

LIVERPOOL PARISH CHURCH
OUR LADY & ST NICHOLAS

Faith Matters

Session 3: Ethics in the workplace

River in
the City



I. The problem.

How we act in a professional context is not just a matter of whether we are stealing from the organization. What is 'right' is not clear-cut, in business, or in religion.

A law provides security, because we know exactly what we have to keep to: just this, no less (which can sometimes be irksome) but no more (which is sometimes very congenial). I have to do only what is commanded. And what is not forbidden is permitted. And there is so much we can do or omit in particular cases before coming into conflict with the law. No law can envisage all possibilities, take into account all cases, close all gaps.

Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, p242

Although Küng had in mind religious legalism, it seems to sum up an attitude we might take in the workplace.

Effective decision-making requires a framework which is not entirely self-referential. However, if we adopt an ethical approach which is, say, faith-based, does that put us at a commercial disadvantage? For example, financial profit can be maximized if we do not differentiate in our negotiation over ability to pay, or relative value. It might be argued that compassion in the workplace is uncompetitive.

Alternatively, we could argue that ethical business practice is in itself a 'premium brand', and that the marketplace values a company which builds this reputation. Companies such as 'Virgin' enjoy this reputation, although it is often not as generous as its reputation suggests.

Look again at the ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ language which we identified in Session 1 associated with the different ‘zones’ of our lives.

<u>Work</u>	<u>Faith</u>
Wealth Creation	Generosity
Targets	Contemplation
Reality	Aspiration
Asset protection	Compassion
Profit	Justice
Ambition	Thankfulness

How can we make these compatible?

2. Bible Study

From Acts 27

27¹When it was decided that we were to sail for Italy, they transferred Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion of the Augustan Cohort, named Julius. ²Embarking on a ship of Adramyttium that was about to set sail to the ports along the coast of Asia, we put to sea, accompanied by Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica. ³The next day we put in at Sidon; and Julius treated Paul kindly, and allowed him to go to his friends to be cared for. ⁴Since much time had been lost and sailing was now dangerous, because even the Fast had already gone by, Paul advised them, ⁵saying, ‘Sirs, I can see that the voyage will be with danger and much heavy loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives.’ ⁶But the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said. ⁷Since the harbour was not suitable for spending the winter, the majority was in favour of putting to sea from there.

⁸But soon a violent wind, called the northeaster, rushed down from Crete. ⁹Since the ship was caught and could not be turned with its head to the wind, we gave way to it and were driven. ¹⁰By running under the

lee of a small island called Cauda we were scarcely able to get the ship's boat under control. ¹⁷After hoisting it up they took measures to undergird the ship; then, fearing that they would run on the Syrtis, they lowered the sea-anchor and so were driven. ¹⁸We were being pounded by the storm so violently that on the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard, ¹⁹and on the third day with their own hands they threw the ship's tackle overboard. ²⁰When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small tempest raged, all hope of our being saved was at last abandoned.

²¹Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul then stood up among them and said, 'Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and thereby avoided this damage and loss. ²²I urge you now to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship.

²⁹Fearing that we might run on the rocks, they let down four anchors from the stern and prayed for day to come. ³⁰But when the sailors tried to escape from the ship and had lowered the boat into the sea, on the pretext of putting out anchors from the bow, ³¹Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, 'Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.' ³²Then the soldiers cut away the ropes of the boat and set it adrift.

³³Just before daybreak, Paul urged all of them to take some food, saying, 'Today is the fourteenth day that you have been in suspense and remaining without food, having eaten nothing. ³⁴Therefore I urge you to take some food, for it will help you survive; for none of you will lose a hair from your heads.' ³⁵After he had said this, he took bread; and giving thanks to God in the presence of all, he broke it and began to eat. ³⁶Then all of them were encouraged and took food for themselves.

³⁹In the morning they did not recognize the land, but they noticed a bay with a beach, on which they planned to run the ship ashore, if they could. ⁴⁰So they cast off the anchors and left them in the sea. At the same time they loosened the ropes that tied the steering-oars; then hoisting the foresail to the wind, they made for the beach. ⁴¹But striking a

reef, they ran the ship aground; the bow stuck and remained immovable, but the stern was being broken up by the force of the waves. ⁴²The soldiers' plan was to kill the prisoners, so that none might swim away and escape; ⁴³but the centurion, wishing to save Paul, kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and make for the land, ⁴⁴and the rest to follow, some on planks and others on pieces of the ship. And so it was that all were brought safely to land.

Some points which we can draw out from this passage.

- 'Leadership' comes in different forms in this passage, and it is not always held by the same person. The centurion named Julius is motivated by good intentions (he treated Paul well and let him associate with his friends, and was keen to save his life at the end), but until the authority he shows at the end, other people take control through expediency. Paul, the sailors, and the soldiers all exercise independent leadership.
- Although the centurion's motives are good throughout, the soldiers and sailors act through self-interest. Paul's leadership is pragmatic, but also appeals to the self-interest of the sailors.
- Morality becomes fluid in this situation. They jettison cargo (which they do not own) and they damage the ship's moorings. Finally, they decide to run the ship aground. The sailors try to flee their duties, and the soldiers decide to kill the prisoners without trial.
- At every stage it is difficult to discern what the 'right' action is, and each has a different motive. Self-preservation is juxtaposed as a motive with doing what they are supposed to do.

3. What drives me ethically?

There are a number of ‘drivers’ behind our actions in business:

1. The rules - often statutory or codified parameters to our professional behaviour.
2. The success of our organization. This might be financial, or it might be more people focused, depending on our organization’s outputs.
3. Self-interest. This could be financial, or perhaps about career advancement.
4. Self-preservation. The Bible Study revealed that this is the most dangerous ‘driver’ because it doesn’t relate to anyone else. Self-preservation might make us hide behind the rules; it might equally encourage us to break the rules.

The ‘rules’ by which we operate are usually framed ethically. They are specifically designed to promote (1) and (2) above, and to suppress (3) and (4). For example, sections 170-179 of the Companies Act 2006 give clear guidance. Here are some excerpts.

171 Duty to act within powers

A director of a company must—

- (a) act in accordance with the company’s constitution, and
- (b) only exercise powers for the purposes for which they are conferred.

172 Duty to promote the success of the company

(1) A director of a company must act in the way he considers, in good faith, would be most likely to promote the success of the company for the benefit of its members as a whole, and in doing so have regard (amongst other matters) to—

- (a) the likely consequences of any decision in the long term,
- (b) the interests of the company’s employees,
- (c) the need to foster the company’s business relationships with suppliers, customers and others,
- (d) the impact of the company’s operations on the community and the environment,
- (e) the desirability of the company maintaining a reputation for high standards of business conduct, and
- (f) the need to act fairly as between members of the company.

175 Duty to avoid conflicts of interest

(1) A director of a company must avoid a situation in which he has, or can have, a direct or indirect interest that conflicts, or possibly may conflict, with the interests of the company.

The duties of a director are framed as an ethical code. But what happens when, for example, the well-being of an individual (a colleague or a client perhaps) sits in contrast to the best interests of the company?

All three sessions of this course have focused on the need to reconcile spirituality with worldliness in ourselves. 'Integrity' is not about moving between one mode and another, but embodying both modes in our actions.

4. Discussion points

- If we associate Christian values with ideas such as 'compassion' and 'justice', will we necessarily lose out in the workplace to those who do not value these concepts?
- The law provides an adequate framework to ensure fair play. Christian values are therefore irrelevant in the decision-making process.
- An individual has no scope for exercising ethical judgement in the workplace. What matters is "the success of the company", which is the legal requirement of the Companies Act.

Lent Talks 2015

**Ash Wednesday Service
12.15pm 18th February
with the Rt Revd Paul Bayes, Bishop of Liverpool**

**Thursdays in Lent from 6pm to 7.30pm,
including refreshements.**

- 19th February Christine Allen, Director of Public Policy, Christian Aid
- 26th February Eithne Brown, actress
- 5th March The Most Revd Malcolm McMahon,
Archbishop of Liverpool
- 12th March Media evening:
Phil Redmond, Roger Phillips and Alastair Machray
- 19th March Salley Vickers, author

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