

## **Do people, do we, know the difference between right and wrong, between good and evil?**

I don't know about you, but I have found the major stories of the news recently thoroughly depressing and dispiriting, as they seem to have raised the age-old question – Solomon worried about it too - 'do people, do we, know the difference between right and wrong, between good and evil?' The big story of recent weeks has been about phone hacking, a practice prompted by the belief that the need, the right, to make money on the spurious grounds of satisfying certain elements of public curiosity, was acceptable and need have no bounds. As details emerged about just whose phones had been hacked, and under what circumstances the outcry has properly been: 'who could have thought that was right?' Whilst it is easy and comfortable to point the finger at particular journalists and newspapers, there has also been the less comfortable theme of what sort of society are we that not only have we supported such enterprises with our purchases but we had not been more troubled by the earlier suggestions that all this was happening. And before that there was the story about the treatment of people, both the elderly and those with learning difficulties, in their respective care homes. I remember a discussion of that on 'Question Time' when members of the audience, whilst recognizing the poor recruitment and training practices that might have contributed to the general situation, also said that these were not matters on which training was required – hitting and abusing the vulnerable was wrong; surely everyone knew that, and if they didn't, then again, what sort of society were we living in. This is a good question! And a further complication: as we noted two weeks ago – if only to know what was right was the same as to do what was right.

And that is where we engage with the writing of Paul in this letter, this treatise, to the church in Rome. I don't know how Paul, were he to be transported into our present time, would have seen and responded to these stories. Arguably he would have felt entirely at home, confirmed that his teaching and preaching still was needed; alternatively he might be devastated that two thousand years had passed and people still had not got the message. For the message remains as relevant to the church now as it was to the church seeking to set itself into the social and moral morass of first Century Rome. Rules, the law, are not enough. There are laws against phone hacking – but they have not been enough; I am sure the homes where resident abuse has been uncovered can produce staff handbooks which state that that should not happen, but it did. We are once more engaging with Paul's recognition that we are all bound to fall victim to sin, to wrong-doing, in whatever form is going to be ours, if we rely only on our own strengths and powers. It would be good to be strengthened and supported by the confident knowledge, if not the effective social conditioning, of a strong shared moral compass, but it can be taken further than that. This, argues Paul, is the consequence of living our lives in the flesh; what we need is to live our lives in the Spirit. That, of course is a great motto to have, a mantra to recite, but what does it mean and how do you do it.

Paul is drawing a contrast between two kinds of life:

- firstly, the life which is dominated by sinful human nature; whose focus and centre is self; whose only law is its own desires; which takes what it likes where it likes, and if it doesn't take it may just buy it. In each of us that will be differently described. It may be passion-controlled, or lust-controlled, pride-controlled or ambition-controlled. Its characteristic is its absorption in the things that human nature without Christ sets its heart upon.
- Alternatively, there is the life that is dominated by the Spirit of God. As men and women live in the air, they live in Christ and are never separated from him. As they breathe in the air and it fills them, so Christ fills them. Their minds are those of Christ, their wills are those of Christ. They are Spirit-controlled, Christ-controlled and God-focused.

These are clearly diametrically opposed life-styles, albeit somewhat caricatured, leading, as Paul argues, to very different outcomes: death as opposed to life. 'But hang on', someone is bound to say, 'surely we all

die? That is the inevitable consequence of being human, even if we have chosen to live a Spirit-controlled life'. Paul's response is to turn our attention onto Jesus. Jesus was human and therefore died, but God raised him from death and defeated the death that would otherwise have conquered and reigned.

Great stuff! But Jesus was the Son of God – we cannot claim that! Indeed we cannot, Paul concedes, but we do not have to, because if we place our lives in God's hands he will adopt us. Adoption was known and practiced in Roman times, as it is practiced today with much the same result, though the processes might have changed a little. In Roman law, which was what Paul knew, the process of adoption gave the adopted person full legal rights in their new family, made them co-heirs with the rest of the family and all aspects of their past life, including debts, were wiped out. It is not that different today: an adopted child enjoys all the legal standing of any other child of the family. We, proclaims Paul, have received the spirit of adoption; we have the right to call upon God as 'Abba, Father'. The process, I might suggest (interpreting the current legislation a little loosely) is that by committing ourselves to God and a spirit-led life we have declared ourselves free for adoption. That we are then adopted is a function of God's own good grace – that is his decision, not ours. But once adopted we are fully part of his family, we stand with the same rights as any other of his children, and if life after death has been bestowed on one of them, his Son, Jesus Christ, then it is bestowed upon us equally.

And discerning right and wrong in private lives and in public life? Well if we can establish that in our private lives the public life should follow. If we are Spirit-controlled, Christ-controlled and God-focused discerning right and wrong will not be a problem. But the 'if' is the crucial issue. The decision, the choice is ours – to declare ourselves on the Lord's side, free for adoption; we can then rejoice, for the consequences that flow from that decision, determined by a constant and loving God, are clear and certain.