

St Martins C3 – August 22, 2021

Responding to proposed Hate Speech laws

Sermon Summary:

Our government never wants to see a repeat of the mosque shooting of March 15, 2019, so, in the wake of this tragedy, the current government has changed our gun laws and is now proposing hate speech laws. The thinking behind the proposed hate speech laws is that they will empower the police to act sooner and apprehend and prosecute those who are inciting hate before they put their words into action.

On the surface there is nothing obviously wrong with what is proposed. God doesn't want a society where people are inciting hatred or violence towards anyone. However, it raises the wider issue of how free are we as NZ citizens to express our views in our own country. We may not *intend* our speech to be hate speech, but what if it is *interpreted* as hate speech?

Two concerns that many have identified in the proposed laws are:

- 1) The word "Hate" is not clearly defined.
- 2) Who determines when someone is speaking hate?

Proposed law changes, like Hate Speech and Conversion Therapy highlight the fact that recent NZ governments are adopting a liberal stance that is increasingly coming into conflict with traditional Christian values. So, how do we share the gospel in a culture that may persecute us for what we believe?

Read: Acts 26

1) God revealed to Paul that it was wrong to persecute people who think differently to you.

Christians are not in the majority in NZ, so this is unlikely to happen, however, even if we did have the opportunity to assert our beliefs over others and persecute those who thought differently, it would be wrong to do so. Even making general judgements about other groups who think differently to you isn't helpful. Focus rather on the merits or otherwise of the issue at hand rather than the person or group that are holding a stand on the issue.

2) The Gospel is the most important revelation God has given us and everyone should have the opportunity to respond to it.

Like Paul, we need to take every opportunity we can to share the gospel, with grace and wisdom. (1 Peter 2:15) We need to sensitively and appropriately share the gospel with others.

3) We need to promote freedom of expression and choice.

The gospel spread because there was a respect for sharing ideas and debate. – Paul made the most of that and so should we. We have to hold on to our right to freedom of speech in NZ, so that everyone has the freedom to choose Christ for themselves.

What we can do:

- Pray for freedom of speech in NZ to continue.
- Make submissions when there is the opportunity.
- Share the Gospel with others.
- Don't attack or condemn groups of people who think differently to you. Rather, seek to engage them in a healthy debate focussing on the issue.

Suggested Discussion Questions:

Have you read the proposed Hate Speech Law changes and what in your opinion are the pros and cons of the changes?

In what ways could Christians get involved with issues like this?

When the Apostle Paul is looking back on his life, he regrets persecuting those who disagreed with him. Why does he now hold that view?

Are there groups who you have previously criticized that you now regret doing so?

What can help us focus on the issue, rather than the group or person who is advocating for a certain position?

In what ways can we promote or model freedom of expression and healthy debate on various issues?

What might be an example of using the opportunity when discussing a particular issue to also present the gospel?

Monday's Devotion – Be Informed

Acts 26: 26-27

The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.'

This week we exploring what we can learn from the conversation between King Agrippa and Paul as we look at it in a little more detail.

The verse above and others like it shows that Paul had done his homework. He had researched what King Agrippa was likely to be interested in, what his likely opinion might be and where there might be common ground to start the discussion.

From Paul's other writings we learn that Paul is well studied in Judaism, but also in the spiritual and political beliefs of Greek and Roman society.

It is good to do the research on topical issues. That doesn't mean just reading a social media post. It means going back to the source of a proposal and seeking to understand the intent and outcomes of what is being proposed. There will always be positives and negatives. There will often be some parts that will be aligned with Christ and His way and some parts that won't be. It does require a bit of work, but the research is worth the effort, so we can be prepared when God gives us the opportunity to meaningful engage in the debate.

Tuesday's Devotion – Show Respect.

Acts 26:2

“King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today...”

Throughout, Paul's defense before King Agrippa, Paul shows a healthy respect for the King. He presents his case calmly and asks probing but not judgemental questions.

Our attitude when we are having discussions on controversial topics matters. Even if you know you are right, it doesn't mean you need to be arrogant in expressing your opinion. I had to learn this lesson. When I was younger I enjoyed seeking God's perspective on various issues and was keen to debate the merits of these with others, however, I approached those discussions with a self-righteousness which presented itself as arrogance. I would have benefitted from being more respectful of the other person's perspective and probably learnt a lot more along the way.

One of the ways we can show respect is to actively listen to those we are engaged in a debate with. Instead of waiting for the next opportunity to jump in with your opinion and inform them that they are wrong, reflect back to the person their argument or ask for clarification. This lets the person know that you are truly listening to them and seeking to understand their perspective. This usually results in a much more productive conversation and a better connection with the person you are in conversation with.

Wednesday's Devotion – Focus on the issue

Acts 26:28

Then Agrippa said to Paul, 'Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?'

Paul very cleverly shares his testimony, presents the gospel and keeps the focus of the conversation on the issue, not on his accuser's. This is obvious in King Agrippa's response when he realizes where Paul is going with his argument.

What is interesting to note is what Paul doesn't do. Paul doesn't focus on King Agrippa's personal life or how well he has ruled. Paul doesn't focus on the merits or otherwise of the Roman occupation of Israel. Paul's focus is on the issue, which at this time is the gospel that he is preaching. Is this gospel true or false?

Even if the person you are in discussions with makes big generalizations about your gender, or your culture, or what you believe, don't play the same game they are playing. It is tempting to make sweeping judgements about a certain group, but it won't help the discussion and what you are saying is unlikely to be true about everyone in that particular group anyway.

It is far better to do what Paul does here, keep the focus on the truth and merits of the issue you are discussing. It removes judgement from the discussion and allows the person to work on the implications for themselves, which is exactly what happens with King Agrippa in this situation.

Thursday's Devotion – Be clear and compelling.

Acts 26:29

Paul replied, 'Short time or long – I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.'

When we approach conversations in a well-informed and non-judgmental way, the person is likely to listen and consider what we are presenting. When we are presenting the truth of the gospel approaching the conversation respectfully is critical, as it may be one of the few opportunities we have to present the truth of who Christ is to someone.

Another important thing to keep in mind is to be as clear and as compelling as you can be in presenting the gospel. What Paul does with King Agrippa is a clever approach. Paul takes King Agrippa on a journey to show that if God can change a persecutor like Paul, then God can change anyone. Paul also argues that how God has revealed Himself through history also confirms the gospel to be true. Both are very clear and very compelling arguments.

Hebrews 4:12 says that the word of God is living and active, it penetrates our souls and judges our hearts. However, most lost people don't read the Bible, so we need to bring that living and active word to them in a clear and compelling way.

This will take a bit of practice, so try sharing God's word with other Christians first, so that it comes more naturally to you when you are having conversations with those who don't know Christ.

Friday's Devotion – Trust God for the outcome

Acts 26:30-31

The king rose, and with him the governor and Bernice and those sitting with them. ³¹ After they left the room, they began saying to one another, 'This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment.'

We need to keep in mind that there are two things going on here. The first is whether Paul is guilty of a crime, the second is the salvation of King Agrippa and others who were listening. Paul is more focused on the second of these two issues, whereas King Agrippa is more focused on the first. It would have made an even greater story if King Agrippa had become a Christian, but it didn't work out that way. However, Paul doesn't seem to be bothered by this, he simply appreciated the opportunity and trusted God to sought out the outcome.

I have had hundreds of conversations with people over the years, where I expected them to give their lives to Christ or at least make a step in that direction, and they haven't done so. Is that discouraging? – Yes. Does it stop me? – No. We, like Paul, have to do what we are called to do, which is to present the gospel in a clear in compelling way, with an attitude of respect. What people then do with that information is up to them.

God knows where they are at and will continue to work in their lives, drawing them to Himself. Let us not put our confidence in our presentation, but in the work of Christ and His Holy Spirit.