

Seeking the Common Good

Living upright in an upside down world (part 1)

Summary: Whatever we do, do it all for the glory of God, the benefit of yourself and your family, and to bless your neighbours and better our world.

Scripture: Jeremiah 29:4–7; Genesis 41:46–57¹

Date: Sunday, 30 October 2022 (NarellanCCC)

Essendon CEO's Cancellation

You may have heard in the news how, on the 4th of October, 2022, Andrew Thorburn quit as the chief executive of Essendon Football Club after club president David Barham insisted he choose between employment at the club and his volunteer position as chair of City on the Hill, an Anglican church which has congregations in Melbourne, Geelong and the Surf Coast.²

This was only one day after Thorburn had been appointed as the chief executive.

Thorburn was hired by the club because he is a former CEO of the National Australia Bank. Normally, such a high-level position would require a thorough vetting of the candidate. We have every reason to believe this was done.

However, at some point after Thorburn was offered the position, someone somewhere pointed out that he held a position at a church, whose pastor preached a sermon in 2013 that said acting on same-sex attraction was a sin. Another sermon said that abortion kills unborn babies and that future generations will look back with horror on abortion in the same way we look back with horror at the Nazi extermination camps of World War II.

These sermons are freely available to the public on the church's website. These are historic and traditional Christian positions on these topics, if not a little hyperbolic.

Now, these may or may not be the beliefs of Andrew Thorburn. His time at NAB would suggest they are not. Notwithstanding, Thorburn was fired from a sporting club because his church holds these views and he was unwilling to give up his volunteer position at his church for his employer.

His firing is a great injustice in our liberal Western democracy. What makes this situation even more dangerous and disturbing for religious persons in our country are the remarks of the Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews, who stated after the incident,

Those views are absolutely appalling. I don't support those views, that kind of intolerance, that kind of hatred, bigotry.

It is just wrong. To dress that up as anything other than bigotry is just obviously false.

Premier Andrews claims to be a Catholic Christian, yet he is here defying God and the teachings of his own church, not to mention creating the conditions for discrimination against persons of religious convictions. According to Thorburn,

It is troubling that faith or association with a church, mosque, synagogue or temple could render a person immediately unsuited to holding a particular

role. That is a dangerous idea, one that will only reduce tolerance for others and diversity of thought and participation in our community and workplaces.

Sadly, in Australia and around the world, we are witnessing an increase of such discrimination against Christian persons. It is enough to make us feel as if we are not welcome in our own home or that we just want to go and live somewhere else. Yet neither options are supported by the teaching of the Bible.

How then shall we live? This four part sermon series will explore how to live upright in an upside down world.

Akin To Exile

Once upon a time, Christian faith and practice were integral to the formation of Western civilisation. Increasingly, we are witnessing a repudiation of that historical foundation and moral vision.

This should not really surprise anyone who actually reads the Bible, for as Jesus stated,

If the world hates you, understand that it hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own. However, because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of it, the world hates you.
(John 15:18–19)

Jesus is here describing the notion that his friends, those who love and obey him (Jn 14:15), remain *IN* the world but are no longer *OF* the world. This is to say we become at odds with the values and behaviour of the world because, by placing our faith in Christ Jesus, the foundation for our identity, purpose and morality is increasingly transformed by his teaching and example, and is therefore no longer conformed to the patterns of this world, with its corruption due to sin (Rom 12:1–2). For example, according to *The First Letter of John*,

For everything in the world —the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride in one's possessions— is not from the Father, but is from the world.
(1 John 2:16)

The friends of Jesus eschew the lusts and pride of this fallen world to instead seek and follow the good, pleasing and perfect will of our creator God.

The movement of Jesus then is united by our allegiance to Jesus and his love for us, and we live by a radically different value system than most of our family, friends and neighbours.

How best to describe this fraught state of being in the world? The biblical image is that **we are exiles**. According to commentators,

Exile refers to the state of being away from one's native land and in a foreign land against one's will. In the Bible, exile describes the displacement of Israel and Judah from the promised land that resulted from breaking their covenant with Yahweh.³

Exile is a recurring biblical theme for the people of God. Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden. Their son Cain was exiled after killing his brother Abel. Abraham left his family and homeland to follow a promise to a land that would become his own but was not then his own. His descendants ended up enslaved in Egypt, a land away from the promise. They wandered the wilderness for a generation. They were then literally exiled to Assyria and Babylon. Even when the people of God returned to their homeland, they found out that,

sadly, it still was not 'home'. They remained oppressed and afflicted, ruled over by foreign powers.

Exile was not the plan of God for his people. It was the result of breaking their covenant with him. Though the Lord brought people together, they chose to go their own way and ended up scattered by their uncleanness and sin.

Yet the promise always remained that if the people repented, God would bring them back from the places to which they had been banished.

The friends of Jesus are not exiles in the sense that we have been sent away to a country not our own, but that our country is not as it should be. This world is God's world! He is the Creator, but the sin of humankind, in rejecting our Creator, has resulted in our slavery to fallenness and the curse of death. As a consequence,

our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this darkness, against evil, spiritual forces in the heavens. (Ephesians 6:12)

This world has willingly enslaved itself to a different ruler. The friends of Jesus follow the kingdom of God even as we live in this world. We may not bear the image of God perfectly but we are trying. And that creates a tension. For example, Jesus stated he would send his friends

the Spirit of truth. The world is unable to receive him because it doesn't see him or know him. But you do know him, because he remains with you and will be in you. (John 14:17)

We have the Holy Spirit and from that Spirit we live and move and have our being (Ac 17:28). Unless they enjoy that experience themselves, our family, friends and neighbours cannot possibly understand what animates us. For them, this is a minor annoyance until it becomes more than that.

This is what it means to be an exile. To be in a land that is our home, yet is not our own, a land created by God but over which God is not in charge. We follow his commands because we belong to his kingdom, even as we live in this land and follow its laws as far as we able, without contravening the commands of God.

Seek the Prosperity of the City

Some Christians argue for a complete separation between the movement of Jesus and the power structures of the world.

But the problem is, that's not actually what the apostles advocated. They adopted Jeremiah's philosophy,

This is what the LORD of Armies, the God of Israel, says to all the exiles ...
"Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat their produce. Find wives for yourselves, and have sons and daughters ... Pursue the well-being of the city I have deported you to. Pray to the LORD on its behalf, for when it thrives, you will thrive." (Jeremiah 29:4-7)

All the prophet has here described are the normal occupations of daily life for anyone anywhere. So his encouragement and advice is to continue to do what is needful for a flourishing life, where you are, for you and yours, but with an aim to be a blessing to, and for the benefit of, others.

It easy to react with anger when the tension around us erupts into discrimination and even persecution. Yet the covenant with Abraham declared his descendants would be a blessing to all nations (Gen 12:1-3). Does this mean we are only to be a blessing when times are good for us and the people around us think well of us?

Even though we are exiles, we are to live upright in this upside down world. The friends of Jesus live the values and commands of the kingdom of God in the kingdoms of this world, and do so in such a way as to seek the common good, that which is good for all, what the prophet called “the well-being of the city”. When we build houses, plant gardens, and start families, and so on, we are seeking to flourish, as one would do naturally. When we flourish, those around us also flourish because they benefit from our well-being and prosperity when we share the benefits freely and generously.

Though we live in an upside down world, we are to fully immerse ourselves in it but out of allegiance to a different ruler, and with a completely different value system. Most of the time, this is going to create a beneficial overlap in pursuit of the common good, but sometimes it will create a conflict of allegiance. And then God's people are to obey God rather than Man, following the example of the apostle Peter, who declared in court,

“We must obey God rather than people.” (Acts 5:29)

As a result, they were flogged and ordered not to teach about Jesus any more to anyone. The apostles happily suffered the consequences that came their way, and for some, even Peter, it meant death.

Yes, the Church should be separate from the State but Christians are not to be. Depending on our moment in history, and what we are doing as the Church, we may be either celebrated or considered a threat to national security.

Nevertheless, our motivation should always be to remain loyal to the kingdom of God, yet work for the common good, even as an exile.

The Example of Joseph

To better understand how to live in that tension, let us consider together the example of Joseph.

Joseph was the first son of Rachel (Gen 30:22–24) and favoured among his brothers by his father Jacob (Gen 37:2–4). As a result, he was despised by his brothers, who threw him into a well and sold him into slavery (Gen 37:23–28).

The slavers then sell Joseph to Potiphar (Gen 39:1), a high ranking Egyptian military commander. At first a common slave, Joseph was successful at all his tasks, and the household benefited. He then rose to become his master’s personal assistant (Gen 39:2–4).

Later, Joseph was falsely accused and put in prison (Gen 39:6b–20). While in prison, he does not wallow but prospers (Gen 39:21–23). He was given authority in the prison and responsibility. Among those responsibilities, was to oversee two of the Pharaoh’s chief professionals, a baker and cupbearer (Gen 40:1–7). Joseph interprets their dreams.

Later, the Pharaoh himself has an unsettling dream. The pardoned cupbearer remembers Joseph’s skill in interpretation (Gen 41:8–13). Joseph was called in, interpreted the Pharaoh’s dream as foretelling a devastating famine, Joseph was put in charge of organising the relief effort (Gen 41:37–38).

What is so remarkable about Joseph's story is that he was made an exile, through no fault of his own —well, he was a little at fault because he was a boastful young man. Through the next year's of his life, his rise and fall, his prosperity and imprisonment, Joseph learned humility and how to trust God.

Yet Joseph was also actively engaged in promoting his own flourishing and the common good of those around him. He did not seek to escape but worked hard and for the benefit of those who commanded his life. They were successful because of his efforts because he managed their affairs well. Eventually, he earned the opportunity to save the Egyptian nation, its neighbours and even his own family.

I am sure we all share tales of our own rise and fall, our own prosperity and turmoil, our own joys and agonies. No one is pretending that life is anything but hard because it is. That it is the fault of our fallenness and sin. Notwithstanding, we are all victims and the friends of Jesus are as if exiles.

How Then Shall We Live?

The only question that matters is **how then shall we live?** Our creator God, the Almighty, encourages us to follow the values and commands of his kingdom so that we might flourish, and to do so as to be a blessing to and for the benefit of those around us.

In my humble opinion, a great example of this can be seen in the 1946 film *It's a Wonderful Life*, starring James Stewart and Donna Reed. James Stewart plays the main character, George Bailey, a man who has given up his personal dreams in order to help others in his community, and whose thoughts of suicide on Christmas Eve brings about the intervention of his guardian angel, Clarence Odbody.

Bailey inherits the family business, Bailey Brothers Building and Loan. A stock market crash creates a run on the banks, which is a problem because banks only have a limited amount of cash available to them at a moment's notice.

Stewart's character convinces his customers to take out of his financial institution only what they need, so that others too would have what they need in the short term.

Bailey's own self-sacrifice inspires his customer's self-sacrifice, at least in some of them, so everyone is able to weather the financial storm.

Do we spend our lives accumulating as much as we can, at the expense of others? Or do we act for the common good, for the benefit of ourselves as well as others? There is nothing wrong with success and flourishing. May others be blessed by it and find inspiration for their own success and flourishing through our own.

So, whatever we do for our families and friends, in our workplaces and what we study, in our sports and clubs and hobbies, in our volunteerism and causes we support and in our political engagement, do it all for the glory of God, the benefit of yourself and your family, **and** to bless your neighbours and better our world.

Conclusion

Our previous sermon series, "Fight The Urge To Fit In", had us considering what are the essential beliefs of Christian faith. Yet being a friend of Jesus is not only about what we believe. It is also about how we live. Placing our faith in Christ Jesus necessarily leads to a lifestyle following his commands and his example.

This sermon series then will explore how to follow his commands and his example, yet will be open and honest that doing so is hard when we are experiencing exile, being the tension of living as those pledging our allegiance to God's kingdom while in but not of this fallen and sinful kingdom around us.

We will first consider of biblical principle for our conduct, then an example of living by that principle, so as to find inspiration and wisdom for our own condition and context.

Endnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 2 See Kel Richards, "Woke warriors who forced Thorburn out of a job are censoring 2,000 years of Christian tradition – and they won't stop there", *Sky News*, 10-Oct-2022, <https://replug.link/b5a66fa0> (accessed 29-Oct-2022); Chip Le Grand, "A test for people of faith: Faith leaders 'appalled' by treatment of Thorburn", 5-Oct-2022, <https://replug.link/dabe0c10> (accessed 29-Oct-2022); and, Benita Kolovos, "'That's my Catholicism': Daniel Andrews embarks on theological debate with archbishop over Essendon furore", 6-Oct-2022, *The Guardian*, <https://replug.link/88886cb0> (29-Oct-2022).
- 3 Benjamin M. Austin and Jonathan Sutter, "Exile," in *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, ed. Douglas Mangum et al., *Lexham Bible Reference Series* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).