

Views from the Pews: Does conscience make cowards of us all?

Shakespeare's Hamlet thought so, but he was an outlier in many senses (that's the theme of the play after all). For humanity in general, the answer is probably "No".

Take for instance the vote in the UK House of Commons on the Assisted Dying Bill. It was what parliamentarians call a Conscience Vote, free of party constraints. This issue – which we in New Zealand debated a few years back – was divisive but also in a strange way unifying across party lines. A large contingent of MPs simply did not know, and needed space to talk to constituents and to consult their consciences. Most faiths insist both on the love of life, and on some form of afterlife as well. Hence the dilemma. Christians for instance celebrate new life on the 25th of December, only to confront the meaning of folded graveclothes and an empty tomb, about four months later.

Parliament seemed more authentic when conscience ruled. Many MPs report feeling a sense of freedom when conscience was put back on the table. It is often said nowadays that politics is driven by invisible vested interests. Bringing conscience back into the debating chamber is one way of dealing with this. This is because debates such as we have just witnessed require courage not cowardice, the courage to lay your beliefs on the table, the courage to be human, to relate how personal experience has shaped your life. And it takes courage to say that you simply do not know, and that you need more time to speak with your God, to consult whatever belief system you follow.

Hamlet of course is laying his personal dilemmas bare for on-stage scrutiny, and you will all know the internal debate he undergoes;

- a. To suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or
- b. To take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing, end them.

Courage and conscience go hand in hand. Difficult legislation is usually a sea of troubles, and there will be those who are disappointed and even afraid of this legislation. But conscience is always there at our side, and in turning toward conscience we turn away from cowardice. Not every decision is right, but as Shakespeare makes clear, indecision carries risk.

Conscience lies at the heart of Christianity.

- Richard Swarbrick