

Freedom of Speech : Christian Values Day

- 1 For UK Citizen
- 2 For Christians - Acts 5 : 12 – 42; Pilgrim's Progress at Vanity Fair (John Bunyan)

What leaps to mind when you hear the words 'free speech?'

Is it a crank shouting from a soap box at Hyde Park corner, surrounded by good natured hecklers? Incidentally there exists a small group of Christian theologians who have made it their business to debate Sunday by Sunday with the preachers of fundamentalist Islam at just that venue.

Freedom of Speech and Democracy – world of NT

Freedom of speech is a cherished Western value, and we have much to be thankful for in the UK form of government. This would be classed as a liberal democracy, but unlike the United States and most of our western European neighbours, we have a Constitutional Monarchy. Although at times we might be dissatisfied with our government, we need only to look sideways at countries under dictatorships, under military rule, or under no rule at all – suffering the disasters of anarchy or civil war – to appreciate what we actually have.

The roman empire under which the apostles and early church operated also had, surprisingly, some aspects of democracy. The culture was Greek, certainly in the eastern parts, and it was after all the ancient Greeks who invented democracy. Citizens of the empire had representation in government, and the emperor himself was in theory elected by the senate, just as a British prime minister would be elected by the majority in parliament.

Democracy means that the government of a country should represent its people, and therefore will govern on behalf of its people, and to their advantage. The crunch comes when deciding who is to be represented.

For the initiators of democracy, the little Greek city states, only a tiny fraction of their small populations were represented – the vast majority were slaves, women, children, or peasants; without power, and therefore without voice. Those who were represented – adult educated males of a certain social standing – were free to debate policy, make decisions about the security and running of the state, and choose temporary leaders from among themselves. Freedom of speech – the freedom to debate – was built into these foundations of democracy. Speech, and the arts of speech and persuasive argument, were cultivated and prized. As the gospel writer Luke wryly observes of Paul's visit to Athens, the citizens and their visitors loved nothing better than new ideas to discuss.

The romans continued at least these traditions of political argument and debate.

To be represented in the roman world, you had to qualify as a citizen of the city Rome or of an official roman colony eg, Tarsus, eg Philippi; again slaves, women, peasants, and all inhabitants of occupied territory were excluded. To be a citizen of Rome did not give you any direct political leverage (certainly nothing like a vote) but it did allow you certain rights, one of which was free speech, including teaching in public. Note that Paul could preach and teach for years at a time in different major centres in the roman world, and only fell foul of the authorities when his enemies or rivals – usually fellow Jews – rented a mob, whipped up a riot and then accused Paul falsely of seditious talk against the government and breach of the peace.

Note also by the way that religious freedom in the roman empire was almost universal. All sorts of religions, from the east and from Egypt and from Barbarian lands, were imported to Rome, had their temples and followers and might for a time become sweepingly fashionable. As long as lip service was paid to the divine status of the emperor – either in this, or a future life – A few emperors tried to reintroduce 'the traditional religion' with a return to worshipping the old Gods of Mount Olympus and to the semi-military values of the old republican Rome which had made her great :like courage, loyalty and austerity. A few emperors sought to distract from their own failures by persecuting well-defined

religious minorities like Jews or Christians. But in general, government did not care how people worshipped and what they said or taught, until that talk became effective.

Once that talk began to change people's lives, there was a new power at work: and the power of government felt threatened and reacted.

The power of Rome was based ultimately on organised force – the army. The emperor all along was he who could command the support of the legions. At times when military service was made compulsory and Christians demurred for religious reasons, the powerbase of the government was immediately threatened.

(the same thing has gone on happening throughout history of the Christian era – religious Anabaptist communities like the Mennonites were persecuted in Germany, fled to the Russian empire where they were tolerated for many years until the Russian emperor needed more conscript troops – the Mennonites and others, holding fast to the 6th commandment, had to flee or starve)

Freedom of Speech and Democracy: UK

It is only about 150 years, or arguably less, since the government of the UK resembled pretty closely the very limited idea of democracy to be found in the roman empire of the book of Acts. Government was in the hands of a very few families who had inherited or bought political power and who represented mainly their own interests. Within this restricted circle, there was free and active debate.

The huge majority of unrepresented nationals, however, depended on the pressure of “public opinion” to get any leverage on government decisions.

Public opinion was of course already a major force in the roman empire, but mainly exercised by riot and mob rule – there are good examples in Acts, like the riot in Ephesus, where the only concern of the authorities is to keep the peace, irrespective of rights or wrongs. Mass protest and riot was still a huge threat to government in the UK less than 200 years ago, and we can all think of mass protest movements in our own lifetimes – CND marches, and Make Poverty History with a quarter of a million protesters on the streets of Edinburgh, are benign examples. What has changed, and is changing rapidly, is the expression and channelling of public opinion.

Changes in media of communication: a short history.

For 1000 years in Western Europe, the church controlled the written word: that is, the word of man as well as the word of God.

Communications were hand-written; mostly only by church professionals.

The Printing press (1400s) multiplied books and bibles and enabled the Reformation

In 18th century England, news and comment was spread by Ballad-makers in the street for the illiterate, and in the coffee houses for the educated by newspapers with cartoons –often highly offensive and libellous.

In the mid-19th century, the electric telegraph made ‘instant’ news reporting possible and broadsheet newspapers took off.

Primary school education became compulsory in 1870 so by the 1900s daily newspapers were very widely read by a literate population

For the first half of the 20th century, public opinion was largely formed by these newspapers :their owners –the press ‘barons’ - had huge political power.

Increase literacy encouraged public lending libraries and cheap pocket books: oddly enough this led to some loss of freedoms as censorship laws were developed for the protection (or control) of the general population

1920s – radio: started as a public service (supposed to be independent of government) and there was only one broadcaster of news and views

WW2 : censorship ++

1950 onwards: Television quickly became universal; starting as a public service, but the advent of independent (commercial) channels meant that voice could be purchased and public opinion could be 'bought'

1960s: rise of satire in the media and general attack on authority.

1980s advent of PC = politically correct as well as personal computer

1990s rise of digitalised telecommunications: internet, then social media

content largely unregulated

YET highly controlled

Everything is recorded: word/image: everything available for criticism OUT of context

Opinions given in private may be universally viewed and commented on

We now have 24 hour News channels, and innumerable entertainment channels not just on television but available through every sort of mobile digital device to almost half the world's population, who in turn have some sort of opportunity to share and to comment on what they are receiving.

So you can be aware of bush fires in Queensland and exactly how close they are to your Australian cousins' back door and what their government is doing about it, before even your neighbour contacts you by banging on the door to say that your own garden shed is on fire .

Contemporary news and communications

Where do you get your news from nowadays ? How much do you trust them? Who owns that source of information, and what is their own agenda?

In the UK we have long been used to the idea that popular and broadsheet newspapers are politically polarised; at one time, your choice of daily newspaper immediately defined your politics. This way, you get the selection of news and the comments that you want to hear, because it reinforces your own opinions. In the USA in particular this carried forward into the multichannel television age, where viewers subscribe only to television and media channels which reflect their own opinions back to them. The media are far more powerful than ever before in shaping and controlling public opinion, and far less accountable.

The ways in which public opinion are shaped are also now far more subtle and hard to detect. We all know that if you repeat a news item or a comment often enough and to enough people, and if it is something people want to hear, then it will become accepted fact, and like an 'urban myth' or the best stories from history, like King Alfred and the cakes, will be very difficult to uproot again. We have laws to protect individuals and institutions from abuses of freedom of speech: these laws make spoken and written lies about another person, meant to damage them, into the crimes of slander and libel . But by the time such abuses come to trial, the damage is already done, and the reputation of the victim will never be repaired . How much more difficult to pursue abuse of free speech through the tangled web of modern communication, following email trails and phone messaging - the recent action brought by footballer Wayne Rooney's wife against a former friend was fascinating in its complexity and triviality. Everything is recorded, and even electronic equivalents of private conversation – by which I mean emails, and phone text messages – are retrievable and can be held up to scrutiny. So private conversation becomes less private. Because everything is recorded, politicians and churchmen and anyone in the public eye can be attacked for some remark made privately or casually or just a long time before; this remark can be taken right out of its context which might have been humorous or sardonic or just plain bad-tempered, and interrogated by the judges of what is politically and culturally correct. It is the media which appoints those judges.

A free and independent "Press" – which now means the entire giant media machine-is one of the vital freedoms which define a liberal democracy and distinguish this from a totalitarian regime that seeks to control not only the lives of their people but also their thoughts.

Even if we take no great interest in politics or history, we all know how “bad” governments seize power in a country. Even if it is a sudden takeover by the army – a military coup – the first thing that they take over is the television station and phone satellite network. Then power is consolidated by removing not only any political opponents, but also all the journalists and freelance writers, and by trying to shut down social media. Suppressing free speech and comment is key to holding on to power. Hitler did this very effectively over several years, Putin has done it more hastily to cover up a badly conducted war. In other countries like Turkey which are on the road to dictatorship, it is still possible to access news media which are not controlled by the government, like Fox news or Al-Jazeera, but these have also their own dubious bias and social media like facebook can be dangerous – the government is ‘listening in’ to your opinions.

For a nation, ‘free speech’ and independent news reporting is a vital freedom of democracy, and any attempt to limit or reduce the power of ‘the press’ must first take account of its crucial role in criticising government and holding it to account.

And yet - neither must ‘the press’ be allowed to control government entirely. Formerly this was done by channelling and polarising public opinion quite openly. Now with the undreamt of extension of media into every moment and corner of our lives – how many hours of the day are your youngsters online? – this forming of opinion is far more subtle but far more effective.

Where are these opinion makers who are telling us what we can and can’t say? Who tells us what to aspire to? Who tells the kids what they really want out of life and what sort of people they want to be? Who is that takes a value judgment - ‘that sort of behaviour is wrong’ - and twists it into an attack on an individual or group, a ‘hate crime’ punishable either by law or by a shower of hostile comment on social media. Perhaps death by twitter can be said to have replaced the old Jewish punishment of stoning – for a young person, this can be equally devastating. There is no trial, no opportunity to speak for the defence.

In the UK, media explosion has not had the effect of increasing government control over our thoughts and opinions (as in a totalitarian country) - if anything, our government (which is after all elected and representative of our interests), is more tightly scrutinised and held to account and often hampered in its proper business by those who really control the media, who are not elected, not accountable, and often unknown. Their philosophy is blatantly post-modern: there is no truth, no absolutes, and every opinion is equally valid. Just as there is no absolute good, there is also nothing really bad, except intolerance (and possibly paedophilia). When applied to people who hold to clear values for religious reasons, the word ‘intolerance’ is replaced by ‘bigotry’ and the believer who gives voice to his values becomes a ‘bigot’. There need be no direct criticism on the part of the believer, but affirming clear values is immediately taken as condemning the non-values of the prevailing culture, and gives great offence. The believer, now labelled ‘bigot’ is under attack by all the considerable forces of the media, sometimes backed up by appeal to the law of the land. Tolerance, essentially a Christian virtue, is being used as a weapon to beat up believers. In fact, it is the believer who has been denied freedom of speech. There are many recent prominent examples of this, often the Christian institute has flagged up and supported these victims.

This is the beginnings of persecution, and only thinly disguised.

Now as Christians, we know that persecution will come – Jesus plainly told us so, and Paul reinforced. What makes it so hard in our generation is that we live in a country which had within living memory, a majority Christian population with a majority national church and at least nominally Christian values enshrined in our laws. These values included justice, helping others, caring for the vulnerable, respect for authority, non-aggression, and tolerance.

Shifts away from these values are destroying the Christian basis of our society, which is very upsetting, particularly for those who have invested in younger generations that will be living in the UK of the future. It is also these very same values which are being used to chop at the Christian roots of our society.

So, we are losing freedom of speech in matters of faith.

If we just talk to ourselves within our own buildings and to our own dwindling congregations, we can say what we like. It's like the orthodox church of old women within communist Russia which threatens no one. And if we street preach to derelicts in the market place that is probably ok too. What will count in the future, is a crunch refusal to condone and incorporate the world's ways into the church itself. The church is being pushed into the defensive, but it was always going to happen.

UK society has many endearing aspects not to be found in all of our western liberal neighbours – a greater emphasis on care for the vulnerable and on justice for all. We are no longer a rich nation by European standards but we give more to charity per person than any other. The French may well be bemused by our relatively generous attitude to asylum seekers. The National Health Service was not a political accident but the outcome of years of reforming and charitable work. If you look closely, many of the most important reforms which have made life so much better for all of the UK population were pushed through parliament by Christians, and many of the original charities helping the poorest and weakest were founded by Christians – those Christians who could not turn a blind eye to the rejects and victims of their society. We still benefit from their dedication and can be proud of their work, in shaping UK society nearer to a Christian model, but in their lifetimes they had to persevere against often violent opposition and often personal persecution. Working to bring in the kingdom of heaven through engaging with the world – as Jesus did – brings persecution and trouble 'as the sparks fly upwards'. Almost always, the toes of some person in authority are inadvertently stepped on and the owner protests. The protests can be violent, like brewers against the temperance movement. But for the uniquely Christian tenor of UK society, we owe a great debt to those Christians and their supporters who persevered. Now the great fund of good will that still disposes British people to give generously and to multiply charities of all sorts is being carefully peeled away from every religious connection or root. It's acknowledged as very good to help your neighbours, especially if that neighbour is wounded or struggling, but there must be no mention of the one who first said 'Love your neighbour as yourself' or who first told the story of the Good Samaritan. The work of the NHS is basically non-profit making care of the sick, and present day doctors are urged to treat and cherish the 'whole' patient – not just the body: this is holistic medicine. Yet the same doctors are not permitted to pray with or for their patients, and will run into real trouble with the medical authorities if they do so, perhaps ending their careers. The Christian basis for essentially Christian charitable institutions has been gradually stripped away leaving only a façade.

This is particularly hard to bear in a country with a former Christian majority. Christians are now definitely a minority, and they have lost their voice, or it has been suppressed. This is not true of other minorities, which certainly as far as the media is concerned are in the ascendant, with massive over-compensation for years of not being heard. There is some justice in this turnabout: minorities in any country will be exploited or neglected if they have no access to power and no voice, and to change the emphasis usually means a big upheaval and leaning too far in the opposite direction. If you have been formerly among the majority with some idea of 'owning' your country, this process will be very uncomfortable. Giving a voice to groups previously ignored, may mean giving less attention and respect to the group that before was dominant. This feels like the freedom of speech of the former majority is being curtailed. In line with this, freedom of speech for Christians, formerly in the majority, is being selectively curtailed where other religions are not so restricted: you are free to express any religious opinion in public so long as it is not overtly Christian. (Your opinions in private may also land you in trouble if your emails and social postings are followed.)

2. For Christians

"At the dinner table, you can talk about anything you like – except politics and religion."

If committed or even nominal Christians are now a minority in the UK, this is bad for the UK but it is not necessarily bad for the Church of Christ.

Committed followers of Christ are always going to be in the minority, in any country and in any age – we are told “many are called, but few are chosen”. Even when our Lord was on earth and teaching and healing huge crowds, only a small minority followed him as that larger band of disciples outside the inner circle of the twelve, and even many of those turned back.

Whenever the church has become rich, powerful and an established majority force in society, it has run off the rails and into serious trouble. When the church is poor, persecuted, outcast and hunted – it grows. The church in Iran, the church in Madagascar, the underground church in China in the cultural revolution –there are so many examples. The early church spread by diaspora in the persecution following the martyrdom of Stephen.

We are told, in no uncertain terms, by Jesus himself, by Paul, by other apostles, to prepare for persecution because this will follow for the church of Christ: but we will be given strength, even a voice (of the Spirit) when allowed to speak.

Peter in Acts 5 : read vv 12 - 42

In Acts 5, the apostles led by Peter are preaching in the temple court when they are arrested by the Jewish authorities and imprisoned without charge; they will shortly be released by an angel, and go straight back to preaching where they left off.

Why did the authorities – the high Jewish council who control the temple and the Jewish law- decide to silence them? It was not really the content of what the apostles were teaching, although insisting on Jesus’ resurrection from the dead must have really annoyed the ruling Sadducee party. It was the success of the apostles’ work and the crowds which were drawn to them as a result. The apostles were not only speaking powerfully, they were performing miracles, healing sick people and casting out demons just as their Lord had done and had told them to do and had sent the Holy Spirit to enable them to do (verse 12). Not words, but action and power in demonstrating the Kingdom of Heaven got the apostles into this early trouble.

To show a better way is to imply criticism of things as they actually are, and this will inevitably bring violent opposition from those in charge who like things as they actually are, because they want at all costs to stay in charge and on top.

As soon as they are miraculously freed, the apostles go straight back to preaching and are arrested again (but discretely because they now have crowd protection) and this time brought to trial before the Jewish council.

The charge: they have been again teaching in the name of Jesus when this had been strictly forbidden, also they are trying to blame the Jewish authorities for his death.

Peter’s defence: (v. 29 ,NLT) “We must obey God rather than any human authority”.

He then takes this God-given opportunity to deliver the essential gospel in 3 verses to the whole assembled Jewish council. Advised by Gamaliel to go softly, the council have the apostles beaten and then again strictly forbid them to preach in the name of Jesus. The apostles of course immediately return to the temple court and continue to do just that, day in day out, rejoicing that they have suffered for Jesus.

Points for thought : (Acts 5)

1. It is not so much what the apostles are saying but what they are doing- bringing the Kingdom of Heaven near- which gets them into trouble with the Jewish authorities, who then try to silence them.
2. Peter has no doubt at all where his true loyalties lie, and whom he must obey.
3. His trust is honoured by God, who by sending just one angel to the rescue shows his power to be far greater than anything the Jewish authorities can muster.

4. The apparent disaster of their arrest turns out to be a unique chance to preach the full gospel message at the very heart of Jewish political power, right inside the enemy camp.
(cf. Acts 6,7:the trial of Stephen; Acts 25, 26: the trial of Paul before Agrippa)
5. Preaching the gospel is what they have been told to do, and opposition - even from powerful worldly authorities - is irrelevant . Free speech or no free speech.
Yet the apostles are Jews, and have all been brought up from childhood to respect and obey their religious leaders.

In Pilgrim's Progress, by John Bunyan,

The pilgrim Christian and his travelling companion Faithful survive various dangers on their way to the Celestial City, and arrive at the town of Vanity Fair. This is a bustling commercial centre, full of market stalls and side shows; it could be any great merchant city of any age – Babylon, Rome, London – or even today's internet trading empire with infinitely accessible 24 hour online shopping, downloadable films and shows and games and gambling. The pilgrim's narrow path, which they must stick to, goes right through the middle of Vanity Fair: by which Bunyan means, the Christian has to live and work in The World, although he does not belong to it but is only passing through. Vanity Fair is not a particularly wicked place, unlike the City of Destruction where Christian grew up, it is just The World. Neither of the pilgrims offers to get up on that soapbox and do a bit of gospel street preaching for the benefit of the inhabitants; they just want to pass through as quickly and quietly as possible, and hurry on their way to the celestial city. The citizens of Vanity Fair have other ideas. They are keen to engage the interest of the travellers, the stallholders want to persuade them to look and buy, the entertainment booth-keepers try to entice them in. Christian and Faithful are just not interested, and this does not go down well with the Vanity Fairians. Just like the silversmiths of Ephesus, they are not going to make any money out of these strangers, and worse still, they take their refusal to play as a direct criticism. The pilgrims, by not joining in with the activities and preoccupations of vanity fair, have given great offence. So a bit of a riot brews, and the governor of the city – representing the authorities, but a servant of the devil - is brought down to deal with the disrespectful strangers. They are beaten and put in the stocks. When asked to explain himself, Faithful then gives his testimony. Up until this point he has not commented or criticised, but now he gives it to them straight and with both barrels. His true and fearless confession of the Lordship of Christ seals his fate – Faithful is martyred (and goes straight to the celestial city).

It is not anything which Faithful says or does that gets him into trouble in Vanity Fair. It is what he does not do. He refuses to engage with the attractive but pointless activities of Vanity Fair – the getting and the spending and the having a bit of fun. His opting out is taken as criticism. This cannot be tolerated by The World. He must die.

Points for thought: (Vanity Fair)

- 1 Such a busy town, thronged with people, would have given the pilgrims a great opportunity to pass on the warning and message which they had received from Evangelist at the beginning of their journey. Should they have taken this chance to preach the gospel to the unheeding souls in Vanity Fair?
- 2 The townspeople were preoccupied with buying and selling and no doubt, if the pilgrims had looked closely, with sharp practice and fraud and false weights. Should the pilgrims have rebuked them for unfair practices and theft?
- 3 What annoyed the townspeople was that the pilgrims refused to share their preoccupations – they wouldn't buy, they wouldn't even look at what was for sale, they didn't want to be entertained. This was taken as unvoiced criticism and the people were offended. What does

this say to us today? Is the church still following the advice of the apostle Paul : “be not conformable to the world”.

- 4 The church of Christ has a duty to speak out against changes in society which appear to be in conflict with God’s law. Discuss.
(the right of free speech is involved)
- 5 The church of Christ has a duty not to join in and not to approve changes in society which appear to be in conflict with God’s law . Should the church ‘ move with the times’ or stay remote? Discuss.

Points for general discussion

- 1 As Christians, we can still talk as much as we like in public but we have to be more and more careful what we actually say.
- 2 Any comments on the world in general, and British society in particular, will be carefully scrutinized and any comments perceived as adverse criticism will not be tolerated.
- 3 Who does this scrutiny? Who decides what is acceptable comment? What is their agenda?
- 4 Talk about Jesus Christ and his kingdom will be tolerated only as long as it is considered irrelevant to the real world – just a story. Christians can talk to each other in-house and write books for each other, but don’t involve outsiders.
- 5 Erosions of free speech in the UK are not a good thing for the UK (and especially not for the younger generations who have grown up with a powerful online media and are less aware of its role in forming their thoughts and opinions). Although appearing to be “liberal” such tight and eccentric and anonymous control of public opinion threatens to undermine democracy, which rests on a pillar of free speech.
But loss of freedom of speech may in the long run be a good thing for the church. Discuss.
6. Peter’s reply to the Sanhedrin’s ban on his teaching was clear and unequivocal:
“we must obey God rather than any human authority”. (Acts 5:29)
Yet Paul’s teaching about our proper attitude to political authorities is equally clear and unequivocal:
“the authorities are God’s servants, sent for your good” and we must obey them.
How do we reconcile these positions in speaking up for Jesus? This was the dilemma for the Confessing church that evolved under pressure in Hitler’s Germany – when the conduct demanded by secular authority deviated so profoundly from the law of God.
There are already plenty of examples in the UK where secular authorities forbid the mention or teaching of the gospel method. Where do we stand?
7. Is free speech as a political liberty necessary for spreading the gospel? Paul appreciated the Roman authorities and taught the young church to respect Roman authority – their role was after all to keep the peace (including suppressing riots!) and to defend the empire against the barbarian hordes always hammering at the frontiers, so that ordinary people could lead reasonably peaceful lives. In this orderly world with good communications, the gospel could be taught and spread with some ease.
8.
Does the absence of free speech as a political liberty mean that those countries are closed to the gospel? (think of the countries without free speech – most of these regimes are known to persecute Christians)
Romans 10:14: how can they hear about Him unless someone tells them?
9. Does free speech as a political liberty encourage church growth?
10. Does persecution for preaching the gospel encourage church growth?

11. What is the connection between persecution and revival?

12. Is public verbal declaration of faith mandatory for a Christian?
by openly declaring your faith that you are saved"

Romans 10:10 "it is

13. In the passage from Acts, the apostles fall foul of the authorities because of what they are doing – rather than what they are saying

In the passage from Bunyan, the pilgrims fall foul of the crowd, then the authorities, because of something they are NOT doing – but not because of anything they have said.

In both cases, the clash with authority puts them in a place where they can deliver the full message of truth to the most important and powerful people around.

In both these cases, political freedom of speech is irrelevant.

Discuss!

PS Bunyan wrote PP during 12 year's imprisonment for refusing to stop preaching the gospel in public