

Views from the Pews - Faith, Hope and ?

Those of a certain age will immediately reply 'Charity!' Newer Bibles often use the word 'love' instead, but although that word is present on almost every page of the Bible, it has become encrusted with other meanings and implications. Many of us I suspect prefer the older text, wanting to know for sure that St Paul was indeed talking about that which the Greeks called Agape, and the Romans, Caritas.

What then is Charity? In the times preceding the Welfare State, it was very big business indeed. So important was it that its status became protected by legislation, and even today, it is promoted through tax privilege both for the donor, and for the charitable entity itself. This is because well-organised charities can take some of the burden off the taxpayer.

But to ensure clarity, the law defines charity pretty closely, and most charities will be expected to fit neatly into the roles of education, poverty relief, or medical services. So St John Ambulance, the Rescue Helicopters, and similar organisations will attract support from many in our congregation. And so will the Heart Foundation, Anglican Action, and the various City Missions.

But our legislators have wisely allowed charities to embark on what the law usually calls 'ancillary advocacy'. So we fully expect Anglican Action or the City Missions to knock regularly on Ministerial doors when government efforts to alleviate poverty are being debated.

But where to draw the line? Our Courts have wrestled with this a lot recently. Is Greenpeace a charity? Where does the promotion of legitimate debate end, and become propaganda? The Supreme Court has recently revisited all these difficult questions in a case involving Family First.

Justice Joe Williams added a very clear addendum to the Decision; he equated Caritas with Aroha, and made the very powerful point that charity is by definition 'selfless' and involves a degree of self-sacrifice for the benefit of others. He argues that without that sacrificial

element, an entity cannot qualify for charitable status. I am unsure of His Honour's faith-based roots (if any) but his remarks will resonate with everyone who espouses Paul's call to exercise charity in our daily lives. Whatever the merits of state-imposed taxation, which are sure to be re-debated shortly, charity has a sound Christian basis and must be kept in mind whatever the direction of political winds.

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