Do the Right Thing

It was a damp dark night and Pat woke at around 4 o’clock in the morning thinking about the day’s work ahead and his brother Tom next door.

Pat and Tom were both farmers. They both had large tracts of land and had harvested the grain from their farms for many years keeping their interests separate, each having their own land, their own houses and their own warehouses to dry and store the grain.

Pat got up and went to his warehouse thinking “there’s my brother Tom next door, he has neither chick nor child, wife or companion and he’s all alone and here am I a lucky man, married to a lovely lady Ethna and I have 6 children all of whom are happy and healthy. I must make sure that, God forbid, if anything ever happened to me that Tom would be looked after” And so for the next number of hours with the wheel barrow working on his own, he moved large amounts of grain from his warehouse into Tom’s warehouse and went back to bed.

The following night Tom woke up, again a dark dank morning and was thinking “here am I, I have neither chick nor child, I live in this lovely house and I have got all this grain in the warehouse. And there’s my brother Pat with his wife and his 6 children; and sure I don’t need all the grain or all the money that I have. What I should do is give some to him”. So he got up at 4 o’clock in the morning and with the wheel barrow moved large amounts of his grain into Pat’s warehouse.
This procedure went on for a number of months until one day Pat and Tom happened to get up at the same time on the same night. They were wheeling their respective barrows in the other’s warehouse when they met in the dark and crashed.

The moral of the story is – this was a holy place.

Good afternoon. My name is Noel Smyth. There are 4 things I would like to share with you about myself at this point.

I am a solicitor, property developer, practicing catholic and a supporter of Man Utd.

When people in the course of a conversation hear these 4 things added together, especially the first 3, they raise an eyebrow. How can the first two professions can sit side by side with the third, namely that of being a practicing catholic.

It is not fashionable these days to have any religion; not to mention being a Catholic and then to be a practicing Catholic.

The reality is however that whether we call ourselves Christians or declare that we have “a strong faith”; largely it depends on your personality as to how you wish to portray it.
I am here to try to give you an insight as to how I balance what I do in my professional life with what I have been brought up to believe - what I have read and interpreted in the gospels, what our Church has taught us.

I am involved in legal issues - generally advising high profile individuals, developing property and overseeing large amounts of money that might go through my hands on behalf of clients. As a 21 year old Solicitor I was obliged to call on God - to take an oath that I would observe the law and carry out its functions to the best of my ability on behalf of my clients. This is somewhat similar to what we, as practising Catholics are asked to do – to carry out God’s word to the best of our ability.

There is no equivocation in the law and that’s why I love it so much. The law basically sets out the rules and the equivocation comes on its interpretation.

Two parables from the Bible speak directly to me and I value my interpretation of them.

The first story is the parable of the 5 talents. The Master who is going overseas called his stewards to him. To the first he gave 5 talents, to the next he gave 3 and to the last he gave 1.

After being away for a long time he came back and the man who he had given the 5 talents to appeared and said that he had made 5 more and the master was thrilled with him and said “thank you very much, I knew you would do it and I expected nothing less”. The man who he had given 3 talents to again came in and said “look I have also doubled what you’ve given me and made another 3
talents”. Again the Master was thrilled and said “you are a great servant and you will be rewarded accordingly”. Finally the man who he had given 1 talent to came in and said “look I only have the 1 because I took the talent and I buried it in the ground because I heard your reputation that you reaped what you hadn’t sown and you gathered where you hadn’t spread”. As a result of which the Master was very upset and said “you are a wicked person, I gave you the talent, it was measured to suit your purpose and yet you basically decided not to use it”.

That story says to me that whatever talent the Lord has given you, he expects you to use it to its fullest extent. He doesn’t expect you to equivocate and in my case if I am asked to act for a client, the client is king. If the client is king then I must do everything absolutely and completely within my power - albeit with the terms of the law - but to do it in every way to save and to protect my client fully.

There is a very famous case in England on which all other tax cases are based and essentially the case says that a person is entitled to order their affairs in such a way as to pay as little tax as possible.

It didn’t say that one has to evade the tax; but one certainly can avoid it and herewith comes the dichotomy that solicitors and people in my profession are always faced with. Namely, how do you deal with these issues? Personally, I go back to the basic principle on which I was brought up. I can always hear my Mother’s voice saying “you must do the right thing”.
The notion of ‘doing the right thing’ is probably best illustrated in the little story I shared about the two brothers. They’re both trying to do the right thing for each other.

Recently, I was speaking with a friend of mine and after much discussion, we both agreed that we can learn a lot from children - children always know right from wrong. My friend told me that he remembered a time when he was 7 years old and that he and his younger brother were returning home with their parents after a trip to Killiney Beach. They were sitting in the back of the car and their Mother noticed that they were both very quiet. She asked if everything was ok and was there anything they wanted to tell her? Neither of them responded to her at first but after a moment of her looking at them in the rearview mirror, they said “Mum would you mind turning back the car and going back to the beach”. When they got back to the beach the two boys left the car, went up onto the railway line and removed the large rock that they had put on the track earlier. They used to put little stones on the track but they had gone further on this occasion. Many many years later, this memory still stands out clearly in my friend’s mind as a reminder that he must always do the right thing.

Whether you’re 7 or whether you are 57, nothing will happen for which you won’t know that you must do the right thing. The same thing applies in the case of whatever transaction you are involved in. Certainly you are entitled to make a profit, certainly you are entitled to carry out your business in the best way possible but in doing so you are always accountable to those with whom you work.
Most solicitors always have to be either lie detectors or psychologists - because most clients who come to visit a solicitor in the first instance tell them half the truth and it’s the ability to see through what the person’s problem is with their version of events. They could be accused of bare faced lies but the reality is the law and anything associated with it is never that straight forward and if that is the case of civil law, how clearly is it the same with the law of God?

The second parable from the Bible that resonates with me is the warning – “it would be easier for the camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven”. So everybody has a vision of this hump back camel and a small little needle and somebody trying to get through it which obviously is a total impossibility.

On further enquiry however one can establish that ‘the eye of the needle’ was in fact a famous street in Jerusalem which was full of shops and crowded with people every day all day.

So the question therefore was could you get a camel through this street? The answer is of course you could you just have to be careful, you had to guide, maybe you had to pull it a bit, maybe you had to encourage it. This story for me means that if we do things in the right way – acknowledging the basic premise that is THE RIGHT THING, the answer is that right and good things will follow for you. It doesn’t matter whether you are a solicitor or a property developer or a practicing Catholic, you may even get away with supporting Man Utd.