

Along the track

The Challenge of Faith

The last census taken in Australia indicates that religious belief is on the decline and the numbers of those who espouse no religious belief is on the increase. For many, the Christian ethos appears tied to the past, its beliefs antiquated, out of step with modern times. For some, religious belief has become thoroughly discredited by scientific discoveries. For others, the actions over the centuries of some believers have done much to debase religions of all persuasions. For others, faith is just a 'security blanket', a sanctuary to make life more bearable by its false promises and guarantees. Others have just drifted away.

More generally, however, it would seem that religious belief no longer speaks to 'the modern world' where individual autonomy, self-realisation and personal freedom are the cardinal virtues. The stories, traditions and beliefs of the past are just that – past. And so, in this view each person ought to decide his or her own moral truth and therefore a society of many truths is possible, perhaps even desirable; hence the move to redefine such basic fundamentals as sexuality, marriage, life and death, the role of government, education and so on.

It is quite amazing to see the number of books, articles and resources about personal wellness being offered. Many of these resources teach achieving self-fulfilment, according to an order of values which we ourselves create and which we achieve by our own strength: hence the common notion of a self-creating self. We are obviously still looking for something but we seem to be turning inwards for meaning and purpose:

The fact that what were once central elements in society are now perceived as untrustworthy or lacking in genuine authority has created a climate where people look inwards, into themselves, for meaning and strength. The search which often leads people to the New Age is a genuine yearning: for a deeper spirituality, for something which will touch their hearts, and for a way of making sense of a confusing and often alienating world (Water of Life #3).

Making sense of such a world today has come to be expressed in popular culture's all-pervading message: You are special. Trust yourself. Be true to yourself. Chart your own course. Because you are so great, you have a responsibility to realise that greatness. Follow your passion. Develop your inner potential. Don't accept limits. Each person must decide his or her own moral truth. This is where true freedom and real happiness lie.

While there is some validity in all this, it is not the complete picture. The Christian faith at its very basic core offers a particular concept of God and of human nature that is at odds with much of popular culture. Christianity understands God as Trinity, God in relationship, in loving community. Human beings are made in the image of God; therefore the essence of humanity is to be found in human relationships with others, with God, and with God's creation. For human beings to live truly in the image of God, these relationships must be generous and just and be open to differences as well as sameness. It is in living these relationships that we are transformed, that we find happiness and fulfilment, not in my self-creating ability or the pursuit of individual freedom.

Christianity has at its core the belief that we find God, we find fulfilment and happiness in relationship with God and we express that in how we relate with others; we are 'our brother's keeper'. Freedom is not just a personal achievement, a personal right but rather true freedom comes about when we work to make all people fed and clothed, to help all enjoy justice, peace and fairness. The Christian faith offers a sense of community because it espouses a set of values and beliefs that underpin the fact that we live in relationship to others, and so it offers a guide to what is pretty fundamental, the common good, the good of each person as well as the good of all people.

But sadly, along with religious belief, that sense of a community of shared values is also disappearing. We face the dilemma; are we in this world primarily to find personal fulfilment, to live out a personal dream or do we balance that with a responsibility towards others, even those who may be different? Must I sacrifice my personal freedom for the good of the group or is the common good less important than my personal freedom? Are there such things as non-negotiable obligations towards community?

Love one another as I have loved you takes on added significance in this climate.

Regards
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