

PARISHES OF
ST PIUS X, ALDERLEY EDGE, ST BENEDICT'S, HANDFORTH
AND
SACRED HEART & ST TERESA'S WILMSLOW
WEEKLY REFLECTION

Sunday 7th September 2025: 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Mere Christianity: Christian Behaviour
(1) The Three Parts of Morality

In 1942-1944 C.S. Lewis gave three series of radio talks on Christianity. He later incorporated and extended these into his short book "Mere Christianity". In these articles I try to convey his ideas in just one section of the book, entitled "Christian Behaviour". The first chapter deals with what he calls "The Three Parts of Morality"

Many people envisage morality as something that interferes, that stops you having a good time. In fact moral rules are directions for running the human 'machine'. They are there to prevent strain, friction or even breakdown in that machine. When a person is taught how to use any machine, the instructor may well have to say, "*Don't do it like that*", since there may be many ways of treating the machine that seem natural but in reality do not work and may cause the machine to fail.

There are two principal ways in which the human machine may go wrong. The first is when they do harm to another e.g by cheating. The other is when things go wrong inside the individual. A useful metaphor for the human race is that of a fleet of ships in convoy. The voyage will only be successful (i) if the ships do not collide with one another and (ii) if each ship is seaworthy and in good order. These two requirements are essential and interdependent. If the ships collide then they will become unseaworthy; if they cannot steer themselves properly, they will have collisions. There is, of course a third requirement. That the convoy reaches its correct destination. The convoy will be an abject failure if it were meant to arrive in New York and ended up in Calcutta.

Thus the three parts of morality are these: (1) fair play and harmony between individuals; (2) harmonising and making work properly the things inside each individual; (3) the general purpose of human life; where is it meant to be heading? It is a common error to focus primarily on (1) and to assume that something cannot be wrong because it appears to do no harm to others. It is indeed natural to begin with this element of morality, for lack of respect for it leads to causing suffering to others. It can also be said that of this element there is little disagreement. Most people agree, at least in theory, that we should be honest, kind and helpful to one another.

However, unless we move to part (2), we are merely deceiving ourselves. There is no point telling the ships how to steer to stay in convoy and not to collide if each ship's steering is so defective that it cannot remain on course. There is no use in having a blueprint for the behaviour of the convoy if each individual ship cannot conform. Rules of unselfishness and kindness for all require unselfish and kind behaviour at the personal level if the human system is to function properly. You cannot make people good by laws and without good people you cannot have a good society. So morality part (2) - morality inside the individual - is a prerequisite.

We now reach the tricky part, namely part (3). The convoy must be heading towards the correct destination. It is tricky because this is where most disagreement arises. At this stage enter Christian beliefs that our life is not ours to do with as we wish, but as God wishes; and that our life is immortal, not restricted to a limited time on earth. For these beliefs will direct us in a different direction, to a very different destination. If people live for only decades, then the interests of the state or a human civilisation may be seen as more important than the rights of an individual before his/her God. Examples (which C.S. Lewis did not give) may be in the Gospel of St John (18:14): *"It was Caiaphas who had given counsel to the Jews that it was expedient that one man should die for the people."* Another is the friction in society on issues such as abortion and assisted suicide. For us, as Catholics¹, there is only one true direction, one way, and that is the way shown us by Christ and the Church. It is therefore at this third part of morality that the main differences between true Christian morality and secular morality clash most in our society.

Stephen S.

¹ C.S. Lewis was of course an Anglican, so the reference to the Catholics and the Catholic Church is my personal gloss.