

21 May 2017

Two and a half years ago, Florida charity worker Arnold Abbott made world headlines when he was arrested. His crime? Feeding the homeless.

Arnold, who was ninety at the time, had been helping prepare hundreds of meals every week since 1990. In 1991, he founded the *Maureen A. Abbott Love Thy Neighbor Fund*, whose name was a tribute to his late wife, and which sought to continue the work they had done together. *Love Thy Neighbor* is based on two core principles: “We are our brother’s keeper”, and “Love thy neighbor as thyself.” And it is open to people of all religions, beliefs, and races, who wish to help those who are worse off than themselves. ¹

Love Thy Neighbor has carried on with its good work of helping the homeless without drawing any international attention, until the City of Fort Lauderdale passed an ordinance severely restricting their activities. Feeding the homeless had to take place least 500 feet away from residential properties, and food sites were restricted to one per city block. These restrictions were motivated by residents and businesses, who were concerned about homeless people being attracted to their neighbourhoods (and presumably thereby lowering the tone of them). ²

But *Love Thy Neighbor* was not going let this stop them. And on Tuesday 4 November 2014, Arnold, along with two ministers from the Sanctuary Church, were arrested while they were distributing food to the homeless. But, in spite of this, Arnold was back feeding

the homeless the very next day. Even though he risked a US\$500 fine for each arrest. Not to mention four months in gaol. And again, he was arrested.³

Fort Lauderdale Mayor Jack Seiler was not impressed by Arnold's efforts, but Arnold pointed out, if they weren't feeding the homeless, many of them would have no alternative other than to forage through rubbish bins, or starve.

"What the city is doing by cutting out feeding is very simple -- they are forcing homeless people to go dumpster-diving all over again," Arnold said. "They will steal. That's what the mayor is forcing the homeless to do."⁴

Today's epistle reading is from the First Letter of St Peter. The authorship is traditionally attributed to St Peter, the Apostle, and this certainly seems to have been the view of the early Church. However, many of today's scholars say that St Peter could not have possibly written this document, as it would have required much higher a level of education and a knowledge of Greek than a humble fisherman from Galilee would have possessed. And a compromise position is that St Peter essentially dictated the letter to a secretary who was more versed in Greek than he was. There are differing views on the letter's authorship, but at the end of the day, we really don't know, and like so many of the books of scripture, its authorship is uncertain.

The First Letter of St Peter contains some very interesting material. Some of it, notably the author's views on gender roles, especially the suggestion that women are "the weaker sex", would generally be

considered today to be irredeemably outdated, which reinforces my personal view that we must always take into account the cultural and historical context of when scripture was written, instead of simply taking it at face value through today's eyes.⁵ It also contains that absolutely fascinating fragment of text about Jesus making a proclamation to imprisoned spirits after his death, which was part of our reading this morning.⁶

But the most consistent theme of the First Letter of St Peter is a message of encouragement for early Christians who were facing persecution, and scholars are divided over whether the author was referring to social rejection, or the more serious official persecution that was undertaken by the Roman authorities at certain times. And it may well refer to both. But in either case, those who are facing persecution are encouraged. They are told that they are blessed if they suffer for doing good,⁷ and that it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil.⁸

A complaint I have sometimes heard from Christians in North America is that they are being persecuted for their faith (although admittedly I haven't heard quite heard so much since Donald Trump took office). Some are employers, who are unhappy that health provisions included in remuneration for their workers cover things they disapprove of, such as the provision of contraception. But an employer being prevented from forcing their personal morality onto their staff does not count as religious persecution.

And there are others who claim they are persecuted who object to anti-discrimination laws that we are told could – for example – force a baker to bake a cake for a same sex wedding. Now you may rest

assured I am not about to segue into the minefield that is the theology of human sexuality: this is just an example to make a point. And I would argue that this does not constitute religious persecution. Baking a cake is just that; it is baking a cake. It is not actually partaking in a wedding. And I am yet to hear any complaints from Christian bakers about baking cakes for divorced people who are remarrying, which I am sure must happen a lot more frequently than same sex weddings.

I would suggest they ask themselves that most clichéd of questions, 'What would Jesus do?' And I would say Jesus would not only bake the cake, he would bake two of them, given that he had said that if anybody forces you to go one mile, you should also go the extra mile.⁹

Neither of these scenarios constitute genuine religious persecution in my view, and to suggest they do is downright disrespectful to those who in some parts of the world are deprived of liberty, subjected to violence, and even killed for following their faith.

But, having said that, there are still genuine examples of Americans being persecuted for following the teachings of Jesus. And one of them is Arnold Abbott. Jesus never said anything about restricting people's access to health care, or refusing to bake cakes for people whose lifestyles we disapprove of. But he had a lot to say about caring for the vulnerable.¹⁰ And he also fed people.¹¹

Arnold wasn't arrested over issues Jesus never mentioned or even alluded to. He was arrested for doing precisely what Jesus asked us to do. In my book, that counts as religious persecution.

The real faces of the persecuted Christians in North America are not the employers who object to their staff having access to contraception. And neither are they the bakers who want to be selective about their clientele. The real faces of the persecuted American Christians are people like Arnold Abbott.

So, what happened to Arnold in the end? After three trials in the Circuit Court, followed by two trials in the Palm Beach Appeals Court, *Love Thy Neighbor* won, and Fort Lauderdale's laws against feeding the homeless were declared unconstitutional.

Love Thy Neighbor won. Jesus won. And love won. But persecution lost.

Darryl Ward

21 May 2017

<http://theword.tk>

1 <http://lovethyneighbor.org/about-us/history/>

2 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/90-year-old-arnold-abbott-vows-to-keep-feeding-the-homeless-despite-facing-jail-9844237.html>

3 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2822829/Charity-worker-90-arrested-police-feeding-homeless-gets-right-work-one-day-later-despite-outcry-insensitive-mayor-gets-arrested-again.html>

4 Ibid

5 1 Peter 3:1-12

6 1 Peter 3:18-22

7 1 Peter 3:14

8 1 Peter 3:17

9 Matthew 5:41-42

10 Matthew 25:34-40

11 Matthew 14:13-21

12 <http://lovethyneighbor.org/about-us/history/>