

Reflection Notes – 12/2/17

- Geoff Stevenson

Rules, Laws, Values or Jesus' Way of Love??!

Some years ago I was team-teaching Year 6 Scripture. I was just about to speak when there was a loud noise and ensuing chaos. The year 6 boy had a noise-maker and decided to use it at that moment. The class dissolved into raucous laughter (generally the boys) and shrieks (mainly the girls). It took a few minutes to get back to some semblance of order. One of my colleagues in this combined Protestant Year 6 Scripture class, of about 50 kids, took him aside and spoke to him. He was taken to the back of the room and he sat by himself to avoid distraction... I noticed he was still distracted, wriggling and playing with carpet, trying to make a noise without being deliberate and so on.

Over the ensuing weeks I had the chance to 'do the disciplining' and take him aside to talk to him. Eventually I realised that nothing we had done really made a difference and I was frustrated with telling him he wasn't behaving appropriately and nothing changing. It was wasting my time and I wondered whether I was taking myself and this boy seriously? So, I allowed my curiosity to lead me into other directions. The next time he distracted the class I took him outside and had a conversation with him. I allowed him to be honest without getting into trouble. Was the class boring? Did he know all this stuff and was uninterested? Was he having trouble with anything we were saying? Was there something else? He began slowly, testing my trustworthiness. Eventually, he shared some of his story, which was difficult. There was a degree of chaos in his life from his family – illness, conflict as well as a degree of dysfunctionality. He and his siblings had a high degree of freedom to come and go but also they were expected to get meals organised and do other things. If they didn't, no-one really cared. There wasn't much structure to his life and he brought this chaotic life and dysfunctionality to school. I knew he was considered a difficult child within the school and it wasn't only Scripture.

We talked for a while and I responded to some of the issues he raised about being in the class. He had permission to write or draw in the class, as long as his doodling had some relevance to the lesson. It could engage, disagree, ask other questions and so on. He had permission to write what he liked but only to show me. If he was having trouble focussing and felt himself 'getting out of control' and likely to do something that would create a major disturbance, he was to get my attention and we would go outside until the feelings dissipated. When I was leading the class I tried to apply some more structure to what we did and use stories with depth to engage him and others and it mostly worked.

I confess that I wasn't sure what to do about this fellow and spoke to our counsellor, at the church. They spoke about hyperactive people and the need for a lot of structure around them that provides security but also room to move and be creative. They spoke of the problems with labelling such kids as 'naughty' and responding to them as if they are able to control what is going on within themselves, as if they even understand it. They spoke of needing to deal with bad behaviour but not only look at the symptoms. Why do these kids act the way they do? What is happening to them inside and why? When we get to this point we will understand them, trust will grow and transformation (for all) is possible!

I remembered this story and how the tight, binding structures that were assumed in generations past, unquestioned and often rigidly applied, have dissolved. Recent generations have pushed the boundaries, asked questions and turned from the binding rules of their parents and grandparents. I feel a sense of despair and frustration for younger people as they seek to negotiate the new world where freedom and choice seem paramount. The parameters of being and living have changed or disappeared as we struggle to build new foundations in this modern, 21st century world.

Conservative institutions are fighting back with tighter rules more rigidly applied. The struggle of Trump/Hanson etc era politics is about building tight structures around the changing world where rules, authority and boundaries defining who is in or out, have become softer or lost completely. Fear, change and individualism are some of the factors that drive this response. The desire to go back to what was when the world seemed more predictable and safe is also a driving force – in church and society. The trouble is that the new 'rules' being applied are the old ones in rigid form and they don't always apply: they don't make sense and most of us have moved on. As society changes and uncertainty prevails, rules become more idolised and hard core. We speak of 'traditional values' and so on, but what are these values and why are they so important? Things like love, respect, relationships and such are vital. These things, along with justice, mercy, peace, humility and integrity are timeless but it is not clear that our society is actually pointing to these things as 'traditional values'. Mono-culturalism (Anglo), racism, homophobia, middle-class privilege, silencing the minority groups and so on are more what I hear expounded and defended in the public arena – especially by the neo-conservative spokespeople.

It is against this backdrop that I hear Jesus' continuing words from the Sermon on the Mount (this week Matthew 5:21-37). He actually provides a deeper structure for the law that grounds it in love and relationships. The Jewish Laws (notably the 10 Commandments) easily become rigidly applied rules whereby we understand them literally – eg, Don't kill! Therefore as long as I don't stick the knife into the person I have fulfilled the law. Jesus raises the bar and provides a broader, deeper structure around this and other laws. If you hate your brother/sister then murder is in your heart. In other words love doesn't have room for hatred that leads to rejection, barriers and the death of relationship. Conflict and ultimately wounding, hurt, discrimination, anxiety, tension and so on prevail in our lives and that of those we hate. Similarly with other rules and laws that can be rigidly applied. Jesus invites us beneath the legalism to the essence of relationship. We cannot be human without relationships, not truly human because that is how we are built. Love and relationship is essential to being human and Jesus invites us into the place where these become the guiding principles, the law of the heart, the foundational structures of interaction, the lens through which we view the world and other people – not skin colour, sexual orientation, ethnic background, religious faith (or none) or any of the other differences we might apply.

When I looked at the child in my Scripture class as a person and listened to his story, I saw him differently and our relationship began. We shared a brief part of the journey together and hopefully we both learned something from each other. The strict rules of others were disabling and a barrier. Love built a relationship, respect and possibility.