

Reflection 23/08/20

How do we make our ethical decisions?

1. You are a member of an interdisciplinary organ transplant team. Six people on waiting list for a kidney transplant –
a 4 year old girl,
a 15 year old boy,
a 32 year old father of 4,
a 40 year old single mother of a 2 year old,
a 60 year old engineer,

A kidney is available. it is a match for each of those on the list.

How do you decide who is most deserving of receiving the donated kidney? A scenario such as this was given in a synod educational day on ethical decision making that I attended in the 1970's. We were divided into teams, and each team had to come to a decision.

That was my introduction to what is known as "situational ethics".

We're all faced with making decisions around moral or ethical issues at some points in our lives- either for ourselves, for a family member, or for a wider community.

In October, we will be participating in two referenda and a general election. The referenda are asking "yes" or "no" to the legalization of recreational cannabis and "yes" or "no" to the End of Life Choice Act 2019 coming into force

Who we vote for to be our next government will also be influenced by our personal moral and ethical standards.

And since March we have been called upon to make a myriad of decisions in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic that at their heart are ethical decisions: to wear or not to wear a mask, to hold church services or not to hold church services, to sing or not to sing in public settings, to obey the regulations or to ignore them, to think only about ourselves or to think about the wider community.

I want to reflect with you on what might influence such decision making, in particular the resources that those of us who belong to the Christian religious tradition might draw upon.

Reading: Deuteronomy 5:6-21

2. The Ten Commandments – as we most often call the code or rules for life handed to Moses. Most of us probably learned them in Sunday School, and were led to believe that they are all we need for a godly life, and for the ordering of community. Can be problematic. For example – honour your father and your mother. When I was a volunteer for Rape Crisis in the 1980's my understanding of this commandment was severely challenged. How could a person who as a child raped or abused by their father, honour that person; or one who was beaten by their mother?

You shall not commit murder –used to oppose liberalizing abortion laws and end of life choice. What about the death penalty, war, self-defense? double standards throughout the ages. Legal definitions devised to address some of the contradictions. All kinds of mental gymnastics and justifications.

Bible, particularly the Old Testament, full of exceptions.

Many of the issues we face in the 21st century were simply not around in ancient times e.g. responsible use of social media.

Reading: Matthew 22:34-40

3. Jesus said that all the laws hang on the commandment to love god and love your neighbour. Love your neighbour. Not just about being like the good Samaritan in Luke's gospel, responding to an emergency on the side of the road.

About self in relation to others. About attitude or disposition towards others.

There's often a tension between Individualism and community.

Individual human rights vs the common good. Protest yesterday in Auckland of people saying it's an infringement of rights to have to wear masks etc.

John Donne(16th/17th poet/philosopher: no one is an island entire of itself; every person is a piece of the continent.

Human rights and the common good-

Hymn: verses 3&4 Christ our Guide

4. There are other tools we can use to help our ethical decision making. Wesleyan quadrilateral – name given by a 20th century Methodist scholar Albert Outler to methodology used by John Wesley to think theologically. Four aspects in the methodology. Scripture, tradition, experience, reason.

When thinking through an issue, Wesley said we must always start with the scriptures, to see what they say. Then we consider the body of Christian tradition- is there something we can take from that? Then there's experience – experience of God in the world, our own life -what do we learn from this. And reason – our thinking ability or intellect.

Take legalisation of recreational cannabis. Nothing in scriptures about use of cannabis. Our tradition might not offer much either, even though cannabis has been around for 1000's of years. Experience – some of us might have tried it at some time, observed others. Reason – lots of material- scientific, opinions for and against. Interchurch Bioethics Council has a particular view.

Questions to consider:

Is there one universal Christian ethic?

Is there a standard that should be applied to whole community, regardless of religious beliefs?

Have I a right to impose my personal beliefs/views on others? Is there a place for allowing safe and legal choice for others, even while I might never choose that path for myself?