

**23 October 2016**

Twenty years ago to the very day last week, Aotearoa New Zealand held its first general election under MMP. This new electoral system broke the old two-party near-monopoly on Parliament. And while the two traditional parties continued to be the dominant force in national politics, a number of newer, smaller, parties rose to some degree of prominence.

Among them were several parties that called themselves 'Christian'. This was a bit misleading, as Christians occupy a diverse range of positions on the political spectrum. And many Christians found the policies of these parties to be far removed from their beliefs, and despaired at being associated with them.

Now before I go any further, rest assured you are not going to be subjected to a political lecture today. I would not dream of telling you how to vote. I was horrified when my grandmother told me how she was told in church to vote Labour in 1972, and then to vote National in 1975. We each have our own God-given reasoning, and I am not going to tell you how to use yours. But I do want to speak briefly about this particular political movement.

Its most defining features were its social conservatism, and its focus on moral issues. And its most successful moment was in 1996, when an alliance between two parties calling itself the 'Christian Coalition' won 4.33% of the list vote, which was not far off the 5% threshold to win seats in Parliament. However, if 1996 was the movement's high, its low came in 2005, when one of its former leaders was charged,

tried, convicted, and imprisoned on charges of serious sexual offending against children. I expect most of you will know who I am speaking of, but I am not going to name him, as naming and shaming is not my reason for being here today.

This ex-politician is not the only Christian leader to have stumbled so spectacularly; there is a long list of American televangelists, who have hoisted themselves on their own petards. And sadly, every single one of them has added their own individual crack to the credibility of the Church.

Today's Gospel reading is the Parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector from the Gospel according to St Luke, in which a proud, arrogant, and self-righteous Pharisee, who took pride in making a perfect offering to the temple according to the letter of the law, took the moral high ground, and proclaimed his righteousness over a lowly tax collector.

The Pharisees were one of the leading Jewish religious, political, and social movements in Jesus' day, along with the Sadducees and the Essenes. Amongst other things, they emphasised the importance of ritual purity and observance of the Law. And it has been suggested that they were the Jewish equivalent of Christian Protestant fundamentalists. But I digress.

In the parable, the Pharisee was an upstanding citizen. So can he really be compared with a fallen Christian leader, and did he have any deep dark secrets? That's impossible to answer. Especially given this is a parable. However, I would suggest he would be very likely to have had some skeletons fall out of his closet, as he

seemed to be headed for some kind of fall, given Jesus had declared, "... all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."<sup>1</sup>

Tax collectors on the other hand were one of the most despised groups in society. Not only were they seen as being collaborators with the hated Roman occupiers, they had a reputation for taxing the taxes they gathered. But this tax collector acknowledged his wrongdoing, and pleaded for mercy.

And I would suggest the contrast between the Pharisee and the tax collector is perhaps best described in Psalm 51:

<sup>16</sup> For you have no delight in sacrifice;  
if I were to give a burnt-offering, you would not be pleased.

<sup>17</sup> The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;  
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.<sup>2</sup>

But getting back to our former politician, how would I suggest should we respond when someone, who has publicly taken the moral high ground while identifying as a Christian, takes a massive stumble?

Firstly, we should remember that none of us are without fault. So we have no right to judge or condemn others. Including those whose had previously judged others and could be judged by their own standards. But that does not mean in any way mean we condone what they have done.

Secondly, we should not feel guilty if we feel aggrieved by their actions. Such public falls from grace impact on the Church as a

whole, and the reputation of all Christians is tainted by their misdeeds. For centuries, the Church was widely seen as being society's moral guardian. And in this regard, can we really blame the media for having a field day whenever yet another prominent Christian gets it so badly wrong?

Thirdly, we should uphold those who were hurt by those individuals, in our thoughts and in our prayers. Prayer is about actions, not just words; some powerful words from Pope Francis I recently quoted here are, "You pray for the hungry. Then you feed them. That is how prayer works."<sup>3</sup> So we should do what we can reasonably do to help them, and work to ensure there are systems in place in our faith communities, to minimise the risk of more people being hurt in the future.

Fourthly, as hard as it may be for us, we should also remember the perpetrators. In the long term, it is better that they become truly repentant tax collectors than remain be self-righteous Pharisees.

Although that is not to say they should not have to take responsibility for their misdeeds. In this regard, I am horrified by the practice, in some overseas churches, of victims of sexual abuse by senior pastors being pressured into forgiving their abusers and not going to the authorities. That is revictimising the victims, and is completely unacceptable.

Finally, we should continue to do what we can do to help build up the kingdom here on Earth, by making our contribution to the realisation of God's reign of justice and peace, and not be discouraged when others, who share our identity as Christians, let the rest of us down.

When we share in the Eucharist today, I ask that we remember that we are the Body of Christ. While there may be flaws in the Body, they are our flaws.

In his song 'Anthem', Leonard Cohen sings:

Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack, a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in.  
That's how the light gets in.  
That's how the light gets in.<sup>4</sup>

The Church is the Body of the Christ in the world. We try to set very high standards for it. But as an institution that has human membership, it is not without flaws, for none of us will achieve perfection in this life.

The cracks in the Church can open our eyes to God's unfailing love comforting a bruised Church and healing a broken world. And that's how the light gets in.

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<http://theword.tk>

<sup>1</sup> Luke 18:14b

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 51:16-17

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.inspiringquotes.us/author/3767-pope-francis>

<sup>4</sup> Leonard Cohen, 'Anthem'