

FAITH ASKING QUESTIONS



A ST FRANCIS COLLEGE SHORT COURSE

THE TRANSCRIPT

Episode 4 Evil and What to do about it

4.4 What happens when the church allows evil actions within its walls? Where is God in that?

Phillip Aspinall: I think that whenever evil rears its ugly head, God kind of weeps. And when it happens in the church maybe God weeps even more deeply. Certainly, evil happens in the church. I mean human beings are prone to sin. As St Paul said, even if we know what we want to do, we can't do it. We find ourselves not doing what we want to do, so sin in that way kind of entraps us, enslaves us. We need something from outside us to help us not to sin and Christians believe that's the Holy Spirit that empowers us to live in a new kind of way. But evil is real. People should know and acknowledge that, and it comes in different shapes and sizes. Some of it is personal – the choices I make that are destructive for me and for other people and cause hurt. There's a kind of structural evil at work in society where we arrange things that cause hurt to people...the rules we make, the laws we make hurt some people, so that's a structural kind of evil. There's even a cosmic kind of evil that we can't explain fully. But the good news is that Christians believe that evil has been defeated – that's what the resurrection means. In the crucifixion we see the climax of all the forces of anti-life, anti-creation focussing in on Jesus and leading to his death, but the death is not the final word. Life breaks out in spite of that which tells us that those anti life forces of evil have been defeated which is the great celebration of Easter.

Penny Jones: Well the truth is that evil is always going to be within the church's walls because the church is made up of people and every person has both good and evil within them and the very greater the good, very often, the stronger the evil also, because that's the shadow of that person, and that's how our institution is made up. Its made up of people so there will always be both good and evil within it. That said, we have to do the very best we can to protect the vulnerable. We have to take what measures we can out of an awareness that there is that mixture of good and evil within all of us to ensure that there are safeguards for each and every one of us in the practice for our faith, and we need to commend those things to God. We need to go back to God all the time and ask for God to shine God's light upon us, to show us where we're going wrong.



Marian Free: For me that's almost a non-question because God and the Church are quite different – the institution is flawed; the real problem there is that the institution and therefore the people who make up the institution have not got a good enough grasp of the principles. So, what I said before about cheap grace – forgiving somebody much too easily without making somebody accountable, wanting to protect the institution, which is what we've seen with the child sex abuse – none of which is God stuff. God became totally vulnerable.

If the church as an institution could see vulnerability as its primary goal, then I don't think we'd be facing these issues. And I think this veneer, this pretence that we're good, that we can do things right is all a nonsense. If we began by saying we are utterly flawed, we are utterly human and we need to make ourselves completely open and vulnerable, then those things wouldn't happen, and if they did, we would acknowledge them and deal with them.

Jeremy Greaves: We can see what happens, we've just had 5 years of Royal commission which has shown to the world what happens when we let evil flourish. Not only does it do great damage to the church as an institution, it certainly affects our ability to proclaim the gospel in the world. Why would anyone take us seriously in the light of some of the things that have been discussed at the Royal Commission?

Peter Kline: Where is God in the midst of the bad things that happen in the church? Sex abuse, child sex abuse, or any other number of awful things that can happen in the church...where is God? I would say that God is with the victims, that's where God is, God is with the people who suffer. God is there with them if you want to turn and find God in the midst of the church's own evil, you find God with and amongst the people the church has committed evil against – that's where you find God.

Jeremy Greaves: Regardless of where evil is in the world, the only sort of God I can believe in is the one that's found right there in the midst of suffering, rather than outside the world somehow directing it. For me the words of the psalmist (Psalm 139) who says "Where can I go from your spirit? If I ascend to the heavens you are there, if I make my bed in the grave, you are there"...speaks of the God who journeys with us even into the most terrible places, to the heart of suffering and so in the church or in the world when we see evil rearing its head, I have to believe that God travels with us into that place, to ultimately bring some sort of redemption. I think Desmond Tutu said "God, I know that you're in control but I just wish you would make it a little bit more obvious" and I think sometimes in those places where we see evil our cry is "God tell us that you're in control": but that's the place we find God I think.



Peter Kline: Well ultimately I think that when the church allows evil things to happen within its walls and it does not do the necessary hard work to address them, remain accountable for them and transforms what enabled them to happen...the church completely undermines itself and any sort of transformative message it might want to give or embody for the world. It completely undermines and discredits itself. We should not expect the church to be a place where nothing bad happens because that would exempt the church from being part of the world. We shouldn't expect the church to be some perfect haven that doesn't participate in the disorder of the world.

What should be a mark of the church is perhaps an insistent readiness and willingness to confront, hold and to reckon with and to not shy away from working through the nature of that and the consequences of that. Part of Christianity's message ultimately is that you don't have to be afraid of confronting disorder and brokenness and evil. You don't need to brush it under the rug. You don't need to turn away from it.

Actually we have the resources within the Christian faith to say the best thing to do is to look right at it and that we can do that because the central affirmations of our faith allow us to say that we don't need to turn away from the awful things that we do, we can actually confront them.



You can find the video of this session, along with reflection questions for individuals or groups at www.stfran.qld.edu.au under “SFC Short Courses—Faith Asking Questions”.

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