

Clarity and Grace: Gospel mission, the Church of God, and ministry in a messy world

Talk 1. Messy relationships: the way of Christ, and the righteous faith concerns of the Pharisees

*Bishop Tim Harris,
Assistant Bishop, Diocese of Adelaide*

My starting point and some assumptions:

I have given the title for my addresses 'Clarity and Grace', so it is only right that I be upfront with you as to my own convictions and starting point.

As a bishop in the Anglican Church of Australia, I uphold the teaching of my Church that retains and approves the doctrine and principles of the Church of England embodied in the Book of Common Prayer. I affirm that Holy Matrimony is an honourable estate, instituted of God, in which a man and a woman are joined together by God. I affirm this not only because my Church requires it, but I believe it to be established in Scripture, our 'ultimate rule and standard of faith.' I am making the assumption that most here share the same view, and it is not my intention to rehearse arguments to defend this view.

It is my plan to take a step back, and consider the wider context of our mission and ministry in the midst of significant social change. What considerations weigh upon us in seeking to be faithful to the gospel, following the way of Christ? Alongside these questions, we need to ask deep questions over our place as members of the one holy catholic and apostolic church of Christ. Where does the nature of relationships and fellowship within the church fit within the mission of God and our calling to proclaim the gospel of Christ. How do we understand gospel mission, evangelism and ecclesiology in one sentence? Just to foreshadow things, I will propose in my second talk that all three must be held alongside each other: they cannot and must not be disengaged or viewed independently of each other.

As one way of exploring these issues, we will look in turn at the example of Christ, over against the concerns of the Pharisees; at the instruction and exhortation of Paul, in the midst of lack of fellowship between various church communities in Rome; and finally, the teaching of John as reflected in 1 John 4, testing the spirits.

Messy relationships: the way of Christ, and the righteous faith concerns of the Pharisees

Jeff Iorg, editor of a very helpful recent book, 'Ministry in the New Marriage Culture, starts with this compelling scenario:

What if this happened at your church?

Your church sponsors its annual Vacation Bible School. A ten-year-old boy comes with a friend and hears the gospel for the first time. He commits himself to Jesus as his Lord and Savior and tells you about his decision. You are elated. He promises to bring his parents on family night at the end of the Bible school so they can also hear the good news about Jesus.

On family night your new young friend brings his parents, two men married to each other. How will you respond? Will they be welcome in your church? How will this boy's perception of the gospel and the church change based on how his parents are treated? What will be your plan for continuing your church's relationship to this family in days to come?

One of the men in this same-sex marriage hears the gospel at the family night service. He's intrigued. His religious upbringing was a smattering of New Age confusion and overbearing Christian legalism. The gospel sounds like really good news to him! He returns with his son the following Sunday for both a Bible study class and worship service. Is he invited to your couples' class or sent to some other group for men? How do the church kids respond to the new boy with the two dads? Do church members invite these visitors to sit with them in the worship service? How about out for lunch after church?

This same man continues to attend church regularly. After a few weeks he indicates he has committed himself to Jesus. He presents himself for baptism and church membership. Will your church baptize him? Will he be welcomed as a member while still in a legally recognized same-sex marriage? Since he is now a Christian, will you encourage him to get divorced, thus ending his same-sex union? If he does this and risks losing custody of the boy who first started this chain of events by coming to Vacation Bible School, will you advise him to do it anyway, no matter what the courts decide about the child? Must a divorce precede the baptism? Are the two events connected at all?

Welcome to ministry in the new marriage culture.

Now what if . . . Your teenage son has his first girlfriend. You aren't surprised or displeased. It's a normal developmental phase of life; hormones are raging and romance is in the air. You meet the young lady, and you're impressed. She is smart, funny, articulate, and open about her Christian faith. You discover her mother— check that, both mothers— are actually pastors in a church in your community. Your son gets angry when you question the validity of their marriage and the legitimacy of their Christian faith. By extension he feels you are also attacking his girlfriend. He accuses you of being judgmental, legalistic, and unloving. He knows what you believe about marriage— and what you say the Bible teaches— but kind-hearted Christian pastors are modeling a different message for him. How do you respond to your son's accusations? How do you relate to his girlfriend . . . her parents . . . their expressions of Christianity?

Welcome to ministry in the new marriage culture.

You get the picture. The social norms and cultural patterns of the world we are called to love is changing rapidly, and we are now facing questions and challenges that are not resolved by neat answers.

While I am aware of such pastoral questions being faced and addressed in local contexts – I suspect pretty much by every church community, let alone family and friendship networks, the focus within the national church has largely been a political one. Many of us are truly conflicted—deeply conflicted—in seeking to affirm our Biblical position regarding marriage & sexuality on one hand, and our desire to be pastoral and genuinely relational on the other.

I want to make one observation at this stage, and elaborate in my second talk: while in our more political mode things are largely framed in ‘for and against’ terms. A recent blog post has put the claim starkly: there is no middle ground. And at one level, I entirely agree—although at another level I believe that is quite unhelpful.

We may share the same convictions as to Scriptural teaching on holy matrimony being between a man and a woman, but there are a whole range of genuinely held views over how we believe we should respond pastorally. How might we best engage the realities of a messy, and frequently dysfunctional world, that is far from the ideal norms depicted in Scripture.

And this is not just true with regard to same sex relationships. It has been true regarding pastoral responses to divorce, and failures in marriage, and—with little tension within the church—in responding pastorally to the reality that for decades it has become a widespread practice for sexual relationships prior to marriage not only in the wider community, but to a significant extent within our church communities.

We minister in a messy world, and struggle to uphold ideals while meeting people where they are, recognising that gospel transformation is almost invariably a process, not a quick or simple decision. Just how we navigate such issues cannot be reduced to ‘for and against’ statements and affirmations. I am confident that not a single person here would be saying – get your life in order, remove all sinfulness and failure, and then you will be welcome in our church. Significant pastoral accommodation is part and parcel of ministry, and just how we approach that will have some genuine differences.

Nor should we forget that Scripture itself reflects God at work in and through a significant degree of cultural accommodation that falls far short of the ideal, including household and familial arrangements. Our assumptions of the neat nuclear family are disturbed by examples of godly men and women living in polygamous marriages, alongside sexual relations with concubines, handmaids and harems. None can be used as God’s intended pairing of a man and a woman, but it does demonstrate a profound capacity of God to work in and through arrangements and circumstances that fall far short of his expectations.

Just to be clear: I am not saying this by way of arguing for the acceptance of same sex partnerships akin to marriage. But I am indicating that there will be a range of views, for instance, as to whether we might recognise and affirm committed same gender but non-sexual friendships? There are considerations that will divide us. More on this tomorrow, but for now I want to reflect on the way of Christ in the midst of a broken, dysfunctional and messy world – for that is the world Christ came to love and to save. What do our gospel traditions reveal to us by way of pastoral accommodation?

Firstly, it is notable that our Lord recognised and named circumstances that do not match the intention of God. One clear example is the Samaritan woman at the well in John's Gospel. In the midst of their exchange, we find the following:

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." 17 The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; 18 for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!"

Now there are many dimensions to this passage, but we should note the way the narrative concludes:

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." 40 So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days.

Not only has Jesus not used the woman's social state become a barrier—somewhat to the surprise of the disciples—she also becomes one of the early witnesses to Christ, and is depicted in John's Gospel positively, alongside and over against the highly respected religious figure of Nicodemus in the preceding chapter. Engaging and ministering in and through socially compromised people becomes part of the *modus operandi* of Jesus. Through a woman otherwise shunned by the righteous, her whole community is reached with the gospel. This episode is presented precisely to highlight Jesus' willingness to enter the messiness of people's lives and experiences.

Another passage where Jesus speaks of God's intention in joining together a man and a woman is striking. In Matthew 19:4-6 we find the familiar teaching in response to a question about divorce:

"Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning 'made them male and female,' 5 and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? 6 So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

What is less recognised, however, is a striking conclusion immediately after affirming the normative ideal:

But he said to them, "Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. 12 For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can."

Here we have a remarkable example of people who do not meet the ideal, who do not fit the socially normative pattern, and I find that striking. There is much that could be said about the stigma and vulnerability of eunuchs in the time of Jesus, but the contrast with the ideal of marriage is especially noteworthy. There is as much a place in the kingdom of God for those who are outside the norms and quite dysfunctional in terms of their social place. Whether by birth, by the impact of others, or by choice, the life and social status of eunuchs was very much in the 'messy' category, and Jesus affirms their place within the kingdom.

To bring the way of Jesus into clearer focus, I want to compare and contrast him with the Pharisees, and to do so, I need to highlight significant elements where the Pharisees got it

right. We are very accustomed to viewing the Pharisees as rule-keeping moralists, obsessed with keeping the law, over against the gospel of grace literally embodied in Christ.

Yet Pharisees have been greatly misunderstood! I want to speak in their defence, because this is some important to understanding the area where Jesus did disagree with them.

It was not over the importance of observing the law. At that point, Jesus was in total agreement: “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 5:20). The Pharisees were entirely right to underscore the vital importance of obedience to God’s instructions. A little background—nothing more than a bare sketch—will help understand where they were coming from.

The forerunners of the Pharisees can be traced back to the lessons learned from the exile in the OT. In answering the question as to why the exile came about, the prophets had a consistent answer: far from being a defeat of YHWH by another power, God had used the other powers as instruments of judgement for wilful and persistent neglect of the Torah. The Israelites had brought it upon themselves because of their covenantal unfaithfulness.

Upon the restoration to Jerusalem, the lesson was well learned. This must never happen again; the Torah must be read regularly, and observed scrupulously. This was the consistent message of the prophets: to be righteous people of God, adherence to the law of God was essential, lest another period of judgement might be experienced.

And a key point is this: the requirement for obedience to God’s law was an all-of-community requirement. Judgement would come upon the community, unless the community held each other accountable to being obedient to God’s instructions, the Torah. And they were right! Living rightly before God is as much a communal thing as it is personal. That much is clear in both Moses and the prophets.

This explains the Pharisee’s great concern for seeking out members of the community who were letting the side down, potentially bringing God’s judgement upon the community as a whole. For the well-being of the community, such persons must be socially excluded, outcasts from the community of the faithful. While Jesus took issue with their traditions of interpretation, he did not challenge the importance of being obedient to God’s law. It is found throughout the gospel traditions. Towards the conclusion to the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Mt. 7:21).

So where does Jesus differ from the Pharisees? I would suggest it was essentially a contrast between the Pharisees fear of spiritual contamination for the possible judgement it may bring upon the community, and Jesus’ willingness to associate and engage with notorious sinners, to build relationships and show genuine love to those who were the spiritual failures and far from living rightly. Where the Pharisees were driven by fear, Jesus was confident that in and through his presence, through building genuine friendships with all manner of people and showing a depth of love, that far from contamination, Jesus would bring redemption and transformation to lives.

Where the Pharisees excluded, and walked on the other side of the road, Jesus crossed the road to be with all the wrong sorts of people. Luke 15:1-2 is a great example: Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."

And so Jesus told the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost sons.

Now I am aware I am not saying anything particularly new, but it is significant for our considerations of how to relate to a messy and dysfunctional world. When we hear and respond to our calling to follow Christ in this manner, in God's grace we are being the church we are called to be.

In my view, being in a reactive mode of church does not bring the best out of us. I believe the church's opposition to the decriminalisation of homosexuality was a bad mistake, albeit for the best of intentions. It put us on the other side of the street, protesting and being heard as highly judgemental, and not a little self-righteous.

Sadly, speaking of pastoral accommodation and demonstrating love through our acceptance of people as they are, (albeit with the encouragement to join us in coming under God's word and seeking to amend our lives) – such pastoral approaches are difficult in a highly political environment, and even more so if others speak of them as demonstrating our going soft on the issue, failing to maintain a rigorous line and becoming suspect as to our spiritual integrity.

I'm not sure whether you have noticed or not, but we as members of the church can be a very judgemental lot! We too fear those who are different to ourselves, those who challenge our culture and social circles and expectations. Yet God's love is for all the world, not just those who have their act together. We are better in proactive and prophetic mode, rather than primarily and repeatedly reactive and judgemental.

So as I conclude this talk, my appeal is that whatever else we may pursue by way of statements and drawing of lines (and we do need both of these), withdrawing from the messiness and dysfunctionality of the wider community is not an option. We are at our best when we are coming alongside people where they are, as they are. It is by our love that we shall be known.

Now I recognise at this point you will be sitting there thinking: "yes, but...", and it is a big 'but...'; You will be thinking "this is all very well, but how are we to relate to a church we believe has lost its way, and heading in a direction we cannot follow?" That is something each of us will wrestle with, and I do know I don't have golden answers to deeply complex considerations. However, I do believe Paul does provide some guidance and teaching that I believe we need to weigh and consider. More on that tomorrow.