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#54 Veganism, ethics and activism

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Tom answers listener questions around if we should eat meat, whether we'll all be vegan in the new creation and if violent protest is ever acceptable.

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Transcript

[Music] The Ask NTY Anything podcast. Hello and welcome back to the show, I'm Justin Breyley, Premier's Theology and Apologetics editor. And as ever, the show brought to you by Premier, SBCK and NTYWite online.

And as I mentioned last week, excitingly the show is now weekly, so glad that we get to bring you more content, only possible because people have generously supported the show. And again, if you're a US listener, listen out for more details on how you can support the show in a new way from today onwards. Before we leap into today's show, which is on veganism, ethics and activism, I want to give another shout out to a lovely listener who's been in touch recently after hearing her question answered on one of those recent shows on pain and suffering.

And she writes, "Just in, it's important I express my profound gratitude to you and Tom Wright. This morning, I dropped my children to school and was listening to the latest Ask

NTYWite Anything. I'm incredibly humbled that Tom answered my question on grief, and I know that others will also benefit from the sensitive, intelligent and respectful answer he provided.

Any attempt to try to articulate how much his words and guidance meant to me will fall short. I don't think I realized quite how deeply I held these concerns and reluctance until the tears fell when Tom said, "God loves your broken heart." From the bottom of this heart, I thank you both. Well, I did share that with Tom and we're both so glad that you found the response helpful.

God bless you as you move forward in your journey. Now a date for your diary. Saturday the 15th of May, Tom is going to be my special guest at Unbelievable the Conference.

We had to, of course, postpone last year's conference due to COVID, but we're back and it's all online so that you can attend from anywhere in the world. It'll include a special live edition of Ask NTYWite Anything with another conference speaker, historian Tom Holland also involved. I'll be announcing the booking website next week, but Saturday the 15th of May is the date for your diary, really looking forward to having a good number of Ask NTYWite Anything listeners joining us for what will be a really great day for the conference.

Saturday the 15th of May. Of course, you can find out more about the show, how to ask a question yourself and all the other resources on offer over at the website askNTYWite.com. That's all from me for now. Let's get into your questions on today's edition of the show.

Welcome back to today's show and today we're looking at topics around ethics and activism. Quite a few people often ask in the politically charged times that we live in and the fact that obviously we also live in lots of times of activism, whether it be political or environmental or ethical activism of one sort or another, how Christians should engage these issues. Have you ever considered becoming a vegetarian in your life, Tom? I have never considered becoming a vegetarian.

No, I've had several friends who've been vegetarians and I've had discussions with them, but it never seems to me a necessary part of my discipleship. I've got a couple of questions, particularly, I think, keying in on a real trend we've seen in culture in the last few years around veganism that's really grown and blown up, that sort of particular view. Here's Eric in Byrne in Switzerland who says, "I've recently been confronted with a question of ethics regarding animals, namely our use and consumption of them.

The activism of veganism presents an array of discussion points and I think dedicated research can help us manoeuvre the issues of the environment and our health. However, as a Christian, the concerns of morality are difficult to nail down. I'm convinced that the original blueprints of Eden and the kingdom in its fullness don't include killing of any kind

in the light of the kingdom being now but not yet.

What's a biblical approach we can take towards our stewardship of animals?" I think a rather similar question from Parker in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, says, "Following Christ's return, will we eat meat and if not, shouldn't Christians as resurrection people forego eating meat in the present age? It's my understanding that death in any form is a product of the fall and won't exist in the new creation and if we are to live in this new creation as if this new creation has arrived, isn't it unethical to contribute to the deliberate destruction of anything? Obviously, there must be some level of triage or else we'd have to cease using paper or living in houses. Two similar questions about whether, if you like, eating of meat is a sort of product of the fall and whether we should therefore be living differently as Christians of looking towards the new creation, Tom. Yes, it is a question, I think, of living between the times, of being people of the new creation while still living in the old creation, in the present creation.

And of course, there are many, many ethical issues which are caught in that what seems sometimes like a trap, though it is actually a vocation. That's where we are called to live. It's very interesting thinking about if the kingdom in its fullness won't include killing of any kind, some of the early rabbis said that the Sabbath is an anticipation of the age to come and since the age to come is pictured in Isaiah 11, where the wolf will lie down with the lamb, etc.

Therefore, on the Sabbath, we shouldn't even kill a fly or a mosquito because all species will live together as one. But you can be sure that the same rabbis come the day after the Sabbath, if you've got a mosquito about to attack you, will quite happily kill it. In other words, maybe there are times, maybe there are some people who are called to live in this way, like in 1st Corinthians 7, Paul says marriage is fine, but actually, singleness is also fine.

Both can point in different ways. This was quite shocking in the ancient world where particularly women were expected to be married. Both singleness and marriage can point to the kingdom in different ways.

And I think I want to say that God's provision of meat for people to eat is there in Genesis, it's there, right, through the Old Testament, but often within a cultic context in the sense of giving thanks to God for this provision, and hence a certain humility. That's what we've lacked in the last two or three hundred years. And I think that's what some vegetarianism and veganism is reacting against, the kind of ruthless exploitation.

I mean, we had chicken for dinner last night, and it did cross my mind as I was putting the first forkful of this very nice meal into my mouth. I wonder what sort of a life this chicken had. And I suspect I know the answer probably nasty and short one.

It's sufficient to get fattened up for my table, but not very pleasant in other ways. Should

I care about that? Should I campaign? Should I stop buying from that producer? Should I only go to healthy farms? At the moment, those aren't choices I can really make or not very easily. Maybe I should, but it seems to me there is a between the timesness about this.

We have, in the modern world, been exploiting God's resources. There's some wise recent books about farming, saying that the whole agribusiness model, which came in in the 60s and 70s, particularly flattening old hedgerows and making everything more industrial scale has actually been hugely damaging for us, for the environment, for the animals, for everything. So there are big questions to ask there.

I'm not myself convinced that either vegetarianism or veganism is something that should be mandatory on all Christians, though I respect those who, for whatever reason, go that route. And do you think in the new creation, we won't be eating meat, which is one of their sort of assumption here? I think in, yes, I mean, it's interesting that Jesus, I seem to recall when raised from the dead, is given a piece of broiled fish and eats that. This fish not count.

There are several oddities there, and the loaf of bread that he breaks at Emmaus were not told that he eats it, but that loaf was grown from ordinary wheat or whatever. So there are overlap issues. And I think we should be aware of getting drawn down into some of the fiddly bits of this.

All our language, I said this many times, all our language about the ultimate future is a set of signposts pointing into a fog. We don't actually know what it'll be like. The idea of streets paved with gold and so on.

These are glorious, symbolic signposts to something which we don't have good language for yet. So I think at the moment, we are still in a world where, as we see in the New Testament, wise animal husbandry, wise fishing policies, et cetera, go for it. It's God, it's God given.

Don't exploit it, but use it wisely would be my advice. Just moving on from that particular specific ethical issue to activism in general, there's been the rise, obviously, in the last couple of years of sort of particularly sort of out there on the streets, forms of activism, whether it be the activism of the climate lobby and the extinction rebellion sort of protesters in the summer in the US, particularly, there was quite a bit of rioting around the Black Lives Matter issue, but also generally in areas like Portland, so-called the Antifa rioting and so on. Now, Ben in London has a question saying that he's noticing more and more of my generally theologically orthodox friends and even a fairly large Christian organization, either equivocating or supporting the so-called anti-fascist or anti-fertriding.

And they cite Jesus turning over the tables quite a lot. It's a real sea change though in

my friend's attitude. What do you think, what do you make of the so-called cleansing the temple argument about violent protest? And does Jesus and the New Testament have any other key pointers? I remember back in 1975, I was a young delegate at the World Council of Churches in Nairobi, and one of the big issues at the WCC then was a policy they had which they put some money into not very much called the program to combat racism.

And this was particularly aimed at the old regime in South Africa, and they were trying to support groups that were finding ways of combating racism. And they tried to make it clear that this was supposed to be non-violent, but one very learned and fine African speaker stood up and said we have to be careful about saying only non-violence because God himself used violence in the New Testament, and he cited Jesus' actions and then going to the cross in support of this. I remember being very uncomfortable about that at the time, but then I realized talking with friends there how it looks when comfortable white people say to oppressed black people, no, no, we shouldn't have a new violence, just walk up and down the street with black cards, that'll be fine.

And they say, look, we've been doing that kind of thing for generations, and we're still being beaten up and put in jail and all the rest of it. And so there are real problems about the way in which white Christians are perceived in this sort of debate. And indeed, I would say I've done just a little bit of work on this over the last few months.

The very word white, I may have said this on a previous podcast, I'm not sure. The very word white as applied to people like you and me, you know, I'm looking at you on a screen, you don't look white. That's what white looks like.

And Tom, for the benefit of listeners, is holding up a white piece of paper. Oh, sorry. If you looked like that piece of paper, I would say, please go to the doctor, you're deeply sick.

The word white was constructed into an ethnic appellation two or 300 years ago, 300 or 400 years ago, by people who wanted to make this binary between black and white, in a way which is totally alien to the New Testament. The New Testament does not distinguish. And Paul says firmly in Athens that God made from one source, all nations of people to dwell on the face of the earth.

And this is the thing that the Black Lives Matter stuff, particularly, the Christians should always have been leading the way on this. Black Lives Matter shouldn't have been necessary because the church ought to have been witnessing to the fact that in Christ God has made a multicolored, multi-ethnic, multi-everything people. The secular multiculturalism has tried to get the results of the Christian gospel without the gospel.

And if the churches haven't been noticing that, it's no surprise that other people take to the streets to make their protest. Just like in Jesus' day, he said, "The kingdom of God is

breaking in and the men of violence are trying to break in on the act." So it's a very confused situation, but part of it is the fader of the church to bear witness to wise, multi, as I say, multi-ethnic community and how it's done. We, of all people ought to know that.

And if we haven't been doing it, it's not surprising if stuff comes up. And sometimes we feel ourselves saying, "Actually, do you know what? I'm basically with these people, even though there are some of their methods, maybe ones I wouldn't share or whatever." Yes. So it's understandable in a sense when people do resort to violence.

I mean, overall, though, do you believe that's not the model that Jesus taught us? I mean, you've spoken before at the time that these riots were happening about the way Martin Luther King obviously approached this and the fact that perhaps a younger generation is even finding his methodology difficult to stomach in the light of... No, I think Martin Luther King on this at least was absolutely right. And he paid the price for it because the more extreme Black power leaders after Martin Luther King's death said, "Oh, well, he had it coming to him. He was trying to be a softy and a lot of us felt no." Actually, he was right because violent revolution only breeds more violence.

And if you fight fire with fire, fire always wins. That's the problem. I'm not saying that we in Western society with our wars and rumors of wars have done it any better.

Seems to me we haven't the mess with both Iraq wars, etc, etc. We have learned it seems very little over recent generations. But the cleansing of the temple action was a very specific thing.

It wasn't saying, "Okay, there are times when we have to have a riot. Let's have one now." It was a specific prophetic action which anyone at the time would see as being like Jeremiah smashing his pot. It was a way of saying, "This whole system is under God's judgment." And all Jesus did was to stop the regular flow of daily sacrifices for a short time.

But that was enough to say prophetically that actually this whole system, which is about the regular daily worship of God, is under God's judgment. And that goes with what Jesus then did in the upper room, which was kind of the positive half of the same thing. So it wasn't, "Let's go and do some violence." It was a prophetic sign at that moment.

And we shouldn't generalize out of that into other possibilities. And ultimately the example of Jesus, as I see it, is a one to whom violence was done rather than that's the... And in the New Testament granted that there's no chance of the early Christians getting together a riot mob to take over Corinth or whatever. But even if they had, that clearly wasn't the way.

And we need to soak ourselves again in the Sermon on the Mount, which is the way forward in all of these things. One last question, Sam in South Yorkshire says, "I've

discovered your podcast found it really thought-provoking in the past year. And during the pandemic, you've addressed several issues to do with worship, faith and fellowship under the restrictions we find ourselves.

I've really struggled though to come to terms with the restrictions on our daily lives because I do question the evidence they're based on and the ethical basis for lockdown. I sincerely believe that lockdown is actually more damaging to our health, livelihoods and happiness than the virus itself. It's also severely impinged on the life of the church, forbidding group worship, restricting Christian fellowship by law.

And the Bible tells us to submit to the governing authorities and not to rest on our own wisdom. However, if we disagree fundamentally with something in society that we believe is harmful, shouldn't we question it or even protest? Jesus, again, breaking up what we said in the last question was in some ways a revolutionary who challenged the governing authorities of his day and subsequent questions have campaigned against what they believed to be unjust, the abolitionist movement, for instance. What is the dividing line between righteous submission and harmful compliance or even complicity in this or any such situation? Would appreciate any guidance you can provide, Tom? The thing which I'm now starting with on this question, which comes back again and again, is that on the television last night, the time I'm recording this, I think it said that in the UK there had so far been something like 112,000 deaths from COVID.

And we know how COVID is spread. Basically, it's spread by people breathing droplets or leaving the tiny fractions of it on surfaces that they touch or where they've breathed or let alone sneezed or coughed. We know all that.

And the only way to stop that happening and to stop that 112,000 turning into 500,000 is precisely to draw back and restrict our social contact. And I haven't enjoyed that any more than the next person. I've lived under it for much of the last year, like we all have, and I find it hugely restrictive, et cetera.

But I cannot persuade myself that saying, Oh, well, come on, this is just stopping my liberty. Let's throw away the masks and go down to the pub, whatever. I cannot persuade myself that that's a good thing.

When we've talked about this in the family, should we meet with these family members who aren't in our immediate bubble? I have said, I would love to get together with them. But I do not want in six weeks time to be standing there at somebody's funeral saying, you thought it would be all right. You know, that is almost manslaughter or colluding with manslaughter.

And I just don't think we have the right to do that. That's not to say that the government calls it right. But then I don't know any government that knew how to do it.

We didn't have a big what to do in a pandemic unit ready in place. And even if we had this one has been moving so fast that I'm sorry for the governments that are trying to keep up with it in Europe, in Russia, in China, in South Africa, in America, they're all flailing around trying to make sense of it. And when that's going on, just like supposing again to use a similar illustration to want to use another podcast, if you're driving up the motorway and suddenly there's an ice storm comes through, you don't say, well, this is going to restrict my freedom.

I really need to get to Edinburgh quite quickly. So I'm just going to bash on. Or do you say, oh, my goodness, we need to slow down to five miles an hour and go into the slow lane with our lights flashing.

And somebody says, but I want to get to Edinburgh. Sorry, guys, if you're going to be sliding around the road and bashing into people, you may just have to restrict your liberty. Now, it's possible that in fact, the government has overstated things.

But I don't know that I'm not a doctor, I'm not a scientist. And simply to say, I think lockdown is damaging to our health. Therefore, of course it is, we all know that my wife and I have been helping to homeschool our grandchildren.

We see what this is doing for them and for us. But and likewise, the life of the church is restricted. Although in other ways, it's been helped by people going online and finding out how to do things and bringing in people who wouldn't be getting to church in other ways.

Obviously, the normal rule is to do what the government tells you to. However, if you're in Hong Kong at the moment, what does that mean? When massive new laws have just been put in, if you're in Myanmar at the moment, what does that mean? If the military have now imposed a new law, those are very difficult times Christians have always wrestled with problems under certain things. But to line up a medical emergency with things like that seems to be actually pushing your luck more than I would want to do.

As ever, it's about finding a wise way through, isn't it? And in this case, obviously, at least here in the UK, the situation as we see it here in the UK, you would say the best thing Christians can do is to submit to the law and to the advice that's being given. But obviously, I suppose you would always be open to wanting to be careful of what that might look like in the future. If under normal circumstances, we wouldn't expect the government to be saying when and where Christians can meet and that sort of thing.

Of course. And there have been people, the journalist Peter Hitchens, who lives in Oxford, as I know, do, he's been ranting on about this. This is the government taking away our liberties and watch out.

They'll never give them back. And I think actually in Britain, I don't think that's a legit

problem. I think there are some countries where that has been and might be again a problem.

And we have to watch out for it. And there are councils, the civil liberties that will be looking out for that. So yes, that could be a danger.

But when life is at stake, we use the phrase casually, is it a matter of life and death? The answer is yes, it jolly well is. So let's be wise and err on the side of caution right now. Tom, thanks again for being with me on this week's edition of the podcast.

Thank you very much. And we'll see you again next time. Yes indeed.

Thank you so much for listening. Next time, we'll look at your questions on authority in the church and when church leaders fall, we've had that pretty devastating example recently in the Ravi Zachariah scandal and Tom will respond. Don't forget to check out our show Partners as well, Tom's UK publisher SBCK and NT Right online for Tom's video courses.

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