Absolute or relative ethics

Last week after the service someone asked me why I hadn’t been made a bishop. One of the many reasons is that I have spent my ministry avoiding church politics. It just seems to me that it’s best to get on with building the Christian community rather than draining away your time and energy with meetings about how to organise your religion.

Something of this is true of that left over of Empire, the Anglican Communion. It absorbs so much energy and I wonder why we people are so keen to keep it going. It not very different from the fact that for the past 16 months we haven’t had a Bishop of Oxford and, honestly, I don’t think many people have noticed or felt a gap in their lives. Except perhaps the Oxford Mail which used to fill a space with a picture of John Pritchard every week. Church structures are not that important, unless you’re one of those clergy whose life seems to depend on walking around Westminster with a silk handkerchief tumbling from your breast pocket, or, if female, a technicolour scarf loosely draped round the sable shoulders of your clerical suit.

Holding the Anglican Communion together when it naturally wants to divide was what devitalised so much of Rowan Williams’ ministry. We kid ourselves that unity is one of the greatest values of the church, but in fact reforming movements, from the Reformation itself to the Oxford Movement to liberation theology and feminist theology have been very creative experiences. Fear of division today, I think, is the fear of terminal decline and those who feel under threat daren’t take any risks.

The Primates’ press release said that they are walking together ‘in Jesus Christ’, whatever that means. I suppose it kind of means that they think they’re doing Christ’s will, but it’s doesn’t look like the self-giving love that has sovereignty of all other virtues. Basically there’s a battle between liberals and conservatives, between cultures, on the nature of ethical truth and where we find authority for it.

Archbishop Peter Jensen, the General Secretary of Gafcon, (Global Anglican Future Conference, a biblical fundamentalist movement) said in his New Year message: “Truth matters even more than institutional unity.” And I couldn’t agree more. At least, getting on with trying to be a Christian in the world matters more than institutional unity.

But there’s an ethical question I want to explore. When Peter Jensen speaks of truth, he means eternal truth, established by God, and revealed in the Bible. In this case the idea that homoerotic behaviour is contrary to God’s will. I know you’re bored with this. But it has much wider ethical implications. The question is: are there ethical absolutes or is all ethics a matter of cultural relativity, just a matter of what each society decides is right, so that *we* practise monogamy, but in Kuwait, Malaysia and Morocco, for example, a man can have many wives; we don’t allow capital punishment, but Saudi Arabia and China execute many people. We drive on the left, the rest of Europe drives on the right, and Indians and Ugandans seem to drive all over the place. (although that’s probably because their roads are so bad and rutted.)

In the case of the Ten Commandments, Moses goes up the mountain to receive the laws from God. It doesn’t get any more top down than that. When St Paul speaks of the Fruits of the Spirit, he is again claiming divine authority for certain kinds of behaviour: ‘love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.’ So you might take the view that divine authority sets out moral truth and we have to follow it. But, as we know there are contradictions and gaps in the divine provision and we are left to debate what God’s intention really is when we are faced by ethical dilemmas like how to prioritise the use of medical resources or whether to go to war or not.

But if you don’t believe in God or you don’t accept the way Peter Jensen interprets scripture, does this mean ethics is inevitably culturally relative? I think the answers probably somewhere in between.

Wouldn’t we recognise that not all moral solutions or ways of organising society are equally good? Indeed some seem abhorrent to us. For example, the Taliban in Afghanistan deny education to women, the caste system denies a class of people health, education, and even food. Many prisoners in various parts of the world are being executed without even a fair trial. Consideration of such atrocities leads us to think in terms of human rights, rights which are commonly understood as self-evident, inalienable rights "to which a person is inherently entitled simply because she or he is a human being," and which are "inherent in all human beings" regardless of their nation, location, language, religion, ethnic origin or any other status. They are in a sense universal, applicable everywhere and at every time, and they are egalitarian in the sense of being the same for everyone.

I think the ethics of animal farming gives a good model for this kind of thinking. It seems self-evidently wrong to be cruel and exploitative towards animals: caged birds that never see the light of day, pigs that can’t turn round in their stalls, methods of slaughter that are often industrial and careless.

This is so natural that many societies have rituals that seek to honour the relationship between man and beast, even though man obviously has the upper hand. Judaism for instance is concerned with animal welfare and hunting is not permitted in Jewish law. The Bible rules that animals have to rest on the seventh day as well as humans, and the Talmud states that one should feed one’s animals before one feeds oneself. Even the laws about kosher slaughter are intended (in terms of a primitive society) to minimise the animal’s pain at death.

We might think this approach is natural. But what is nature? A modern field of wheat, using F1 hybridised seed, could be said to be against nature. The stun gun used in abattoirs could be said to be against nature. But nevertheless, there is some important content to the idea that for animals freedom of movement, the opportunity for exercise and eating some of the foods they would eat in the wild is a natural and proper good. Our own Vaults and Garden Café promotes itself by selling fresh, organic, locally grown produce. In other words, we are seeing some innate good in natural things and our cooperation with what seems natural; and something bad in the abuse and corruption of nature.

Now you might think I’m heading down the humanist road rather than the Christian one. In fact there’s masses of overlap, of course.

If you want a divine imperative, however, I would say it is the sovereignty of self-giving love over other virtues. That embraces the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, and the fruits of the Spirit, still leaving scope for further subtlety. It is a sovereign good that I think of as embedded in creation, even though through the history of the universe since the Big Bang for billions of years all we see is gas, heat and cold, electrical forces, and collisions of stars – totally unmoral, totally value neutral. Yet within that creation is the potential for consciousness, conscience, relationship and ethical judgement. Philosophers might say that matter is value free, but we have experienced the good, bad and the ugly; the sacred and profane; and know that it’s real.

Now I’m going to end there. And you might be annoyed that I haven’t gone on to unpack all this for the issues of the Anglican Communion, but you’ll know doubt see that that my ethical analysis is leading to a very much more nuanced approach than a simplistic notion of absolute truth.