

## **Being human, being divine. What makes us human?**

**15 October 2009**

### **Beginning and end of life: abortion**

**Beware of the word *abortion*.** Abortion means, in medicine, the premature expulsion of the products of conception (fetus, fetal membranes, placenta) from the uterus. There are two types:

- *spontaneous*. This is common – nature is profligate. A late period could well be a spontaneous abortion. Miscarriage is a spontaneous abortion.
- *induced*: what the lay press means by *abortion*, when termination of pregnancy (TOP) is sought.

#### **Abortion law: some dates**

- 1803 abortion a statutory felony both before and after 'quickening', punishable by death.
- 1837 illegal to 'procure a miscarriage', punishable by life imprisonment.
- 1929 anyone who destroyed a child 'capable of being born alive' was guilty of a crime, unless done 'in good faith for the purpose of preserving the life of the mother'. Fetal viability set at 28 weeks.
- 1967 *The Abortion Act*, making abortion legal under conditions, legal upper limit for TOP at 28 weeks.
- 1990 HFE Act. Abortion allowed to full term only for disability, or life and/or health of mother.
- 1991 28 week limit lowered to 24 weeks. Amendments permit abortion until birth for fetal handicap.
- Current law does not legalise abortions but provides a legal defence for those carrying them out.

#### **Some issues:**

- *Thou shalt not kill*. What does *kill* mean? Why take this bit of Hebrew Scripture seriously, when (a) they didn't (or did they?), and (b) we ignore so much else of Hebrew Scripture?
- When does human life begin? Conception (fertilization)? Implantation? Quickening? Birth?
- Is there a point in the development of the embryo before and after which it is substantively different?
- What constitutes a person? Ensoulment? Individuation? Ability to exist independently?
- An equal right to life?
  - 'Christ became human for our sake and an embryo for the sake of all embryos' (Torrance 2000).
  - Bishop Lancelot Andrewes, Christmas Day 1614: 'He was not idle all the time He was an embryo — all the nine months He was in the womb; but then and there He even eat out the core of corruption that cleft to our nature and us, and made both us and it an unpleasing object in the sight of God. ... this the good by Christ an embryo.'
  - 'For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb'.
- Does or should the visible (us) have greater rights than the invisible (an embryo)?
- Who is more deserving of compassion – mother/victim/fetus?
  - rape? chorioncarcinoma? ectopic pregnancy?
  - 'a greater risk to the physical or mental health of the woman, or her existing children'.
- A private matter or a community one? *Truly I tell you, just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.* (Matt. 24:40)
- Legalized abortion has laid the groundwork for acceptance of the destruction of embryos in scientific research. The result is that human life *is reduced to an object or a mere instrument. When it reaches this level, society itself suffers* (Benedict XVI).
- Pregnancy changes a woman, even before she knows she is pregnant. What about the effects on her?
- What about contraception that prevents the fertilized ovum gaining adequate nutrition, such as 'the pill' that prevents implantation? Is this, in effect, abortion? It happens naturally anyway, sometimes.
- If we can kill an embryo, then why not kill an adult? Is a human embryo not fully human?
- Birth defects. Eugenics? What's wrong with eugenics anyway?

*What do you think now?*

- [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_25071968\\_humanae-vitae\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae_en.html)
- Watch the film *Vera Drake*.

**By what ethical criteria are we to make judgments?** *more another week.*

#### **Thursdays in October and November**

- *abortion, euthanasia, in vitro fertilization, embryo research.*
- *intersex states: how is sexuality determined?*
- *Competition or cooperation? Eternal life—now or then? Rituals—waking to sleeping*
- *So what makes us human?*