

Be doers of the word, not hearers only

Australia Day service St John's Darlinghurst Sunday 28 January 2018

If you asked them what the Bible says is the worst kind of sin, most Australians would probably say "sexual immorality".

They might be quite surprised then to know that while God takes personal behaviour very seriously, the Bible says a great more about the immorality of injustice, and abuse of the poor and powerless.

In chapter 25 of Matthew's gospel: as Jesus tells it, what is the criterion for judgment when the Son of Man comes in all his glory at the end of time? What is the measure to separate the peoples into those who receive the inheritance, the kingdom prepared for them since the creation of the world, and those who are cast into outer darkness?

Surprisingly Jesus says: "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 in prison and you came to visit me."

And when they asked: when did we see you...hungry, thirsty, stranger, in prison.... Jesus replied: "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

And so saying, sends these surprised souls off to eternal life.

It is important that we understand the reality of what is being said here.

The American writer and commentator Jim Wallis (founder of Sojourners and author of the book "God's Politics" is based in Washington DC and lives with

his family in a black neighbourhood there. Jim tells the story of an old lady called Mary Glover. Mary was a self-appointed missionary to the poor in the neighbourhood, and she used to say a prayer each Saturday morning as the Church opened its doors to the weekly food-line. As Jim tells the story:

“Mary would usually start by saying something like: ‘Thankyou Lord, for waking us up this morning! Thank you, Lord that our walls were not our grave and our bed was not our cooling board! Thank you Lord!’ Then she would always pray the same words, as a long line of people waited outside in the rain, cold, or heat for a simple bag of groceries, a mere twenty blocks from the White House. Here’s what Mary Glover always prayed,

‘Lord, we know that you’ll be comin’ through this line today, so Lord, help us to treat you well.’”

With such radical instructions, we shouldn’t be surprised to know that the vast preponderance of charitable activities and institutions that have served all comers, regardless of who they are, have been motivated by and founded upon Christian belief.

We in Australia think this notion of helping people in need regardless of where they come from is normal: it isn’t.

Caring for your own family, your own people – that is what is normal in most other traditions.

For example: the first recorded cross-border international aid and development project was in the first century after Christ, The apostle Paul, in response to a famine that ravaged Palestine in AD 46-48, conducted his own decade-long international aid program earmarked for poverty-stricken Palestinians.

Wherever he went, he asked the Gentile churches to contribute whatever they could to the poor in Jerusalem. ¹

The notion of providing assistance for foreigners somewhere else in the world, and not only your own people, was new. God's law in the Old Testament – summarized by Jesus as 'love God and love your neighbor as yourself' extended to care for the stranger within your gate, looking after the foreigner amongst you.

Jesus Christ blew this wide open!

This neighbour did not just mean your own family, community, religion, ethnicity – but anyone in need who may be even your sworn enemy: your Samaritan.

And Jesus of course reminded his hearers over and over that this was not a new law: it was the command of God from the beginning.

But I think we could be forgiven for believing this urge to do good works, to do philanthropy, is universal.

The Australian philosopher, Peter Singer in his book 'The Life you can Save' says this:

Putting yourself in the place of others...is what thinking ethically is all about. It is encapsulated in the Golden Rule: 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' Though the Golden Rule is best known to most westerners from the words of Jesus as reported by Matthew and Luke, it is remarkably universal, being found in Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam and Jainism, and in

¹ John Dickson quoted in *Driven by Purpose: charities that make the difference* Judd Robinson and Errington, HammondPress 2012

Judaism, where it is to be found in Leviticus, and was later emphasised by the sage Hillel.'

This is a really common misconception² – although somewhat surprising from such a prominent academic as Singer who provides no substantiation at all for his statement.

If you are interested you should read Richard Schumack or John Dickson on the topic - but it is just not true that these faiths hold to the same 'Golden Rule' – John Dickson suggests it is more appropriate to call them the 'Silver Rule', that is, 'don't do to others what you don't want to be done to you' – that is, there is a big difference between not putting your enemy in hospital and building him a hospital.

The logic of Singer's ethical argument goes like this:

- suffering and death from lack of food, shelter and medical care are bad
- if it is in your power to prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything nearly as important, it is wrong not to do so
- by donating to aid agencies, you can prevent suffering and death from lack of food, shelter and medical care, without sacrificing anything nearly as important
- therefore, if you do not donate to aid agencies, you are doing something wrong.

Singer's pragmatic ethics led him to start up, no, not an aid organisation to **do** the work, but an aid effectiveness organisation that **critiques** the work other organisations are doing, and then recommends their '**approved**' charities. Needless to say, religious motivation gets a black mark.

² See Hugh MacKay and Bernie Sanders and many others.

People are not queuing up to join it either.

Now I'm not for a minute suggesting that there are not people of good will doing good things out of genuine philanthropic intentions. But if you are looking to understand the true philosophical basis of this phenomenon of charities, you would have to say it is at its core – usually without attribution – the Christian gospel of love in action, in obedience to the word of God – to love our neighbour as ourselves.

Back in 2006 a feature story appeared in the BRW about charities in Australia. The journalists wanted to tell a story about the role of the charity sector in the Australian economy. For their purposes and audience, this translated to 'how big a part of our economy it was'.

The story was a kind of take on the Richest 200 List that we have come to know, but listing the 'Richest 200 charities'.

Well, as my day-job involved providing legal services for much of this same sector, this piqued my interest! So we put together a 'Top 25' charities list.

The standout feature of these 2006 'Top 25' tables was that, if we excluded³ churches and educational institutions (Universities and non-government schools) – which are actually also charities – 19 of the 25 in Australia were Christian.

A decade later, and following the introduction of the Australian Charities Commission and the Charities Register in 2013, we now know a lot more about charities in Australia and the data is more accurate. There have been many

³ We included all charities as commonly understood – that is, not churches, schools or universities.

changes since 2006 – lots of mergers of charities, and a number have become national.

Our analysis of this data **now** shows the impact of Christian charitable endeavours in Australia is just as marked. Of the largest 25 charities by revenue in 2015⁴, 16 are Christian not only in name but in practice⁵ and a number of the others started out as Christian but have lost this identity.

Size itself is not important, but it provides an interesting marker not only of scale but also longevity.

Why does this matter?

Because this is a story not of theoretical ethics, but of life transforming action; not only of motivation, but of deep identity.

My point is not at all that we should be self-congratulatory. Rather we cannot understand what is going on in the charities space without appreciating its deep Gospel underpinnings and motivation.

Even some prominent charities such as, YMCA, Red Cross and the Benevolent Society began with quite overt and intentional Christian purposes, only to discard them later, with equal intentionality. These are interesting stories in their own right, and worth having a look at.

The Red Cross was founded by devout Geneva Christian, Jean Henri Dunant, resulting from his personal experiences of assisting the wounded soldiers at the Battle of Solferino in 1859, a battle that didn't even involve his own countrymen. This led to his advocacy for, and establishment of, the five person

⁴ Based on ACNC data from 2015 Annual Information Statements, excluding churches and religious bodies themselves; education (schools and universities); government entities, and foundations that fund other charitable organisations rather than doing the work themselves.

⁵ Likewise, of the largest 50 charities by revenue in 2015 28 are Christian.

International Committee of the Red Cross and the Geneva Conventions that followed – deliberately choosing the Christian symbol of the Red Cross. Dunant was awarded the first Nobel Peace Prize in 1901.

The Benevolent Society started out as an emphatically Christian mission, but by 2015 when the Society wrote its bicentennial history, it proudly claimed to be a ‘non-religious’ organisation. I think its founders would be rather shocked.

But stepping back to the beginnings of European settlement:

The first charity that we know of here was the Female Orphan Institution (also known as the Female Orphan School) was established in 1800 officially by Governor King to care for orphaned and abandoned children in the colony of NSW. But it was the governor’s wife, Mrs King, who was really largely behind its establishment – so it was known as ‘Mrs King’s Orphanage. When it was officially opened on 17 August, 1801 31 girls aged between the ages of 7 and 14 were in residence. The girls were taught spinning and sewing and some were taught reading and writing.

Public support dropped off in time, so in that sense the charity as an institution did not continue.

The next charity to be formally established in NSW was the ‘NSW Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and Benevolence in these Territories and the Neighbouring Islands’.

The Society was officially set up in 1813 by a group of men who had mainly served with the London Missionary Society. These were from a group of

evangelical Christians in England called the “Evangelical Revival” and they set out intentionally in 1813 to create a public society to promote evangelism in the Pacific and benevolence in Sydney.

The vision of the Evangelical Revival was of a regenerated, caring society, and their programme was comprehensive. The hand of perhaps the best known of them, William Wilberforce, was clearly seen in their determination to address the needs of the poor and excluded in Sydney society.

William Wilberforce was a serial philanthropist who was not only famous for his role in the abolition of slavery in England and its colonies, but also for founding the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) and the promotion of prison reform.

Incidentally Wilberforce’s influence could be seen also in his strong support of penal reform in the colony – and the improved treatment of the convicts: no accident that the rather enlightened “ticket of leave” system was a feature – not just a practicality in a colony without enough freeman workers – as was the hard-fought campaign for the appointment of a chaplain for the convicts. The first of these was Richard Johnson who came out with the first fleet, and his assistant, Samuel Marsden followed soon after – taking over as chaplain when Johnson went back to England. It was Wilberforce who encouraged Marsden to take up the position in Sydney. Notwithstanding the bad press Marsden had subsequently, it was Marsden for example who convened the committee to establish the first orphanages in Sydney and Parramatta in 1800.

The momentum with which the Society started in 1813 petered out, and it ceased to operate by 1815 almost before it had begun.

However in 1817 the NSW Auxiliary of the British and Foreign Bible Society (now known as the Bible Society) was established on 7 March 1817 by Act of Parliament under the patronage of the colonial governor of the time, Governor Lachlan Macquarie by a group of business leaders. These people included Thomas Moore of Liverpool (who founded Moore's College), and two weeks later the same men established the Bank of New South Wales.

The Bible Society today is the oldest continuous charity in Australia.

However they were not done: in 1818, the year after starting the Bible Society and the Bank of New South Wales (now Westpac), its board also started up a new organisation with the encouragement of Macquarie, to focus on benevolence in the colony rather evangelism in the Pacific. It became known as 'the Benevolent Society'.

In fairly quick succession district nursing services started (1820), asylums opened for the poor, blind, aged and infirm (1821).

In 1862, Sydney City Mission, "an unsectarian Christian organisation" began to address poverty, and soon similar missions were in Brisbane (1859) and Adelaide (1867) (these merging in 1999 as Mission Australia).

Maternity hospitals started in 1866, Vincent de Paul started its services in Sydney in 1881.

Homes of Peace were established to provide palliative care by charities such as the Little Company of Mary and Homes of Peace Hospitals (now HammondCare).

An organisation that you are aware of here at St John's, HammondCare had its origins in the social services provided by the Anglican Church at St Barnabas Broadway where RBS Hammond was minister in the early 1900s. During the Depression years his Hammond's Social Services was the largest social service outfit in Sydney.

Around the country prior to the Second World War, social services - the distribution to the poor of food and clothing, of housing relief or district nursing support or asylums for destitute children or the aged or the dying - were overwhelmingly provided by religious based charitable institutions. And their strong presence continues to this day.

So what? What if organisations that were once founded by Christians, are not identifiable Christian anymore. Surely they are doing good works!

Certainly.

However I have seen over many years of working alongside hundreds of Australia's and this city's charities of all sizes, ages and kinds, that it matters a great deal to their effectiveness whether they know Who they are and Why they exist – the identity and purpose of an organization profoundly informs What it does and How. It informs not only what an organization will do – but also what it won't do.

At the heart of our Christian identity is the command, to proclaim the Good News of Jesus AND show God's love to his Creation.

And that means maintaining with great vigilance the Christian motivation of our charitable services. But it is also not something we just leave organisations to do, the professionals.

This is **our** calling: this is how **we** should live: to be God's labourers in the work of restoration of His creation – the new Heaven and new Earth, through restoration of lives, broken bodies and minds, here and around the world, and also our environment both natural and built.