

# Material considerations



MOST PROBLEMS BOIL DOWN TO COMMUNICATION AND A CLEAR UNDERSTANDING OF GOOD AND EVIL. AND THAT'S ALL YEAR ROUND, NOT JUST FOR CHRISTMAS, SAYS THE REVEREND **JUSTIN WELBY**.

I was accused of worshipping Satan the other day. It's an unusual accusation against a Dean of an English Cathedral (in fact the email said "worshipping satin" but I got the idea from the rest of the comment). If true it would be a bit off limits in the church – well, to be accurate, a cause for instant dismissal. The reasons are too complex to explain (I wasn't by the way), but the essence of the problem was communication. The only consolation about struggling with communication is that I don't know anyone who really gets it right.

The range of issues that crop up in phone calls to me as personal and ethical adviser at the ACT usually have some issues of communication at the core of the problem. People ring about everything from strictly personal matters to worries about jobs to genuine ethical questions at work.

**CIRCULAR ARGUMENT** My own experience both in charge of a company treasury department and having run one large organisation outside the church since that time, was always of the dangers of bad communication. The examples can be ludicrous. I was caught up in one nasty bit of political infighting because I had a round table in my office. A colleague noticed our mutual boss also had a round table, but he had a rectangular one. The reason for this was that I had a funny shaped office and a square table would not fit, and moreover it was not the sort of company where the shape of the table meant anything at all. But the result was a whole conspiracy theory about my bid for power.

Sometimes the examples are serious. Another organisation I worked for had a senior manager who was misbehaving badly. The symptom was that one could never quite understand her reports. It added up and yet gut instinct said this was not the whole story. Yet, because most of us basically don't seek to cheat and fiddle and deceive or defraud, it was months before we could bring ourselves to believe that this might be more than confused thinking and writing. The result of the delay was very serious and I learned a lesson about needing to communicate doubts and worries.

**IT'S BETTER TO TALK** In April I was involved in some mediation in a large African country where heavy fighting was taking place. I have a lasting memory of standing at the side of a mass grave, filled in a couple of days before, with over 350 bodies, mostly women and children. The survivors stood around. It was burningly hot, on an open plain, with low



**SURVIVORS TALKED  
LESS OF REVENGE  
THAN OF HOW THEY  
COULD FIND A WAY  
OF SPEAKING TO  
THEIR ENEMIES.**

hills to the north, over which the raiders had come. The evidence of raw and unconstrained evil was before our eyes, and its consequences all around. Yet the survivors talked less of revenge than of how they could find a way of speaking to their enemies, of showing, one said, "that we are as human as they are". It was communication again, perhaps naïve, but better than continued killing. The immediate answer was a supply of satellite phones so that the key members of each community could talk.

From the banal to the serious to the utterly traumatic and tragic, good ethics call for two key starting points. One is a realistic understanding of good and evil; my colleague with the table assumed everyone was bad and out to get him, with the deceptive manager we all assumed anything except bad deliberate wrong doing. The kind of evil with which I was faced in April seems far away, and the heroic virtue of the survivors seems equally distant from us. But both are real parts of human nature and all ethical codes must take that into account.

The second starting point is communication. For it to be effective will always be costly. For me as a Christian (even if I were to worship satin, although cotton futures look better) the greatest communication in history is seen at Christmas, when in the words of the opening part of John's gospel, read in every church, "the word became flesh", God took human identity to communicate eternal values and truth. Costly, but effective. I believe it, some don't, but at the least it is a stunningly brilliant model of how to make yourself understood.

Justin Welby is the ACT's members' confidential adviser on ethical and personal issues and dean at Liverpool Cathedral.

[dean@liverpoolcathedral.org.uk](mailto:dean@liverpoolcathedral.org.uk)  
[www.liverpoolcathedral.org.uk](http://www.liverpoolcathedral.org.uk)