

Assisted Dying 1. How should Christians make moral decisions.

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[0 : 00] You're listening to the very occasional Newton Abbott Parishes podcast.

My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding.

And if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding. And if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure. Then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.

For the Lord gives wisdom and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. He holds victory in store for the upright. He is a shield to those whose walk is blameless. For he guards the course of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones.

Then you will understand what is right and just and fair every good path. For wisdom will enter your heart and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul.

[1 : 22] Let's pray. Father, we give you this evening. Thank you for this chance to chat through one of the big issues of our day. And we ask, Lord, for your wisdom tonight.

That you'd help us to get better at thinking. And that we would walk in your ways of wisdom and truth. For we know your ways are good.

In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. There are some spares on some different tables. Yeah. So there is a handout.

If you haven't got one, do find it. I guess we'd all agree. So this first chunk, we're just going to think about how we make moral decisions as Christians.

What do we think through? Is there a process that we can use? I think we'd all agree that modern life is amazingly complex. Probably to a far greater degree than generations before us.

[2 : 23] That's true, isn't it? When even you try and choose what coffee to have. What film to watch on the endless different channels and streaming services. Or what a Newton-Abbott takeaway you're going to have for a special meal.

There's about 80 down that road. It's huge. It's also true when it comes to making moral choices. I assume we'd all agree that cold-blooded murder is wrong.

That adultery is wrong. That armed robbery is wrong. That perjury is wrong. Pretty much every society has had rules like those. Which isn't surprising, given they derive from commandments 6, 7, 8 and 9.

As his children, God's law is written on human hearts. Even if we don't always pay attention to it. And the Ten Commandments state that those things are clearly and always wrong.

But how about killing someone who has broken into your house and is threatening your children? What if lying under oath would save many innocent lives? And what about the kind of moral decisions that the Bible doesn't mention by name?

[3 : 27] Abortion. IVF treatment. Experimentation on animals. Or our topic tonight, assisted dying or assisted suicide. How do we make a clear Christian moral choice on these issues?

Is it possible to do that? Well, when life throws up various moral dilemmas, there are a few ways that we can arrive at that decision. Or as I'm going to put it tonight, various different planets on which we can stand to make our decisions.

I'm going to suggest four. Now, we won't always stand just on one. For different topics, we might move around. Sometimes we might like three or four of them to base our decisions on.

But thinking about the basis of how we make our decisions will help us when we get round to discussing these issues. So four possible ways that we could seek to stand on planet popular.

Take our lead from opinion polls. After all, that's how we choose our holidays, isn't it? Who goes on TripAdvisor before you book anything? Oh, it's got four stars. That must be all right. Two stars. No, I'm not going there.

[4 : 29] It's also how we decide winners on reality TV shows, elections and on big issues like Brexit. But there is a problem with this.

The majority is not always right. Sometimes it's clear that the wrong person wins the public vote in a TV competition. And more seriously, sometimes terrible dictators get voted into office, sometimes by huge numbers of their countrymen, even when they are honest about their policies.

However good it feels being in the majority, being part of a large crowd, moving in the same direction, we've got to remember that sometimes the majority view can be both wrong and wicked. Planet popular isn't always a safe place to be. A linked planet to this is planet expert. We spot someone who we trust and admire, whose views align with ours, and we use that person to justify our decision.

Maybe we quote their expertise or position in science, government or the church. There are plenty of times when this is a good thing to do. We trust doctors and electricians for good reasons, don't we?

[5 : 38] They generally know what they're talking about. But with moral dilemmas, we always need to ask, well, what planet are they on? How are they making their decision? Taking a person on trust simply because of their position is never a good idea.

Today, many people take a different tack and stand on what we might call planet personal. I think there's an increasing feeling in our society that we have the right to make our own choices. And we resent people who tell us what to think or how to behave. That's why personal stories have become such a powerful tool when thinking through moral questions. So we tell the story of our pain and demand an answer.

We tell the story of a difficulty and we want a solution that brings us happiness. But we know someone suffering with a particular issue and our heart of compassion goes out to them. We love them dearly. We hate to see them suffer. So our response is to say yes to whatever makes their life easier. But that response is largely an emotional one.

[6 : 43] We might find some experts to back up our position, but that decision is personal. We have decided what is right because of how we feel. What's the problem with that?

Well, firstly, it ends up denying that there can be any kind of moral absolute. See, if it's morally acceptable for us to make a decision based on our feelings and emotions and our preferences, then it must also be morally acceptable for someone else to make the opposite decision based on theirs. On planet personal, there can be no real critique of anyone's decisions if we're all making them based on how we feel or think ourselves. Therefore, everyone has the right to decide for themselves.

That leads to moral chaos. Secondly, it overlooks our sinful natures. We all know from painful experience how easily we make the wrong moral choices.

The Bible backs that up, doesn't it? It tells us that the heart, the seat of our desires and emotions is deceitful above all things. Planet personal can be a dangerous place to be when we're making difficult moral calls.

[7 : 53] Now, some might balk at the idea of being led by emotions or popularity and look for a rational approach. A person standing on planet rational aims to take a dispassionate look at all the evidence or the thinking behind a clear logical argument.

Pros and cons get considered. Implications studied. The rational thinker seeks to be objective. Pushing feelings and public opinion and religious dogma to the side.

Now, that all sounds great. Except we never know all the evidence, do we? Our minds are limited so we can never foresee all the possible outcomes.

Thinking through things is important. But, of course, this is God's world. So, the moment we push God out of the debate on moral questions, we find ourselves in very dangerous waters.

But, as Anglican Christians, in fact, I'd say as Christians of any denomination, we have something better than standing on these different planets. I think we can find a moral framework which gives us not just a sure place to plant our feet when we face moral decisions, but a means and a method to deal with whatever new moral issues might come in our ever-changing worlds.

[9 : 08] So, here's my suggestion. An Anglican means to make it through the moral maze. If you were born and bred Anglican, you may have heard of Bishop Richard Hooker.

There's a big statue of him outside Exeter Cathedral. He was born in Heavytree in 1554, and he was a great thinker. Hooker's way of dealing with complex moral issues was threefold. Scripture, reason, and tradition. Sometimes people have used that idea to come up with a kind of a mental image of a three-legged stool, although he never used that analogy, and I don't think he would like it either.

Because for Hooker, as with all things, when we're mulling things over from a Christian perspective, the most important leg of that imaginary three-legged stool is Scripture.

Scripture gives us God's word to us, a divine, reliable self-revelation of God that reveals his character and mighty acts, tells us about ourselves, and explains how we need to relate to our Creator, and how we, as God creatures, need to live in his words.

[10 : 20] So, in the Scriptures, we see that God is holy and just, and that he expects his creatures to behave in the same kind of way. To help us live rightly, God has given us moral commandments to obey, like the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20.

They're not mere suggestions, but they are commands to his people. And since none of those Ten Commandments are repudiated in the New Testament, we can say confidently that those Ten, along with other commands that find their places in both Testaments and the teachings of Jesus, they form a clear moral framework for God's people.

In fact, a good, clear moral framework for all people to follow. But the Scriptures also teach us things that have a wider application, don't they, about the value of human life, the sovereignty of God over all things, the reality of eternity and eternal judgment.

And through narrative and wisdom, literature and parables, they guide us in how these laws should be understood and applied. Because God is unchanging, we can't simply say, oh, we know better now, let's rub out number five.

God's laws are as unchanging as his character. And if the Bible clearly teaches something, we need to accept it, believe it and obey it. But we need to be honest, though, don't we?

[11 : 38] Because some things are not clear cut. So we need to use our wisdom and apply our intellects and reason to help us see the way through. Here's the second leg of that imaginary stool.

It's not an alternative route. As Christians, we can't simply jettison the Bible and say we're going to think things through ourselves. Christian wisdom seems to rightly apply what God's Word does say to situations that it may not directly address.

Let me give you a silly example. I can't find a single mention in the Bible of piracy. Had a quick look this afternoon. I don't think it's there. So was Blackbeard a criminal?

Was he? Well, piracy involves murder and theft, almost certainly plenty of sexual immorality as well, all of which the Bible does condemn as wrong. To misquote Shakespeare, a sin by any other name is still a sin.

And where things aren't as clear cut, the Bible gives us principles that we can seek to apply rightly. That's what happened with the abolition of slavery. There may not have been a verse or a command that they could immediately point to, but the fact that the Bible teaches that all human beings are made in the image of God, that in Christ all barriers of race and language are immaterial to salvation and have no bearing in the church, gave those abolitionists a strong moral basis for their work.

[13 : 06] They reasoned from biblical truths to arrive at a clear Christian moral position and they changed the world. Scripture and reason are the first two legs.

The third is tradition. I'm speaking here of accepted doctrine, practices, teachings of the worldwide church, not just the Church of England. Again, we can't simply say tradition on its own is a good enough guide.

Article 21 of the 39 articles, I'm sure you could all quote that back to me, that says that as the church as an institution can err and its bishops and clergy can err.

So just because something has been accepted practice in the church for decades or centuries, it doesn't give us a free pass to accept it without using our reason and most importantly, checking things against scripture.

However, our forefathers in the faith often had a far deeper understanding and appreciation of God's world and his word and his character than we do.

[14 : 10] They wrestled far more deeply with many issues than we might even consider. A quick look at how thick many of their tomes are and how detailed their arguments will and how that compares with many modern theological works, I think gives plenty of evidence for that.

So when a clear moral teaching of the church has been established over time, we must be hugely cautious about thinking that we know better than they without having thought things through very carefully indeed.

And whilst many issues that we may end up wrestling with, like our topic tonight, might be a result of a modern problem, something that's arisen out of advances in medicine, the traditions and long accepted teachings of the church on moral issues do give us a strong basis for the thinking about moral dilemmas we face today.

So when Matthew starts setting out a Christian view of assisted dying, he will make his case from scripture, from reason, and using the traditions and teachings of the church across the ages on issues like this.

Now, you might find what Matthew says confusing, he may disagree with it, there's going to be time to discuss that and to ask questions when he's finished. And if you do agree, sorry, if you do disagree, can I ask that you think about the basis on which you are disagreeing?

[15 : 31] Where are you standing? Which planet are you standing on as you take your stance? So in this...