

RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION LEGISLATION

..... THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

The current debate on the Religious Discrimination Bill, both inside and outside of Federal Parliament, has brought out the best and the worst of politicians, religious leaders and people of faith.

The worst of it is the Australian Christian Lobby, based in Canberra, who have many politicians in their thrall and wield such power that politicians are fearful of incurring their eternal wrath. Hence the amended Religious Discrimination Bill has been pulled from the parliament by the Prime Minister, not just because it has divided his own party but because the religious right (represented by the Australian Christian Lobby) has demanded it.

What is ugly about this is that the Australian Christian Lobby presumes to represent the Christians of Australia and the media and politicians are sucked in by this fallacy. They represent a small sector of right wing protestant and pentecostal fundamentalists who have little understanding of traditional Christianity as lived out by mainstream Christianity. They certainly don't represent the Catholic Faith in which I was raised as an Anglican and now practice as a Roman Catholic.

It is, of course, good that we strive to end religious discrimination but we don't do it by discriminating against others. If the Australian Christian Lobby and supposed Christian politicians were being true to the faith they profess and the gospel of Jesus, as exemplified in today's gospel (the Beatitudes), they ought be a lot less interested in passing self-interested laws about religious discrimination and spend more time lobbying for laws against this nation's discrimination against asylum seekers who arrive by boat instead of a plane. And as a nation we still have a long way to go in ending discrimination against our indigenous peoples, non-whites, the disabled, homosexual and transgender people, the homeless etc. etc. I have never heard the Australian Christian Lobby lobby for any of these vulnerable groups. Shamelessly, they lobby for themselves and their own restrictive, fundamentalist version of a faith that is unrecognizable to most Christians. Jesus would not be amused!

The most odious feature of the proposed bill enshrines the right of people of faith to discriminate against homosexual and transgender children in 'religious' schools. Under pressure from his own party the Prime Minister was forced to amend the bill so as to end discrimination on the grounds of sexuality but to maintain the right to discriminate against transgender children.

Sadly, on both the left and the right of politics, we are drowning under the ideology of 'rights' - my rights - my freedoms. Individual rights and freedoms are important but individual rights and freedoms do not give me the right to harass, vilify, ostracise, harm or discriminate against another. If we were less narcissistic we would care less about our rights and more about our responsibilities. Our responsibility towards society, towards the common good, towards the 'other', especially the most vulnerable and disparaged in our community.

In the midst of this debate over the effects of the proposed anti discrimination laws, the thing I am most proud of is our Catholic Schools who have a reputation of amazing pastoral care of children dealing with issues of sexuality and gender fluidity. During the past week ABC radio talk-back was alive with parents and students ringing in to commend their Catholic School for the support and encouragement they had received in dealing with issues of sexuality and gender that can be so confronting for our children when faced with discrimination and worse.

The Prime Minister's rush to introduce this long promised bill just before parliament rises in preparation for the coming federal election may in fact be less about trying to rush through an old election promise and more to do with wedging the Opposition and distracting voters from more important issues but we as a nation deserve better leadership. But not just political leadership! We need real leadership in the Church so that the joy of the Gospel and the teachings of Jesus can be proclaimed by real prophets who have the moral courage to speak truth to power rather than allowing a lobby group, espousing a dim and dark shadow of the Christian faith, to speak on our behalf.

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