

## **RELIGIOUS FREEDOM** (Lindfield 7<sup>th</sup> July 2019)

### **Leviticus 19:33-34, Matthew 25:34-46, 1 Corinth. 8:8-9**

Religious Freedom has been much in the news of late, particularly in the wake of Israel Folau's social media posts but we will come to his specific situation later.

We are talking about the freedom to practise one's religion freely, without restriction or penalty. Multi-culturalism automatically means many religions. Can we make migrants feel welcome in their new country if we prohibit such an important part of their life? How can they feel "at home" if their understanding of god, the reason they live as they do, is not welcome?

There are some countries where religious freedom does not exist. In some Middle Eastern and African countries only one religion is allowed and it is illegal to follow another. In others there is a State Religion – this is where one religion is the "official" religion and there may even be certain restrictions on those who practice others. For instance in England, the Church of England is the State Religion: this means that one is automatically deemed to be a member of the C of E unless they join another one. The same is true for Scotland and Ireland. In one of the many quirks of English/Scottish history the Queen becomes a member of the Church of Scotland when she visits there. In Germany, where Lutheranism is the State Religion, Lutheran Pastors are paid by the State.

In Australia our Constitution prohibits the Government from nominating a State Religion or preferencing one religion over another. Our basic document virtually guarantees religious freedom.

It means that someone can practice their religion without restriction – so long as it doesn't violate other laws of the land. Employers, educational, medical, other religious institutions cannot discriminate against anyone because of their religion. A Jew, a Hindu, a Moslem, a Buddhist, a Christian can worship and believe as they choose. By implication it also means that people who have no religion have similar rights and privileges. It seems so obvious to most people. Why is it even an issue? An employer should, in my view have the right to say that their place of employment is operated by a Church so as a condition of working there the employee must at least agree to abide by the philosophy or ethos of the workplace and not act in a way that brings disrepute to it or the faith that undergirds it. A teacher in a Christian School does not have the right to promote atheism or Buddhism to the students. This is where religious freedom and workplace behaviour meet.

It becomes an issue when people of one religion try to assert privilege or dominance over others. In India there are often violent confrontations between Hindus and Buddhists. The same is true in Myanmar. In Africa there has always been tension between Christians and various tribal religions. In Australia some Christians understand that Christianity is the ONLY way to know God and that verses like John 14:6, *I am the way, the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father but by me* prove that. We will talk about this verse and what it means on another occasion. In other words if you don't follow Jesus you cannot have eternal life. Therefore their task is to tell everyone about Jesus so they might be saved. You can immediately see that such a message may not be immediately welcome in a family who

## Page 2

have practiced some other religion for generations and in their former country for thousands of years. That

brings disagreement and tension within the Christian community as to how and even if that should be done. If it is to be done it should be done privately, quietly and only to people wanting to hear or discuss or learn about it.

So that brings us to Israel Folau. Are you sick of reading about him? I know I am.

It all began during the debate about Marriage Equality. Major sporting codes: Cricket Australia, the Football Federation, the NRL and Rugby Australia all came out in favour of SSM proclaiming they wanted their sport to be inclusive and welcoming. The next day, September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2017 Israel Folau came out and said he opposed SSM on religious grounds. There was an immediate response from some of his teammates and others both agreeing and disagreeing with him. No-one said or implied he didn't have the right to his views.

This bubbled along while the plebiscite was debated. The result of the Plebiscite was announced on 14<sup>th</sup> November 2017. Folau became more vocal and after meeting with his employer, Rugby Australia on 10<sup>th</sup> April, 2018. He was told that RA had a policy of inclusion and of using social media in a positive and respectful way. Folau refused to guarantee he would not make similar comments in the future but would "walk away from the game" if necessary.

After the most recent post on April 10<sup>th</sup> this year saying that God's plan for homosexuals, adulterers, drunks, fornicators was Hell, he was charged with a breach of his contract and had it cancelled. There is a court case pending. He is arguing Unfair Dismissal on the grounds of Religious Discrimination.

Twice he was told by his employer that they had a policy of Inclusion and they were to use social media in a respectful and positive way. Twice he refused to abide by those conditions. This is why I don't believe the Israel Folau case is one of Religious Freedom. He has never been told not to hold those views or not to talk about them. The issue is how he does it. Many Christians agree with his views. Many don't. In my view the main issue is his misunderstanding of how you understand and interpret Scripture. Others want to make this a "test case" on Religious Freedom for their own political and/or religious reasons.

His asking for money from the public to fund his legal case is disrespectful to his fans and also very tacky in that he is a very wealthy man. For me it has now become a matter of integrity and moral fortitude. He refuses to abide by his employer's rules for using social media, he has at least twice said he would walk away from the game if it brought disharmony or disrepute to the game but he's going to court instead.

Religious Freedom is a must in a country that espouses multi-culturalism. All freedoms have their inherent responsibilities. It is important to understand the notion that just because one CAN do something doesn't mean they SHOULD do it. Paul said he had no problem eating food sacrificed to idols but if it caused someone to stumble then he wouldn't do it. That's the example of honouring and exercising religious freedom.

Israel Folau and those of like mind would be doing a greater service if they shared a positive message of God's love as seen primarily in Jesus and allow the Holy Spirit to work in the

Page 3

hearts of the believer to change them and us, more and more into the image of the God who made us.

AMEN

\*\*\*\*\*