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With power comes responsibility.

Lexie Matheson, AUT, looks at the latest harmful words of Israel Folau and what it means for the LGBTIQ community and all of us.

Tertiary Update, 12 April 2019

So Israel Folau is it again.

Barely a year after his last homophobic outburst Folau has again hit Instagram with an appalling post anchored in his need to share his religious beliefs. 'Christianity' he calls it, but it's as far from 'love thy neighbour' as I am from being an All Black.

Why does he do it? Well, it's one of those religious requirements, this evangelising, and, in my view, it's brought unbelievable grief wherever it's been practiced.

My first response was that his meme looked rather like an audition notice, a list of those qualities required if you sought selection to the Qantas Wallabies rugby team. 'WARNING' he shouts. 'Drunks, homosexuals, adulterers, liars, fornicators, thieves, atheists, idolaters. Hell awaits you. Repent.'

It's hard to misunderstand his intention, I'll give him that. He is a godly man, a man of Jesus, a man of staunch convictions.

But the Qantas Wallabies made it clear, mid 2018, that his last homophobic outburst was totally unacceptable. Until yesterday, I have to admit, his ongoing silence made it seem as though he had at least learned to keep his mouth shut.

Not so.

This latest mind numbingly stupid outburst has hit our news media like a Trump Tweet. Momentarily gone are the irrational criticisms of Jacinda Ardern, learned observations about celestial black holes are retired to the back burner, the seemingly endless Kiwi commitment to 'whataboutism' is silenced. Because without warning we're back again to the seasonal topic dujour, Israel Folau's rampant homophobia.

Suddenly, advocates of free speech have become passionate in support of his right to speak his mind regardless of topic and/or consequences. And the ongoing, often vile, debate about curbing hate speech in Aotearoa continues to divide the country like a 1981 apartheid rugby tour.

Fundamentalist Christian's, likewise, cite Folau's right to have an opinion and to exercise his freedom of speech, no matter how heinous and discriminatory, and to spout it in public forums as much as he likes without any risk of censure.

They're right of course, Human Rights law in this country does protect his right to speak with impunity as long as the theme is religious. Perhaps when Jacinda's finished toughening up our gun laws, she might want to take a serious look at this one, too.

However this whole thing has very little to do with freedom of speech and even less to do with Folau's colonialist religious views though these often provide an angry smoke screen to the truth.

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I seriously believe that his motivation is more to do with a stubborn refusal to acknowledge that the words he uses from the platforms of power he has access to – 316,000 Instagram followers, 130,000 on Facebook and 121,000 on Twitter – do actual damage to the souls he says he's trying to 'save'.

Tuiloma Lina Samu, Pasifika Human Rights Advisor to the NZ Human Rights Commission, writes in a wonderful letter to Folau published in The Spinoff that 'an unquestioning belief in and holding fast to the Bible is very much a feature of our lives as Pasifika peoples. Our cultures are entrenched in our Christian faiths and this has been central to our modern-day cultures since we were colonised. But our peoples also need to remember that fa'afafine, fa'afatama, fakafefine/ fakaleiti, fakafifine, 'akavaine and sexually diverse cultures are more ancient and authentically ancestral than our Christian religion is.'

This is critical to a contemporary understanding of Folau's hateful ramblings and why they are potentially dangerous to exactly the young people he is trying to convert and save. Folau's not ranting to them, he's evangelising to save himself.

There's no question Folau's a hero among Pacific peoples and much of what he is preaching can be heard from the pulpits of his community. I get that and, while I have serious disagreement with both the context and the content of much of the sermonising, I am neither Christian nor of Pacific heritage so I hold my tongue out of respect.

I do believe, however, that an unselfish Christian person might look more closely at the consequences of their words and ask 'just how much damage am I doing to the most vulnerable young people from my own communities who identify as LGBTQI and am I able to say mea culpa when tragedies happen that I have doubtless contributed to?'

I have no issue with Folau following whatever religion he chooses but when it comes to knowingly promulgating messages designed to harm vulnerable people then I draw the line.

It's people like me who get to pick up the pieces and I'm happy to do that because our system has cracks in it that people fall through. I fell through them when I came out and there was always someone there to help me heal and to help me learn.

What is despicable is knowing that I'm picking up the pieces of kids who have been consciously pushed down by someone they looked up to, someone they admired who should have known better. With power comes responsibility, and Folau has yet to learn what this means.

If you're upset by the bigotry you're reading from Folau then maybe contact one of the support groups I've attached to this ramble. They're all great – or if you just want to chat, flick me a message. I'm happy to help.

LGBTIQ+ COMMUNITY WHERE TO GET HELP
OUTline NZ 0800 688 5463
RainbowYOUTH 09-376 4155
1737, Need to talk? Free call or text 1737 to talk to a trained counsellor
Depression.org.nz - 0800 111 757 or text 4202
Lifeline - 0800 543 354
Suicide Crisis Helpline - 0508 828 865 (0508 TAUTOKO)
Kidsline - 0800 54 37 54 for people up to 18 years old. Open 24/7.
Youthline - 0800 376 633, free text 234, email talk@youthline.co.nz, or find online chat and other support options at www.youthline.co.nz