

## Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> April 2019 Easter 2

### Acts 5: 27-32 and John 20:19-31

#### Witnesses

For the past year Israel Folau's Instagram postings have focused heavily on the themes of hell, judgement, repentance, sin and the Scriptures.

Not long before the Easter break Israel posted an Instagram (you've got to love the social media apps for creating havoc) quoting from 1 Timothy 1:8-11, which reads in its full form,

"Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God which he entrusted to me."

Or maybe Israel had in mind Rev 21: 8 "But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, and all liars, their place will be the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death."

Well a media storm ensued and it looks like Israel may be sacked by Rugby Australia for speaking out (witnessing to) what he believes to be a Gospel message. Bishop Brian Tamaki jumped to Israel's defence and said basically spiritual war was being declared.

The Australian Vice Captain, Will Genia said, "You can't be going around spreading hate and telling people they're going to hell. You can have your beliefs and have a faith in what you have a faith in but you can't go around and tell people they're going to hell because they are a certain way."

Politicians from both Australia and New Zealand have felt they should make a contribution to the debate and have basically said, "You can have your own personal opinion but you can't go around spreading hate speech." As the Australian Prime Minister said, "It is important that people act with love, care and compassion to their fellow citizens and to speak sensitively to their fellow Australians."

Well where do you sit in this debate?

Most people have focused on the reference by Israel to "homosexuals – sodomites" but what about the fornicators, murderers, slave traders, liars, perjurers, cowards, sorcerers and all else that people do that is contrary to the will of God." It seems to me that they also require a mention in dispatches if we wish to be fair to them and not leave them out of those likely to spend eternity in hell.

**What we are witnessing is part of an age-old debate. How does one witness to, or speak about, what one believes without causing offense to others?** In our reading from the Acts of the Apostles this morning the disciples have just miraculously been released from prison for preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Chief of the Temple Police and the High Priest went out and brought the disciples of Jesus before the High Council. The Chief Priest said to them, “Didn’t we give you strict orders not to teach in Jesus’ name? And here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are trying your best to blame us for the death of this man.” (5:27-28)

Peter answered, “It’s necessary to obey God rather than man.”

That also is the defence of Israel Folau?

When I was in Cambridge, England on Study Leave a number of years ago the Rev David Chibaboka, was also at Westminster College studying for an MA. He became good friends with the Rev Dr John Campbell and Joy and me. One day he asked why no Minister was down in Cambridge Square preaching the Gospel. When we asked him why we would do such a thing, he replied that that was Ministers do in Malawi where he came from and he expected the same in England.

David was having difficulty contextualising the Christian faith. One of the papers he was required to complete for his MA was Feminist Theology. This was totally outside of the realm of David’s understanding of Christianity. As he couldn’t grasp why we didn’t preach the Gospel in Cambridge Square so he couldn’t grasp what feminist theology was about.

**You see, context is everything. No matter how good our intent may be – such as with Israel Folau – coming out and giving expression to it may open us to public ridicule and misunderstanding.**

In Winton, Southland, when I was a child 60 years ago, late night was Friday night. Every Friday night, regardless of the weather a family of two brothers and the wife of one would stand outside the Bank of New Zealand on the Main Street and preach. My father told me that they were from the Brethren Church and that they wouldn’t eat with the shearers or others who came to work on the farm. They gave them their meal in the Woolshed while the family ate in the dining room. Yet these same people, every Friday night preached to we heathen on the streets of Winton. It just didn’t seem to make sense to me. Why should we even listen to them for they dressed in very drab clothing and spoke with a monotone. There was nothing that was attractive about them and so we shut our ears to what was being said.

**Context is everything when one is giving witness to the Good News of what God has done in Jesus Christ. Enthusiasm, self-righteousness and arrogance count for little. A good dose of humility, compassion and understanding the world of those we are speaking to go a long way if we wish to be heard and understood.**

If you listen to Peter’s speech before the High Priest and the Council you will find that he does not harangue the elders of the Jewish people. Rather in a very brief, few sentences Peter states his case which basically said, you killed Jesus by hanging him on a cross, but the God of our Fathers – that is the one whom you represent and worship, raised him and set him by the side of God as Prince and Saviour. **He did this to give all people the gift of a changed life and sins forgiven. And we are witnesses to these things.**

The Council members were furious with Peter and wanted to kill him but the wise head of Gamaliel prevailed. The disciples were whipped and told not to speak of

Jesus again. The disciples disobeyed those orders continuing to preach the Good News of the Gospel, for which ultimately they gave their lives.

Depending on the situation we might view a person who practices civil disobedience, such as Peter, as activists, heroes or martyrs. If we don't agree with their cause or condemn their activities then we may label them as dissidents, terrorists or trouble-makers. Such is the case today with the student climate protestors who see the future of the world as more important than obeying civil law. In Sri Lanka the horrific Easter bombings of churches and hotels is viewed as an atrocity by most while those carrying out the acts probably see it as God inspired.

The apostles clearly defy local authorities when they continue to preach and perform miracles after the High Priest has ordered them to stop. **We name them as courageous and faithful; the High Priest and the Council name them as rebels and dissidents.**

Peter has no misgiving about standing firm against the Governing Council. He saw himself as bearing witness to God's work in history through Jesus Christ. The Apostles saw themselves as being accountable to a Higher Power – God.

The question for us is where do we stand in this modern age as we continue to bear witness to our faith in the Risen Christ active in the world through the power of God's Holy Spirit?

I think the tension for all of us lies in what we believe to be the essential Good News of the Gospel. Israel Folau, coming out of his Mormon and Assembly of God background, is preaching a message that God has got it in for certain people – and he sets out the criteria.

What he seems to forget is that we are all sinners (people who have a propensity to stuff up and get things wrong) but that the grace of God is far greater than our waywardness. When you take the Good News of Jesus in its entirety it is not about how bad people are it is about how gracious, loving and forgiving God is.

From the beginning of the first book of the Old Testament through to the last verses of The Revelation of John the bible is not so much about how we get it wrong (although it does acknowledge this time and time and time again) but rather about how forgiving, patient, and graciously loving God is.

The image Jesus gives us of God is that of the forgiving Father always reaching out in love to all of God's children – and that is at the heart of our baptising of Emmy this morning. God is saying to her and to all of us through our baptism – you are part of my family. I love you with a never-ending love.

Listen again to what Peter said to the High Priest and members of the Council, **“The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, the One you killed by hanging him on a cross...to give Israel the gift of a changed life and sins forgiven.” As he was being crucified Jesus said, “Father forgive them, they don't know what they are doing.”**

If that isn't about grace and God being for us and not against us then I don't know what is.

Much as I respect Israel Folau's right to speak I think he was unwise to use social media to convey his message. He and we are always better to speak with people face to face, as the Apostle Peter did, where we can be questioned, challenged and have our point of view clarified rather than being misunderstood.

To God be the glory. Amen