



Flinders University Annual Theology Lecture

Preaching Social Justice

Rev Will Willimon, Also blog site – *A peculiar prophet*

Reference Luke ch 4: Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth – he preaches the coming of God to deal with injustice, captivity [and we're in captivity to the Romans, they say], God will look after us, they're thinking; then Jesus says – remember the drought and famine at the time of Elijah? There were widows all over the place in need of help, but the only one helped was this foreigner in Zarephath; and remember the widespread "leprosy" during the time of Elisha? Who was helped at that time? Only Naaman the Syrian, a member of that foreign occupation army. And the people in the synagogue were outraged; in their fury they tried to kill Jesus on the spot. How dare he suggest that the favour of God might be for people other than the chosen ones???

The people of God are not normally in a crisis until the [real] preaching starts. There is no individual issue more challenging than the model of Jesus, his standard of justice, care for the outsider. Judgement begins with the house of the Lord.

Any injustice presents and represents a call to preach. One reason for coming to worship is to review our lives under the gaze of God. So major political issues MUST get a mention.

Theology is about **everything**. Christianity is about **everything**.

The challenge is to think about issues through the lens of Jesus. Christian ethics needs to say what is Christian about itself.

1 Christian preaching must start with the Bible first – even if it goes on to other texts later. [Yes, that raises lots of issues.] The biblical word is more strange than we think; and it can be hard sometimes to find a relevant text – especially given that our concerns now did not exist for the people of Bible times.

However – a possible response to hostile questioning or challenge about attitudes to homosexuality might be, "I'm happy to go along with everything Jesus said about the matter." Re family issues: Jesus might have said, "Perhaps not come to me for advice there. My family thought I was mad; my parents left me behind in Jerusalem when I was 12 and didn't even notice I was missing for two whole days." And then there's the biblical record that when Jesus first started calling people to come with him, they just up and abandoned family, job, everything – and left. So much for providing for the family.

Perhaps Jesus might say to us, "It may be that the Church is there to rescue you from your family." The Church is one of very few organisations that calls you to do something significant for people other than your own children – refugees, for example.

2 Lots of the things we say are inaccessible to people outside the community of faith. So in the matter of abortion, for example: there's the Right to Life crew, and the Right to Choose lot.

Christians don't have rights – they have a call.

Life is a gift; Mary submitted to God's call on her life; Paul responded to God's call to him.

3 Many big issues require expertise, and expert advice. If Christians want to have a say, then they need to do their homework and get informed.

Example – health care (especially in USA). Can we afford this? How do we choose who gets care? A response might be – people DO have to recognise their eventual mortality and not spend inordinate amounts trying to stave it off. And we have to keep medical salaries within reason – and that's a moral issue.

4 Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me ..." [implying special insight].

But in our time we expect all information to be publicly available.

So what do we say the relationship is between revelation and human knowledge / decision?

^ Church, be relevant – but who decides what is relevant and how to deliver it.

^ Sermons can start a discussion – they will not finish it.

Yet the Church is in the perfect place for these discussion to take place, because we have the context of grace.

And we preach grace, and get into community service and justice issues because we believe God cares, because Jesus calls us to follow, not just admire him. [We do it because we cannot not do it.]

>> Love your enemies >> Forgive your persecutors >> Be like a child.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says: You lot who are hungry, pushed around, unemployed, divorced ... - God is yours.

And you lot who are rich, comfortable, secure – to hell with you.

5 How much does your position on a particular issue cost you? We cannot be like the church that lobbied local government for wheelchair access to all public buildings while not providing it for its own church building.

Jerry Fallwell (Yes, him!!) said, "You cannot oppose abortion unless you are prepared to pay for the care of any mother who decides to go to term." So he set about establishing support homes for single mothers.

We say we believe the church is God's answer to what's wrong with the world: democratic society is not.

Story – a church that helped a mother struggling with various issues with her child(ren); eventually the mother brought herself and her family for baptism, because of the help she had received. But also – in baptising them, the church was making a further promise to go on being available to help.

6 Should a visiting preacher dare to talk about controversial issues to a congregation? That's the pastor's job.

^^ In the account of the "flight to Egypt", we have an undocumented baby who is the saviour of the world.

^^ Everybody here is an immigrant. Nobody here is born a Christian – everyone has had to cross the border into the kingdom.

^^ Luke ch 2 – the world missed the birth of the Messiah. The world does things like that!

Question – how do we move the church to adopt that alternative vision?

You're assuming the church is not already an alternative – but is that so?

^ There was a church of mostly senior-age members trying to find out what sort of mission they could have to young families in their area. After a meeting and a time of prayer, one of the people suddenly said, "Baby sitting". And so, in due time, these senior-age people made themselves available for free baby-sitting on Saturday nights. And a connection with the church gradually grew and expanded.

^ The church car park that had a sign "Reserved for choir members" on several places; they removed the signs and installed "Reserved for single parents with children".

^ The church is sometimes the only place where a parent can go to get some serious adult conversation.

^ Will asked some people to pray for him as he was to go to visit a young man in gaol on a DUI charge. A recovered alcoholic said, "I'll go with you" and insisted – "I know more about this stuff than you will ever know; I'm coming with you; I know what he needs to hear."