

I keep coming across people, inside and outside the church, who think that we've lost our moral compass in both personal and public life. Standards have gone, who cares about anything? On one side are forces of decency, order and respect; and on the other, there are forces of 'What's mine is mine and what's yours is mine as well.' I don't know whether or not this diagnosis is correct, but that's how it feels to many people. So my question this morning is: What is it to act morally?

Immediately, we have to admit it's not an easy question to answer. What one person thinks is not necessarily what another thinks. e.g. One thinks that to terminate a pregnancy is of itself just simply wrong; another thinks that termination is morally permissible under certain circumstances, such as when the safety of the mother is at risk or the foetus is severely impaired; and another thinks it's really a question of a woman's right to choose. These are differences of opinion at one level, but I wonder if they hide some deep differences of what morality is.

The former Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, once said that we seem to have "two conflicting visions ... between those who see society as a series of private gardens of desire and those who make space for public parks which we do not own but which we jointly maintain for the sake of others and the future." This comment might be polarising our situation a bit too much – most of us are mixtures of selfishness and altruism – but perhaps we can see what he's getting at. Selfishness or altruism are there as choices before us.

Then we look at scripture and wonder whether we can get some help from there. Not always it seems. Take the first lesson from Second Book of Samuel. Plenty of morality there – well, sort of. Plenty of shenanigans anyway. We've got a king (David) who impregnates Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah, and then arranges for Uriah to be killed. He takes Bathsheba into his own house and adds to his existing collection of wives and a son is born. God's not pleased – so there's a certain moral compass operating there – and sends Nathan the prophet to trap David into realising his immoral deeds, and David confesses his sins. Nathan then says: 'The Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die.' God offers forgiveness in response to David's confession. But God doesn't want this to be easy hunky-dory forgiveness, so there's a sting in the tail. As a punishment the son born to Bathsheba and David is struck ill and is destined to die. You might say that at this point any sense of tidy morality rather goes awry. There is rough justice, however, in the fact that David can't get away with just mouthing his 'Sorry God' as though there were no consequences to his immoral actions. The immorality has to be recognised, but to modern sensitivity the killing of the child seems to call God's morality into question. May be we simply have to be content with the picture of repentance followed by forgiveness, together with a need to have something take place to answer the seriousness of David's immoral actions in the first place. This is just about OK as a set of principles, and actually when you think about it, they pretty well continue to be followed today. We wouldn't want the son killed today and David could have a term of life-sentence imprisonment. But the principles of having to account for bad human behaviour through a system of moral reckoning are what we need.

Now back to my initial question: what is it to act morally? Here's a couple of things to think about when you're next in the bath, thinking about morality.

1. I suspect that we all carry inside ourselves some basic instincts about some fundamental values - and perhaps those reflected in the 10 Commandments serve as good a pointer as any: do not kill, steal, bear false witness against your neighbour, and so on. The trouble is that the 10 commandments are expressed in a negative form. A better form of words would be: practice love of life, have respect for another's property, be honest in relationships. To do these things would lead to an increase in civility, in courtesy, in honouring the dignity of another human being. It would be a bonus.

But do we feel that there is this common pool of instinctual morality? A natural sense of what's right and what's wrong? Actually, our moral sense is learned and absorbed from those around us. From family traditions, school and education, friendships, what we pick up from church, synagogue, mosque and temple, and even what we might read or study. Of course what's around us is a tapestry of mixed messages, so we have to attend more self-consciously than we might fancy doing to developing an outlook which is true to who we are, what we believe and the faith we espouse, even if that faith is the category of no-faith. It means trying to be honest about where our failings lie and cultivating a spiritual outlook which we allow to affect the

whole of who we are – in our relationships, in our working life, in our leisure habits and our voting inclinations.

2. However- and here's my second thought – morality is not only about individual behaviour, being more respectful of one another and the like – it is also a public matter. This was recognised by the insightful Church Times in one Leader some while ago, which read: "The argument behind much preaching is that society will improve when people behave better. [The Church] talks a lot about the family, the 10 Commandments, [and is] often preoccupied with personal and sexual relationships. But if discussion stays at this level, the opportunity to deliver a wider message to the nation goes begging." The Leader continued: "The greater sins to which we all contribute, which make this a world of injustice, conflict and exploitation, are untouched and unacknowledged." For once, the Church Times gave us some fairly challenging stuff.

One well-respected Christian writer on social issues in that same Church Times pushed further politically: "We might think that consumerism, greed and selfishness have crept into our national life and will somehow creep out again. In fact, in order for capitalism to work, it has to be based on greed. You can't filter greed and selfishness out of the international economic order and expect it to remain the same order."

Well, that might be a viewpoint fairly at one end of a debate, suggesting that a more root and branch shake-up is required if public morality is to improve, i.e. if proper justice is to be put in place. But at least it does point to the need for debate at these levels as well as the private levels. Morality is about how we set up institutions to give the weaker members of society a better chance of flourishing than they often get. We all know that if you consistently treat another human being badly, the chances are that they will react badly in return. If a person feels that society does not treat them humanely at all, then they are going to wonder why they should treat society humanely in return.

Finally, I want to add a reflection from the Gospel reading this morning to your consideration of morality. The problem – or interesting thing – is that it rather upsets all of our instincts about wanting a tidy moral system by which to live. We're in the house of a Pharisee and a Pharisee was not a bad man, quite the opposite. A Pharisee was someone who wanted his fellow Jews to apply religious recommendations to all of their living. The Pharisee wanted an increase in religious application of principles to everyday life, if you like, wanted a renewal in religious commitment. But the religious outlook made clear distinctions between the sinners and the righteous. And we only get the full force of the story if we see that the Pharisee really was righteous, really did take his religious commitment very seriously. We should not despise the righteousness of the religiously committed – their goodness exceeds most of what all of us here might manage. But it was what we might call conventional. There are rules to follow and we should follow them. Into this scenario Jesus upsets everything. Simon the Pharisee is shocked by the attitude of Jesus to the woman, a sinner. He receives the answer that the sinners show greater love than the righteous ones because more is forgiven them. He takes the side of the sinner, though there is no reason to think that he doubts the validity and continuing application of the religious law. It is not the love of the woman that merits her forgiveness, but it is the forgiveness which she perceives in Jesus which creates her love. This upsets the usual morality equation. The usual equation goes: sinner, repentance, offer of forgiveness. Our story's equation goes: sinner, forgiveness, love. What if we celebrated the love of all those rejected by society – and I'm sorry, but I'm thinking of refugees again – as evidence of their gratefulness that they are accepted. Stop thinking of them as sinners. It would change us into being better acceptors and create a sense of outrageous unconditional welcome which would turn the current system on its head.

Unconditional forgiveness is virtually impossible to practise. Yet it is handed on to us as a measure of what morality might aspire to. One Christian writer puts it like this:

'Pure forgiveness is not an instrumental good, a prudent management technique or a damage limitation exercise; it is an intrinsic good, an end in itself, a pure gift offered with no motive of return.'

Another writer calls it the 'madness of the impossible' because it can't be encompassed by rational explanation; it is its own meaning.

The Church would be more the church of Christ than it often is if it joined Jesus and not the judgemental ones in its encounter with those who are thought unacceptable.

The God of unconditional forgiveness calls all of us to account.

Amen.