

**Easter 6 A April 27, 2008: St Aidan's & Wesley 10:30am Acts 17: 22-31 & John 14: 15-21 Revd Peter Walker**

The great philosopher, Aristotle, said that a human being is a political animal. We are created, he taught, to live in groups, in communities, to live in a 'polis'.

For instance, Aristotle taught that a 'bad person', in fact, what he would call an immoral person, is a person without friends. Only friends make us moral by telling us the truth about ourselves, truth that those who are not as close as friends are never likely to tell us, for they do not care enough about us to bring them to our attention. Only friends know how to break, in the right way, the truth that hurts but then changes us for the better. Pity the person who is without friends, said Aristotle, someone without those who will tell them what they need to be told.

Though we probably want to hold greater sympathy than Aristotle appears to hold for the person who is without friends you can pick up the logic of his argument.

Aristotle's view clashes front-on with modern understandings. The prevailing modern view of a human being, it would seem, is not that we are dependent on others, but rather that we are essentially self-created and self made, and if we are not, we should be. Autonomy, the ability to stand alone, by ourselves, without reference or claim to the needs of others, is the sign of a successful life.

The harvest of this model of the successful life is all around us. Think of all those groups and communities that should be working, formed by ties of blood, or otherwise, and yet are failing: marriages, families, neighbourhoods, clubs, churches, nations, and the list could go on. Here, can we say? is one of the results of the view that the strong individual, and not the community, stands supreme.

It was interesting, and not at all surprising to hear that one of the 'big ideas' to come from the 20-20 Summit was the creation of a Bill, or Charter of Individual Rights. It was not surprising because the notion of a Bill of Rights fits perfectly into the modern understanding of what should be the basic unit of humanity. The basic unit of humanity, to be protected and preserved by its own Bill of Rights, is not the group, it is the individual. On the surface it seems a sensible thing - individuals must have their rights protected. But it has subtle dangers.

There are more clever people than me doing this work, but my question is: If we have a Charter of Rights should we not also have a Charter of Responsibilities? Subtly, a Bill of Rights, without recognition of wider responsibilities, is another nail in the coffin of the view that individuals are part of something that is greater than themselves. The ANZAC legend is deeply moving because we sense that there was a time when people knew that, knew about sacrifice for the greater good and we wonder if we have forgotten about 'greater good'. ANZAC day reminds us to be vigilant in our prayers and action for peace, it also connects us once more with a time when people knew the call of wider needs and individual sacrifice.

You are, by now, asking yourself: Why is he making a big issue, here at Sunday morning worship, of what sounds more like politics than of faith? Fair enough - here is my answer.

Firstly, because I don't think we can be so quick to dislocate faith and politics! Jesus didn't separate the desire to do God's will from the desire to see the life of the 'polis' - the realm of politics and society, impacted by the values of the kingdom of God.

Secondly, and specifically, because chapter 15 of John's Gospel shows us, interestingly, that the Christian view of a person stands in stark contrast to the contemporary western concept of the person (and is actually much closer to Aristotle!). We believe that God has created us, and Christ has commanded us, to lean on one another when we need help; and that God has created us and Christ has commanded us to give help to others when they need someone to lean on.

Three times in this passage our Gospel links love and obedience: " If you love me you will keep my commandments (15) " They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me (21) " Whoever does not love me does not keep my words (24).

And we know what, for Jesus, was the greatest commandment: Love God, and love your neighbour as yourself.

The test of a Christian's faith in and obedience to Christ is not first of all a matter of belief, but a matter of love. The basic unit of life is not the individual, it is an individual who loves and, we might add, who is willing to be loved: it is a loving community... loving family, loving friends, loving church, loving community.

We say that we want to be free, and that we want to be independent. Yet it is one of the ironies of contemporary life that we try so hard to free ourselves of any dependencies and attachments - to be the modern ideal of humanity, yet we end up enslaving ourselves. Material stresses, over-work (over-work being a form of addiction to the image of the 'self-made success'), and loneliness. They are all obedience to "the treadmill of getting and grabbing that characterizes our society". (William Willimon).

I cannot think of anybody I know who has had their life and well-being destroyed because he or she was lovingly obedient to Jesus Christ. It is costly - and it should be costly. But, at least in our church communities, obedience to Jesus is not destroying lives.

Yet I know many people, and I don't doubt you know many people too, whose health or livelihood, or both, has been destroyed because they are enslaved; obedient to a master, perhaps one those we have named, which is breaking them down.

St Paul stood in front of the Areopagus in Athens, the Acts of the Apostles records, and he preached there a truly wonderful sermon. You must read it. He said: I see here in your city signs of all the objects to which you are offering worship: gold and silver and the like. Now let me tell you about the One who stands above them all - the One whom you call the Unknown God... [W]e ought not to think that this, the real deity, is like gold or silver or stone... [For H]e has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising [that man] from the dead (Acts 17).

The one to whom we offer our obedience is Jesus; and mercifully (and ironically) that form of obedience is the most liberating experience of all. And this, for me, is why.

Creation's most fundamental loving community, is that which is formed by the love of God, coupled with the response of love for God by an individual like you and me, and the consequent presence of the Holy Spirit within us that binds God and believer as one. It is obedience to Jesus Christ that leads us to this community - that leads us to this love, and which enables us to love one another.

They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them. (15. 21)

I am very fond of the words of the 2nd verse of Hymn 626. I wonder if you would like to turn them up in the pews and we will close by saying that second verse together as a prayer.

Let us pray:

Lord of all power, I give you my will, in joyful obedience your tasks to fulfil. Your bondage is freedom; your service is song: and, held in your keeping, my weakness is strong.