

What can you say? What are the limits to free speech? The horrific events of January 7, 8 and 9 in Paris underline the dangers of saying what we say, being who we are (if, in this case, you happened to be Jewish and visiting a supermarket, or a police man or woman and protecting the public, or a cartoonist and journalist taking a dig).

Let me first, as a bit of a coward, salute those who do speak out. We owe them a debt of gratitude. Journalists, for all that we complain about invasions of privacy, (rightly sometimes), are often, literally, in the firing line. In recent times journalists have been killed, in many countries, for doing what they do - trying, and often succeeding, to tell the story. In many places there are journalists in prison or exile because of words they have published, or simply because the powerful want to silence them.

Why is this? Surely it is because those who seek to rule without opposition know that words are indeed 'more powerful than the sword.'

So here is the first reason why we need people to speak freely. This is so that the vulnerable may be heard, the powerful may be held to account, and the truth will be judged in open debate.

Some will then say: 'But you must not publish offensive material.' This is more complex. Most people will applaud a journalist who speaks out against injustice. However, fewer might support that journalist if they wrote something that many believe to be offensive.

You can see the difficulty. A politician's private life - is that fair game? You can see how it might be, if we believed that what went on affected his or her judgment. Some countries are much more intrusive into private lives and others are more indulgent of foibles. However, one of the most difficult problems in governance is corruption. How often have we heard that politicians are paid to make laws which suit the briber? For good governance we need less corruption. For politicians with integrity we need to know that they are not subject to blackmail.

Or take another instance: extreme violence or explicitly sexual material. We may wish to ban the publication of horrific or pornographic images. But often, in such cases, the prior question needs to be asked: 'What illegal or damaging action is being carried out on another human being?' To stop the action we need to hear, however offensive, the story. Offensive images saturate the internet, and we don't even have to go far to search for them. We may wish to take steps to prevent material being seen by children. Fine, and this can be done in a number of ways.

But what about blasphemy? The more I think about it, the more difficult I find it to approve of a law against this. In the United Kingdom we abolished the law only in 2008 and replaced it with the law against 'incitement to racial and religious hatred'. The reason a law against blasphemy is problematic, in my view, is because in banning what may appear to be blasphemous to one group you may inadvertently curtail the freedom to unmask hypocrisy, or dangerous half truths. The bottom line is that, the foundation of all being, whom we name as God, can defend Godself. What I believe about God may appear to be blasphemous to another Christian. I don't think any of us should be banned **by law** from expressing our doubts, our struggle to describe the indescribable. This doesn't mean that we should gratuitously offend. Let's take a few examples.

One of the very special characteristics of the Jewish faith is the belief that it is wrong for a Jew to speak the name of God. So, in the Hebrew language, which writes consonants and

then usually adds little marks for vowels - but sometimes doesn't - the name of God is written: YHWH. But when a Jew reads scripture, he or she reads aloud 'Adonai' meaning 'The Lord'. Which is why, in most of our Bibles, in a gesture of respect to our Jewish friends, we read THE LORD, wherever in Hebrew YHWH is written. (In some versions the vowels of Adonai are conflated with the consonants of YHWH and so we hear Jehovah). Not to utter the word YHWH is a matter of respect and honour to friends, rather than of law.

It is interesting to reflect that a primary reason Jesus was put to death was for the sin of blasphemy, for apparently claiming the title Son of God, and of declaring the forgiveness of sins which was regarded as only being something God does. As Christians, therefore, we pledge our allegiance to a blasphemer. Yet, of course, what Jesus proclaimed was a new kind of relationship and a new kind of understanding of what God is like. For Christians, therefore, not to forgive sins or to heal, because one interpretation of the law says so, is a kind of blasphemy against the true nature of God. To my mind, the greatest blasphemy against God is cruelty towards anyone made 'in the image of God', that is, one of my fellow human beings. (And there are laws against that, thank God.)

So, in conclusion, there are two particular things I want to say.

Firstly, I am personally very grateful for those who are courageous enough to speak the truth, even to poke fun, especially when it unmasks hypocrisy and corruption.

Secondly, in respect to my friends I will make a judgment as to what I say, what I depict, in order not to cause unnecessary offence. But I don't believe the law should tell me what to do in these instances.

Lent begins this month. One of the things that we might spend some time thinking about is how to give voice to the voiceless, and how to speak the truth in love.

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