

'Charlie Hebdo & Freedom of Speech'

1 Samuel 3:1-20 Revelation 5:1-10 John 1:43-51

just before Christmas finally disappears over the horizon, here are a couple of my presents: a Leaning Tower of Pisa jigsaw puzzle (easier than it looks) and this book: 'What If? *Serious Scientific Answers to Absurd Hypothetical Questions*'

here are some questions that tickled my fancy: what if the sun suddenly switched off? what if everyone on earth stood close together and all jumped in the air at once? how long could a nuclear submarine last in space? how many Lego bricks would it take to build a bridge from London to New York? if you want to know the answers, get hold of the the book!

perhaps someone should make a similar book of questions that vicars get asked; some are of the 'absurd' variety, 'do you wear your dog-collar in bed?' (No!); more often, they are serious heart-searching, 'I think God is speaking to me – am I going mad?' (also No, most probably!)

recent events in Paris have raised serious questions about freedom and responsibility, in a way that's different from other attacks; when schoolchildren in Pakistan are murdered, there is a clear sense of outrage; when a military installation is bombed, we react with determination to resist force with force – the moral lines seem quite clear

but there is some ambivalence about the attack on the Charlie Hebdo staff; did they 'bring it on themselves' by publishing scurrilous cartoons of Mohammed, or do they have a right to say what they like without fear of reprisals? are there proper limits to 'free speech'?

I have looked at some Charlie Hebdo material online, and most of it, to my taste, is pretty disgusting, including things aimed at the Christian faith; I might not be armed with a Kalashnikov, but do I think there's a point at which I would say, 'stop'? or should we add our voices to the protesters and chant, 'Je suis Charlie' in church today?

some contradictory quotes on the subject – first, Boris Johnson: 'you may be offended by what they have done, but you should defend their right to publish'

President of Muslim Association of Britain: 'causing offence just for the purpose of offending is not free speech'

and a letter in the Church Times that captures my ambivalence on this: 'I am against all extremism, terrorism, violence and killing, especially in the name of God; I am for respecting and trying to understand the faith of others; I am for the marginalised, the ethnic minority and the outcast; am I *Charlie*'?

as Christians we naturally look for answers to such questions in the teaching of Jesus; on the other hand, we must also beware of the danger of misusing the Bible, just as some might say the Koran has been misused, to justify our own/society's prejudices or actions

let's step back for a moment to get some perspective from our readings, which in this Epiphany season are about God's revelation in Jesus

the opening chapters of 1 Samuel are set in a context of chaos and confusion; the final words of Judges are, 'in those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit'

here in chapter 3 we are told, 'the word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread'; and that lack of communication with God is symbolised by the blindness of Eli the priest, who has failed to restrain the wickedness of his two sons (chapter 2 for details)

young Samuel by contrast is an innocent, a blank sheet; at the start, 'he did not yet know the Lord'; but by the end he is recognised throughout Israel as 'a trustworthy prophet'

we probably feel ourselves to be in a world like theirs, where 'everyone does as they see fit', and evil flourishes without restraint; where will we look for a reliable 'word of the Lord' for our times? are there prophets and leaders to look up to and seek guidance from? or are we to find the way by the light of our own understanding?

jump forward now to John's vision of heaven in Revelation 5 and his distress over the scroll that no one can open; but he is reassured, 'Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll'; so it's Jesus who is the key, he's the one to make sense of scripture, and reveal the truth to us

but this victorious 'lion of the tribe of Judah' is also 'a lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered', who has 'ransomed by his blood, saints from every tribe, language, people and nation'; so when we look for answers to these hard questions, it is that crucified Jesus whom we must have in view

John 1 tells of the disciples' first meetings with Jesus, starting with Andrew and another disciple, probably John himself, and then Simon Peter; now Jesus calls Philip, who fetches Nathanael to meet him

in all these encounters there seems to be something about Jesus that attracts and convinces these men, so that he can say to Philip, 'follow me', and he does so; he can say just a few words to Nathanael and he replies, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!'

here again we find presented to us the one around whom all our attempts to answer those tricky questions must revolve; let's return ...

the killings at Charlie Hebdo have been described as an attack on 'democracy, free speech and the rule of law'; those are things that we value, of course, but I think we need to see that none of them unequivocally 'good things', for all can be twisted into evil forms

democracy can become effectively mob rule, even when exercised via a ballot box, where the majority are given leave to trample over weaker and more vulnerable minorities; Jesus teaches us rather to put the interests of others first, even at the cost of our own

free speech can become licence to mock, abuse, denigrate, or insult those who differ from us; Jesus teaches us the primacy of love, and that our words, and our thoughts too, must always express that love

even the rule of law can be perverted to the ends of the rich and powerful; Jesus himself stood for a higher allegiance, to God's kingdom rather than that of human beings, and he paid the price for that stand

I think this is how it seems to many Muslims, who see our 'western' way of life as, at least potentially, corrupt and ungodly; do we have something to learn from them? are there times when we should place our faith in Jesus above those other values?

though we may not express it with violence, we too have a higher allegiance than to the secular structures and values of our society; under the right circumstances that allegiance might lead us to break the law too – plenty of Christians, both past and present, have had to face that dilemma

insisting on our 'freedom', to say what we like, regardless of the cost to others, is a form of selfishness, even idolatry, which is the opposite of the way of Jesus; expressions of hatred or contempt for others cannot be the love of Christ; Jesus himself even calls this 'murdering our brother in our heart'; much of the Charlie Hebdo material is like that

on the other hand, last week's edition showed a tearful Mohammed, holding a 'Je suis Charlie' placard, to indicate his identification with the issue of free speech; but the caption reads, 'tout est pardonne', 'all is forgiven'!

the editor is quoted as saying, 'we cannot feel any hate for the terrorists who killed our colleagues ... we feel that we have to forgive what happened'; what an example from such an overtly atheistic, anti-religious publication, to want to say, 'all is forgiven'

so, no, this is not a straightforward issue, it needs a lot of wisdom!

I was drawn to words of Paul in Galatians 5:13, where he warns against the abuse of our 'freedom', for love must always come first; he writes, 'you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another'

real freedom, the freedom that Christ gives us, is not freedom for 'self-expression', but the freedom to serve – to serve God, and to serve others, in love; that is the example that Jesus sets us, and that we need to follow