

Stumped

Psalm 25; Romans 7:15-25; Matthew 11:16-19

There are so many ways to interpret these two passages that I am going to start with cricket. You heard me, cricket AND we will look at the battle of the spirit and when the rules are used as a way to turn the knife on yourself. That's when it becomes a different battle altogether.

First, for non-cricket fans, (of which I am one) I will put you in the picture. It is the biggest story of the week. The Sydney Morning Herald led with 6 articles on the events at Lords before they mentioned the mass shooting in Philadelphia or the latest casualties in the war in Ukraine. Yeh, it's that big.

Cricket rules were developed by the Marylebone Cricket Club in 1787. They are the Masters of Lords and of world cricket.

Apparently, under the rules, there are 10 ways to get out.¹ One of them is by being stumped. Now if I understand this properly, the batsman pretty-well stands in front of the stumps and protects them with their life. But he or she may wander out of the crease (that's a designated space in front of the stumps) because they think the game is over, or its lunchtime, and sometimes to put the bowler off his (or her) game. It's annoying and distracting. When they wander off, anyone with the ball in their hand can throw it at the stumps and if they hit the bales – the batsperson is out.

Apparently, in this case, the batsman, for no particular reason, thought the game was over and walked away so an Australian threw the ball and the batsman was decreed OUT. The English thought this was unfair as it was not 'in the spirit of the game'...although, apparently, they did it to someone else in a previous match. It's in the rules (the ones they wrote) but they called it was unsportsmanlike.

I think that's a reasonable summary.

When my son was playing in the under 5 soccer team, he was a goalie. Games are long for under 5s and at some stage he needed to relieve himself. He wandered off into the trees and at that moment, for the first time in what seemed like ages, the play moved up the field and wham! A goal was kicked. He was very upset and thought it was unfair but none of the rest of the players (or umpire) seemed to agree with him.²

¹ Don't take it from me – I referred to Mark Taylor, ex-captain of the Australian team in SMH article 4 July 2023 *It's just cricket: why the Bairstow furore has me absolutely stumped*

² Perhaps this is the reason he took up lacrosse instead of soccer.

There is very little difference between these two stories only my son did not make the Sydney Morning Herald. What was in conflict here was not the rules but how the rules collided with what they felt, what they THOUGHT, was 'the spirit' of the game.

Rules are clear and documented. Thoughts and feelings are more elusive. Both are real and Paul's letter, tongue twister that it is, kind of skirts in and out of law, spirit, feelings and failings.

Paul's letter is confusing because we will never know if it is biographical – as in, this is my struggle, or whether he is using the 'I' word as general inclusion the way we might say 'one'. ONE might do this or ONE might choose right from wrong.

Another difficulty is that many preachers take the text literally and interpret this as a war between the spirit and the flesh. This is the basis of all sorts of sexually repressive teaching (some of which we remember from school³) and leads to a very unhealthy relationship with our own bodies and others'.

A healthier and more useful interpretation is that it is the struggle between the values of our living God and the aspirations and priorities of a worldly system. "We might see this as a competition between desiring the fruits of the presence of Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control) and feeling the need to pursue success in the eyes of our mainstream culture. A culture where we feel pressured to always be more or better at the acquisition of wealth, health, knowledge and achievements of every kind. Or, in this case, win the test match – which they were losing anyway.

Many are torn between the call to be our best selves (which is spiritually driven) and the need to codify and model. In other words, our spirit is in conflict with the human need to create rules and laws to prove we have succeeded – or fallen short. After all you can't manage what you can't measure, right? In cricket, how would you know who won the game?

Jesus however is not fooled by such judgements or achievements. Indeed, his life and teachings upset all conventional aspirations and understandings."⁴ He put love and service above the law. He put God and faith above success.

While this may be a scuffle within ourselves – it is a full-on war when you are living as you are called to be, your true self, hopefully showing the values of a living God... and you are up against a person or persons who see *you* in the way of their earthly

³ Anyone who went to a Catholic school will remember some pretty weird and wild 'sex ed'.

⁴ Rev'd Sue, *Companions on the way*, 3 July 2023, <https://www.companionsontheway.com/>

ambition. They may even be masquerading as having a higher purpose. (at this stage, I could return to the Ashes controversy but stick with me...)

People with this mindset can bring to bear rules and conventions that attempt to disable another. I'm not entirely sure this cricket controversy wasn't created as an elaborate 'sledge' to put the Aussies off their game. It is certainly more difficult to play as an elite athlete when surrounded by a wildly hostile crowd. Gaslighting, sledging, spreading rumours are all about undermining another person⁵. This kind of clash is harmful. It has physical and psychological implications.⁶

This is moral injury and this is what happened to me. Moral Injury, like PTSD actually changes the brain chemistry and takes a long time to recover. It robs you of confidence, sleep and self-esteem.

Dr Nikki Jameson⁷ was a keynote speaker at the Spiritual Care Australia Conference. She is an expert on moral injury and suicide. Her address had a profound effect on me. As she described the behaviours that cause moral injury; how it is experienced; and labelled the emotional and physical responses that are a result – it was as if she was reading my diaries. I felt like she drilled a hole through me. She counted off a list of actions and behaviours that was like a shopping list of my lived experience.

Moral injury can occur when people in power; systems or institutions fail to behave according to their public ethics. It can also happen when a person is required to do something that is in conflict with their own moral standards. The soldiers who were bullied into participating in the activities that led to the case against Roberts-Smith would be an obvious example. They felt sick with themselves.

One of the first steps in recovery is acknowledging and owning what happened. I would tell people it was a hard time. I even laughed it off sometimes. I never admitted how hard it was. After 2 and half years of stress, I felt something break inside me like a rubber band. I survived and departed with some grace and sanity because I sought help from God; pharmacology and counselling. Dr Jameson's strategy for helping others is to help them reclaim; reframe and repurpose the experiences and feelings. I did not have that opportunity. I survived rather than recovered.

⁵ Implying to other people that you are worried by another's mental health. Casual statements and asides that cast doubt on their sobriety; honesty; work ethic etc. statements you can deny or dismiss as out of context,

⁶ Exhaustion, short term memory loss, temporary psychosis, insomnia, depression, disorientation, illnesses (especially of the gut); mood swings, uncontrolled temper/crying, a sense of incompetence, guilt, hopelessness and more.

⁷ Dr Nikki Jamieson is a suicidologist and social worker, her PhD that explores the link between moral trauma/moral injury and suicide. She is a leading researcher in Australia and is currently working for Defence. Her appointment is a direct result of the commission looking into suicides of service men and women.

To begin the recovery process, I went back and began to read my diaries. And you know what struck me? Even as the experience was excruciating, and my diaries are bleedingly honest, my faith was strong, even stronger and I did not feel God was distant. I reconfirmed my calling even in the maelstrom to continue God's work. It was astounding to see how much I prayed...and how that helped me analyse and look at what was happening from different perspectives. I sought divine guidance.

My nemesis and I had totally different definitions of mission, trust and spirit. His faith was on Sunday and mine was called to be there every day. His trust was evidentiary, mine was in character. I did not judge him but I tried to understand him.

In our Matthew reading today, Jesus is pointing out the moralistic and unimaginative judgements of the people who declared John the Baptist had a demon because he didn't eat or drink like them. The same people called Jesus a glutton and a drunkard for enjoying fellowship with others, especially the marginal, dubious others. "This is not simply a social complaint that you can't please some people!! (although it is worth remembering that you cannot indeed please all people.) It also says that those who focus on such superficialities have no wisdom in their judgement⁸. Indeed, their motives are to tear down and dismiss the prophets in their midst. Trust me, you never want to be a prophet in their midst.

For most of us, our desire to live a good life is not just about the desire to fit in and achieve moral goodness. It is also about success in the eyes of our neighbours and even ourselves. "⁹ For some of us, there is a disturbing call to live a particular life of purpose that we feel is God's desire for us. The very fact that we have committed to exist and react in a different way from the normal cut and thrust, can sometimes make it very hard and lead to judgement by others. (Holier than thou? Nose in the air? Weak?)

My nemesis kept looking for my angle, my agenda, my game ...and there wasn't one. He was fighting an enemy he couldn't find. He was operating under one set of rules and assumptions and I was operating with another higher power in mind. He weaponised every rule at his disposal.

Paul's passage is part of his continuing comments about the relationship between law and sin. The law (or rules) are not sinful – it is how and when they are used.¹⁰ This person who harmed me never broke a rule but he did not operate in the spirit. But it

⁸ My boss sought documents, references and opinions from others rather than simply trying to get to know me.

⁹ Rev Sue IBID

¹⁰ *Lawful but lacking humanity': Judge rules on hotel detention of refugees*, Bianca Hall, The Age 6 July 2023, Australia's use of hotels as makeshift detention centres for refugees and asylum seekers was lawful but failed the tests of basic humanity, a Federal Court judge said in a landmark ruling on Thursday.

was typical of a person who lives with what I call 'transactional' faith. That is a person who does 'good' only for salvation. God owes them. Jesus tells us that is not good enough. Ambition, even spiritual ambition, corrupts. The law is not sinful but it can be used sinfully.

My understanding is the official cricket rules has a preamble something like, "*Cricket owes much of its appeal and enjoyment to the fact that it should be played not only according to the Laws, but also within the Spirit of the Game.*"¹¹ I'd say, the spirit up and left the game once it was commercialised and professionalised. These guy's careers depend on success, not on niceness.

The beginning of Matthew's passage could be taken as that mis-connection, the misalignment of purpose that leads to moral conflict. One is being guided/herded in one direction and the response is not what is expected or desired by the director. The game is theoretically *for* enjoyment – but not for the players. This may be a clash between earthy and heavenly directions.

We all have our internal battles. And most of us have had external wars as well. The conflict between the rules and how each of perceives the rules will be repeated eternally. Whether Australia wins or loses the Ashes, the abusive experience of our players and the call of unfairness by the English team will have a lasting effect. It feeds into a greater narrative – Aussies are cheaters. Sledging on an epic scale.

I would sympathise with the English team calling it unfair that the Aussies took advantage of a stupid mistake... if I didn't know that the previous English captain said that they had done the same thing on more than one occasion.

The problem with taking the moral high ground is you can't take your bat and go home. In my case, God wouldn't let me. I had a job to do.

And my survival foundation can be found in Psalm 25. It is the psalm you turn to in distress, when your enemies are treacherous without cause.... And it ends like this:

¹⁶ Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and afflicted.

¹⁷ Relieve the troubles of my heart
and free me from my anguish.

¹⁸ Look on my affliction and my distress
and take away all my sins.

If you have fought these wars, the the whole psalm may keep your head above water.

¹¹ Peter FitzSimmons, SMH, 8 July 23, "With apologies to Julia, you lot can tell your story walking" – an article where he reminds us the English invented 'Bodyline'"