

Does faith have the right to speak in the public square?

Series intro

Although Lent doesn't formally start until Wednesday, we're today launching a series of sermons for Lent on the general theme of 'Faith in the public square'.

There are only just over 11 weeks until a General Election. The fog of distortion, misinformation, spin and name-calling is descending rapidly - but there are really critical issues that deserve serious and honest open debate. Debate in what today is called 'the public square'.

So I want to start by asking if faith has the right to take part in that debate, or whether it should be heard only in churches (or mosques or temples) or behind the closed doors of our homes. And if faith does have that right - what should it be saying - and doing?

To answer those questions I'm going to take you on a brief journey to three different 'public squares' in two different eras.

Athens, the Agora - late summer 50AD

The first is the Agora - the market place in Athens. Paul, on his second great missionary journey, finds himself in Athens a bit earlier than he intended. Now he's waiting for his travelling companions, Silas and Timothy, to catch up with him.

Athens was then the centre of the world for intellectual debate. So Paul - intelligent, educated, curious - goes sightseeing, and he is horrified by the huge number of altars to the wide array of gods that the Greeks worshipped. When he spots a sort of 'catch all' altar dedicated to 'the Unknown God' he sees it as an opportunity to proclaim Jesus as the revelation of that god unknown to the Athenians - but the one true God, who he worships. He's brought before the Court of Areopagus, one of the most venerable institutions in Athens - situated in one of the stoa alongside the marketplace - to explain his message - and he relishes the opportunity to preach the gospel.

Paul didn't need to ask himself whether he had the right to speak. He considered that he had no choice. God had entrusted to him the task of spreading a message of vital importance to all peoples - the good news about Jesus. The reconciliation of man with God. Imprisonment, shipwrecks, earthquakes, beatings - none of them would stop him - because nothing in the world could be of greater significance.

So there's our first answer. Christ did not teach in private, he spoke to the people everywhere - in synagogues, at the lakeside, beside a well, up in the hills. Paul took that public message out to the wider world. We should have the confidence to continue that work, although our opportunities to do so are unlikely to include speaking to the masses. The message is often spread by our lives more readily than by our words. You may argue that faith proclaiming its own right to be heard is not a valid justification - so a complementary answer is that faith is already firmly in the public square - and can't be removed. Around the world many countries can trace very easily the impact that religious faith - and I don't just mean Christianity - has had in the formation of their society, their institutions, their laws, their relationships with other countries. Faith was not, and is not, a minority interest. People of no faith in this country benefit from living in a society formed largely on principles built out of the Christian faith - liberty, care for those in need, respect for all other people, and so on.

A letter in the Telegraph early this month was signed by a bishop, a senior rabbi and the Secretary General of the Muslim Council - and it said that 'religious literacy is essential to the diversity we treasure in Britain - and an antidote to the extremism and intolerance that threaten it'. Promoting religious literacy is our task - all of us.

Paris, Place de la Republique - 11 Jan 2015

Our second stop is in Paris - just five weeks ago - in the Place de la Republique. I'm sure that I don't need to remind you of the hundreds of thousands of people who crowded into that square carrying 'Je suis Charlie' placards, following the massacre of the cartoonists at Charlie Hebdo.

I had the good fortune last month to listen to a talk given by Jean Vanier, who founded a movement called L'Arche which creates communities - now 143 of them in 35 countries - in which people with and without learning difficulties live side by side. L'Arche describes itself as 'Working together for a world where all belong'. On the flyer I've given you is the address of a website, Together for the Common Good, where you can see and hear his inspirational talk.

Vanier said that he could not associate himself with the 'Je suis Charlie' slogan. He totally condemned the violence of the men who carried out the attack. He recognized the enormous importance of free speech. But he could not agree with the wilful and

aggressive disrespect of other people, of their faith and their sensibilities that the magazine had shown.

In chapter 9 of his first letter to the church in Corinth Paul wrote: 'I am free and own no master; but I have made myself everyone's servant, to win over as many as possible'. Christianity should be the voice of reconciliation in the public square. The founder of Christianity was a carpenter who made it very clear that his role was to serve - to serve not just those close to him, not even just those of his own race, but everyone everywhere. That gives us a unique perspective, if one that can be hard to live up to. Today I guess that many - even most - people think of religion as potentially lethally divisive - look at the cartoon on the flyer. Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, Hindus and Moslems in India, Sunni and Shi'a Moslems across the whole of the Middle East. Despite the troubles in Northern Ireland, Christianity's task is to unite people, to reconcile differences.

Jean Vanier told of a visit he made to one of the L'Arche communities in Santiago, Chile. In the car, on the way in from the airport, his local colleague pointed to one side of the road, which was all big houses with elaborate security, and said 'That's where all the rich people live' - then he pointed to the other side, where there were shacks and hovels, and said 'And there are the homes of the poor. No one crosses this road.'

I read recently the comment that 'The objective of (so called) Islamic State is to identify fractures within European society and to strike at them, in order to pit people against each other'. In the run up to the General Election we should be demanding from our politicians policies that bring people together, that encourage respect, that unite communities, that share wealth fairly without undermining the work of those who create it, that are honest. At the moment that's not the tone that I hear in the early skirmishes.

Washington Mall, USA - 28 August 1963

Our final stop is in Washington. It's the 28th of August 1963. This isn't really a public square - it's the two mile long National Mall that leads from the Lincoln Memorial up to the Capitol building. On this day there are a quarter of a million people crammed into the Mall because the March for Jobs and Freedom has reached its destination. Martin

Luther King is giving his famous 'I have a dream' speech. America is being changed - but at what cost to Martin Luther King.

Christianity may sometimes seem to follow too much the humility of Christ - but we see in St Paul, in Wilberforce fighting to abolish slavery, in Martin Luther King, in Jean Vanier, in ordinary people in all ages who have achieved extraordinary things, both the challenge that Christ's gospel presents and the power that it gives to those who accept that challenge.

James, in his epistle, writes 'What good is it, my friends, for someone to say he has faith when his actions do nothing to show it? Faith, if it does not lead to action, is a lifeless thing' (2.14, 17).

Did you see the recent TV coverage of the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz? A survivor, Roman Kent, now aged over 90, finished his short speech with the words 'You should never be a bystander'. I found those words incredibly powerful, particularly in today's fractious and divided world, which is proving to us daily that man's ability and desire to inflict pain and death on others - even to exterminate entire peoples - has not changed in the years since the Nazi Reich.

Summary

So I believe very strongly that true faith - as distinct from any fundamentalist distortion of faith, which desperately needs to be countered - has a duty given by God - to be exercised for the common good - to be heard in the public square. We stay silent at our peril.

I believe that the vital role for Christians today is to promote respect, to welcome diversity, to accept the faiths of others when they are expressed in peaceful ways, to challenge division, to extend mutual understanding, to argue for the sharing of wealth. That is something that we can all do, through our daily interactions with all sorts of people, from our boss to our spouse and children to the Big Issue seller. That is the yardstick by which we should measure our politicians as they seek our votes in May.