

Warwick Methodist Church
Keeping in Contact During Covid-19
Number 22 – 7th July 2020

Dear Friends,

"It's great to be free to have fun" – *woman visiting a pub in England last Saturday.*

"I'm free, and I want to live free" – *man in the US State of Texas, explaining why he was not wearing a face covering at a public event, despite it being mandatory to do so.*

"For 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. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'" - *Romans 5:13-14*

Freedom is a precious thing to most of us. Freedom of conscience, freedom of speech, freedom of association with whomever we want, the freedom to travel, to seek to change our work or home or social arrangements. I think it is fair to say that the majority of us take these freedoms for granted – we assume they are our right, will always be there, and are therefore outraged if someone appears to be trying to deny them to us. Recent history demonstrates that many of these freedoms could be and were taken away from us, temporarily, for the greater good. Most of the population have accepted this as a necessary evil, and largely gone along with it. We accept the withdrawal of these freedoms on the assumption that they will eventually be returned.

There are certain of our fellow citizens, however, who have consistently disobeyed the regulations. The reasons are no doubt varied; one strand goes like this: the government has **no right** to force me to stay home/close my business/not hug my grandchildren/wear a mask. This attitude seems frequently to travel with a cluster of others, including that the pandemic is a myth, or at least overexaggerated, or a plot by the government, or some shady international organisation, to take over the world, force us all to be microchipped and then control our actions and our lives. One particular version from the US claimed that masks take a person's breath, the breath which God put into them, and that to wear a mask and force others to do the same was therefore to defy God.

Now, if you happen to agree with any of those sentiments, then you have freedom of conscience. In the UK at least, no action will be taken against you for believing any of those (in my opinion ridiculous) things, nor indeed for saying them. If however your belief resulted in violent action, such as setting fire to a mask factory, then you would have

broken the law, and would suffer the consequences. Again, if you disagree with government policies, you are free to say so as strongly as you like, so long as you do not stray over into inciting hatred or violence. In that, you are more fortunate than the inhabitants of many countries, who live in fear of a visit from the secret police if they are seen to criticise those in power.

When the apostle Paul writes about freedom, he does so in the context of a debate about whether Jews who have accepted Christ are still bound by the Jewish law, and whether Gentiles who have accepted him ought to come under it. He is quite clear – No, those six hundred plus regulations about food and clothing and ritual washing and many other things are swept away in Christ. We are free from them. However, with freedom, comes responsibility.

Many of those rules were about protecting the vulnerable from being taken advantage of by the strong. For example, if you caused injury to your neighbour or damage to their property, then the law set out what you had to do by way of restitution. In Christ, that law is set aside – does that mean, then, that if you harm your neighbour, that you can simply walk away? Of course not – the law of love, which supersedes all the detailed laws of the Old Testament, demands that you make good the damage that you have done. Indeed, it demands that you do everything that is reasonable to avoid harming your neighbour in the first place.

And so it is with us. The law of the land is now restoring to us many of the freedoms it had temporarily removed; we have a responsibility to use them wisely, to protect the wellbeing of ourselves, our families and our neighbours. As Christians, we also have a responsibility to care for the wider community, within the boundaries of our ability.

Lockdown has caused me to reflect on the many freedoms I normally have, and to gain at least some insight into what life is like for those who do not have the freedoms which I have enjoyed until recently. People's lives are curtailed by all kinds of things – health, poverty, politics and warfare, to name just a few. How do I use my freedom to work for justice – so that the freedoms I take for granted can be more widely shared?

Keep safe; keep caring; keep praying.
Barbara

PS – I will be on holiday week beginning 13th July (though we're not going anywhere!), so next week's letter will come from Graeme

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