

Warden's Address

Society of Ordained Scientists Annual Gathering

Hinsley Hall, Leeds, 15th June 2023

2 Corinthians 3.3-end – 4.1-6, Matthew 5.17-26

There are times when I miss the King James Version, when I want the old ways back. '18 For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.' Catch me unprepared and I might struggle to tell you what the difference is between them, but I know what I like, and I miss my jot and tittle. But it's not just the words themselves, it's the rhythm and the cadence of the King James and the BCP. But there is an irony that a tittle was a small pen stroke which could be used in Medieval Latin to indicate missing letters in order to abbreviate a word - so, yes, things could be changed if it made life more convenient.

Change is always difficult. The traditional version of the Lord's Prayer is, in my experience, still the preferred version at funerals. On a larger scale, the recent shenanigans at General Synod here in the UK in the debate on Living in Love and Faith showed how challenging doctrinal change can be. There was genuine and great distress displayed by speaker after speaker insisting their lives would be wasted and their faith destroyed if the rules were changed, and also if the rules were not changed, and a sizeable group whose distress lay in trying to hold the family together in the face of vitriolic accusations being hurled back and forth.

And yet, throughout the Bible, in Old Testament times, there were massive changes: the transition from being a nomadic people to a settled agrarian nation required new laws, the switch of power from judges and prophets to kings was no small step theologically and legally. And however difficult our teenagers might be I don't imagine any parent seriously wanting to take our obstreperous teenage children outside the city gates and stoning them to death.

In New Testament times, the food laws were changed thanks to one man's vision, the rules on circumcision after much dithering were modified or forgotten, and holding all our wealth and goods in common never really took off.

Since then, through to modern times, there have been volte face moments. Some have happened without fuss, the recent removal of purgatory, and usury, despite being very biblical and clearly sinful, being permitted and even encouraged. In ancient times, the lending of money at any rate of interest was considered heinous, (though I presume that only positive rates were intended). Convenience counts.

Thankfully, this is not true of science. As my Humanist friends tell me, 'I believe in Science', and 'The data doesn't lie.' Most of us here would agree, I imagine, with the first statement but how many of us shuffle our feet at the second. All of us would subscribe, I imagine, to the idealised version of Science, and the application of reason and observation in understanding the visible and invisible universe. But equally as many of us would acknowledge that Science is frequently let down by the behaviour of the scientists as humans, as sinners, falling short of the required ideal behaviours. The data may not lie, but it can be very dependent on which data was collected, which selected, and when, and by whom, and who was paying for it.

The history of science is replete with examples of reluctance to change neither jot nor tittle of orthodox thinking. Ph.D. students being advised, if they want a career in science, not to pursue a particular approach, avoid an area that is politically contentious, might conflict with sources of generous funding. It would be generally inconvenient. Or when it is written, the energy with which both the paper and the author are attacked and even mocked and ridiculed.

Galileo ran into problems not so much for challenging the Church as challenging the dominant Aristotelian academics. Nor is it only impolite argument. The Spirit gives life but the word can kill. Ignatz Semmelweis died in 1865 in very suspicious circumstances, having called his medical colleagues 'irresponsible murderers' for not washing their hands between patients. Other scientists have died by their own hand. Richard Altman, the discoverer of mitochondria, killed himself because of the negative and harsh response to his work.¹

There are, and have been, more recent examples, across many fields, cosmology, climate change, genetics, gender studies, right up to the present day. Just a few years

ago, The World Health Organisation started a programme of vaccinating children in the Philippines against dengue fever. Doctors on the ground realised that though beneficial for many, a substantial minority of children were later even more ill than ever and even dying. Persuading the government and the World Health Organisation to stop the programme was a monumental task. Ironically, ethically, this still leaves me with a dilemma - with whom do I share this story? In world where the value and efficacy of vaccination is being dismissed and not taken up, should I be sharing stories that show that science can get it wrong, especially if the takeaway is just simply, 'Don't trust vaccinations'. Or is that a convenient excuse on my part?

Jesus is notorious for challenging conventional beliefs, both in his day and still here and now in ours. Not just in the wider world, but even within Christian communities, we struggle to implement his teachings, to be open, loving, receptive to different ways of expressing different ways of being, thinking and feeling. We still have structures which say - to belong you must agree, you must be like us, you must conform.

When reading the gospels, I am always struck by the number of people who walk away saying, 'No, this teaching is too hard', even with Jesus in front of them.

And yet the teaching is ultimately a simple one. Jesus clearly doesn't think in terms of jots and tittles when he summarises the Law, 'Love God, love your neighbour as yourself', and by way of example, 'Love one another as I have loved you'. Whether you come via the roof or the door, you are welcome here.

Or as some scientists have suggested - in science, we really could be a lot kinder to one another'.

¹ No text reference to this but it was bluntly stated by Professor Nick Lane, Evolutionary Biology at UCL, in a science discussion programme 'In Our Time', BBC, Mitochondria, 1/06/2023, time into broadcast 13.30 – 15.45. He ended the passage by saying, sadly, 'Yes, it happens in science too'.