

Hills to Die On

I recently answered a formspring [now moved to Q&A on the blog] question (and copied it to the blog) which was about the place of the Christian voice in our society – what should we speak about and when? When should we call on the government to embrace our point of view – and what are matters that we leave to the private or personal sphere? In the terms of Romans 13, the area to speak out on is in the area of the “sword” of the government that delivers justice etc.

One of the areas that is clearly in that domain is the area where we look to care for the weak and vulnerable in our society and to work towards their welfare and security. This places the topic of euthanasia as something that Christians do and should have a public voice on. My Bishop, John Harrower, is no exception and he has blogged passionately about this in the past and the present:

‘Surprised and sad’. These summarise my reaction to the news of pro euthanasia legislation for Tasmania by the Attorney General.

Surprised because the State has only 1 year ago done all this and 11 years prior to that, 1998, we also investigated pro euthanasia and rejected it. I was at the Governor’s Address to the Official Opening of this Tasmanian Parliament and euthanasia was neither in his Address nor was it mentioned in the election campaign – but it is now promoted not as ‘Government’ but as a private member’s bill yet by the Attorney General and Deputy Leader of the Labour Party and using all tax payer resources of her Government Department!?

Sad because nothing has changed in terms of medical and legal precedent. So, why waste our State’s scarce resources by redoing an issue we have done just last year? We have poor and needy people on our streets who need care.

Let this not be an argument about what the church says and whether it's allowed to say it. Let this be a demonstration of the real issues: the cohesion of individual rights with responsibilities, the responsibility to ensure to the utmost that society's weak and vulnerable are protected from exploitation and manipulation. Let us recognise that this is not just about the corner-cases of psychologically-empowered terminally-ill demands for death with dignity, but that it speaks to the main area of distressed persons not wanting to be a burden, or the grieving family struggling to cope with both the pain and value of palliative care. Let us not just talk about the right of someone to end their life, but also the right of someone else (e.g. the medical profession) not to be asked to do the ending for them. Let us not pretend that being terminally ill is an absolute black-and-white state of being (after all, we are all on the road to death at some point in the future) and so consider the implications of what an embrace of euthanasia might say about the value of those who are elderly or infirm or whether or not palliative care is worth funding.

I could go on.

None of these things are "religious" questions – although their answers are guided by worldviews of every sort. On balance, my conclusion is probably obvious: I am against active euthanasia – which is, when all is considered and weighed, dramatically harmful to both psyche and society.

I agree with Bishop John. The euthanasia debate received its answer in this generation last year. To revisit it simply generates political cynicism.

