuyama wrote his essay, world history has remained frustratingly "interesting". New forms of totalitarianism — often religious in character — have risen up to challenge the freedoms and human rights that the collapse of Communism brought.

I have to admit that the Declaration of Human Rights was a document I hadn't read before preparing for this sermon. It's quick to read – there are just 30 rights enshrined in it. They appear, in spite of the dated exclusive language, to be an admirable inspirational model for a just society. For example, *Article 9 No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.* I'm sure that we all easily agree with that and that we would agree with most of the other rights.

I think that the problem with the language of rights, however is that it can be interpreted in a selfish way and in a confrontational way. 'This is my right and I will therefore pursue it to the bitter end no matter what the co-lateral damage may be.' Joke about green man zebra crossing. This confrontational approach runs contrary to the declaration itself, which has a more relational rather than an aggressively individual approach:

Article 1.

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 29.

(1) Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.

(2) In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society

So is the language of 'rights' the correct language for Christians to use? Or does it encourage an individual, confrontational approach? Would we prefer to think of having obligations towards one another with an emphasis upon community and upon relationships? Christians believe that it is in solidarity with our human community that we respond to God's love. Ours is a corporate enterprise not an individual quest.

And this brings me to St Nicholas. Besides being Santa Klaus, the bringer of gifts, St Nicholas of Smyrna has many legends told about him. He is the patron saint of Russia, sailors, children and believe it or not, pawnbrokers. Most of the legends that have been handed down to us about St Nicholas deal with his community concerns as you will see as we look at a few human rights and link them to St Nicholas.

As Christians, we believe that through Christ being the fulfilment of the Law, we have complete freedom in Christ. As part of the body of Christ we are bound together in relationship but we are also caught up in a mystical or spiritual sense in the life of the risen Christ and we are borne up through that life into direct relationship with God.

St Nicholas was bound up and concerned about the poor. He was concerned about a particular family in the community, which had three daughters but no money for dowries to ensure they would find good husbands. St Nicholas galloped passed the family's home and secretly threw a bag of gold through the open window. He did this three times one for each daughter and that is why Pawnbrokers, whose patron saint is Nicholas, have the symbol of three gold balls.

But there is a tension in Christianity. We are caught in an 'already/not yet' dynamic. This is why it is so appropriate to celebrate the Declaration of Human Rights in Advent - a season which is quintessentially 'already/not yet' in nature. Through Christ's crucifixion and resurrection we have access to complete freedom but we fall short of it and do not manage to live Christ's risen life. We are betwixt and between and so we are caught in a life of compromise and we try to tie down in laws and human right declarations some moral framework. We recognise that it falls far short of the heavenly vision of complete freedom, but it is a pragmatic tool to enable that heavenly vision in this life of betwixt and between.

But are the rights in the Universal Declaration actually Christian? This raises more questions than answers again.

Article 3.

Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Looks fine at a first glance. *The right to life* - that sounds Christian and fit in with one of the 10 Commandments - *Thou shalt not kill*. But what happens when you start to try to apply it?

Have you heard the legend of St Nicholas and the pickled Boys? There was a famine in the land around Smyrna and a local innkeeper was desperate to get meat to supply the wealthy travellers who stayed at his inn. So he kidnapped and killed three young boys. He then pickled their bodies in brine as he would any other joint of meat and served them up to his guests including the passing Bishop Nicholas who knew at once that they were the missing young boys and so the saintly bishop miraculously brought them back to life and returned them to their parents. The right to life - restored by St Nicholas.

Is there a Christian understanding of this right to life? Let's start with euthanasia. Is it more Christian to protect life at all costs or is it more Christian to end suffering? Does voluntary euthanasia put pressure on those with a chronic condition to relieve society from supporting them? Should we protect them at the possible expense of others? And what about a very premature baby? Should they be intensively nursed at enormous cost, or is that money better spent saving many hundreds of other children in our impoverished country by simply giving them food? Or what about the contentious issue of abortion. Who has the right to life? Is it the mother or the child? If the mother is 15 does that change the argument? Would her life be lost, not literally, but metaphorically if the baby's life were saved? What if the mother already has 7 children and no income? Whose life should be protected? What if the mother will pass on a congenital disease? What if the mother will die in child-birth or she is terminally ill? What if the child is damaged? How damaged does the child need to be? Does it make any difference to the moral principle if the abortion takes place early or late?

I'm not going to try to answer any of those questions. I cannot give a definitive Christian answer. I can give my answer, which is informed by my understanding of Christianity and, if I were to have to take one of those decisions for myself, it would be underpinned by prayer and reflection but I cannot give you the definitive answer of what is right or wrong. We could get any number of Christians in here who would give any number of answers to those dilemmas.

Giles Fraser wrote recently about the new appointed Bishop of Peterborough, Donald Allister, who said: "Liberalism is one of Satan's greatest weapons against the Church." Giles Fraser asked why do people so consistently fail to understand the idea of liberalism? "Liberalism," he says, "is not a wishy-washy style of biblical interpretation, or an indifference to biblical truth — although the Bishop's advice here is pretty amazing: 'If in doubt what a passage means or how it applies we will believe it literally and obey it absolutely.' I hope they enjoy fulfilling Psalm 137 verse 9: 'Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the stones.' Liberalism is a commitment to human freedom and a hatred of authoritarianism." This

is why many of us celebrate the Declaration of Human Rights. Fraser goes on to conclude, "To describe liberalism as satanic is to align oneself with flag-burning ayatollahs who chant against the United States as the "great Satan" and against Israel as the "little Satan".

Now, the problem with any ethical debate is that we are never presented with a black and white choice but usually ones with shades of grey. We are not able to point to the left and say that that is completely good and to the right and say that that way lies all evil. Taking an ethical decision requires us to use our reason, our emotional intelligence, our experience, and our context and trying to discern where the balance of the greatest good lies. Taking an ethical decision as a Christian, requires us in addition to use the Bible, Christian tradition, Christian experience and Christian belief.

For us, Christ is the context in which we live and move and have our being. Richard Holloway, who was bishop of Edinburgh, has argued that using God as a clincher in a moral debate is too contentious and is a recipe for conflict. Instead he suggests that we use our God-given sense. So, do we want to line up with some more militant Christians and argue our case on Christian grounds? Is it important that different voices speak on behalf of the Christian community? Should we be fighting for new rights on an overtly Christian basis? Or like Richard Holloway, should Christianity and God simply infuse our being and be an intrinsic part of our rational process?

I leave you with these questions and just conclude by saying that the Declaration of Human Rights gives us a pattern, a model or policy in an imperfect world as we move from here to eternity. St Nicholas and in fact all the saints have shown us how we as Christians should respond to oppression and thus prepare ourselves for Christ's coming in glory.

[Some ideas for this sermon were taken from a sermon by Diana Thornton (Holy Trinity & St Peter South Wimbledon) and an article by Giles Fraser in the Church Times]