

Freedom of Speech? - Week 60

This weekend the Winter Olympic Games begin in Sochi in southern Russia. The selection of Sochi as the venue for the Games has been controversial from the start, and particularly so in recent months because of various laws existing in Russia which are giving offence to liberal opinion in the West.

A public letter has been signed by up to 200 people, particularly complaining about Russian laws concerning homosexuality, blasphemy and defamation. These laws are deemed to be "beyond the pale", because they restrict freedom of speech and behaviour. Some athletes and politicians are boycotting the Games in protest at these laws.

So the great cry here is, "There is to be no limit to freedoms! Any such limits are wrong and must be removed!". We thus find ourselves in the ancient debate over the balance between individual freedom on the one hand - "I will do what I like when I like" - and the responsibility we have towards one another on the other. Clearly both sides of the debate have a legitimate place, to an extent, but if either side becomes over-powerful, trouble quickly follows: complete freedom with no restrictions leads to anarchy, and total restrictions with no freedom lead to totalitarianism.

Now we come to a second example, on a much smaller scale than Sochi but demonstrating just the same issues. A few weeks ago in England, a man standing as a candidate for UKIP (the United Kingdom Independence Party) in a forthcoming election, was abruptly suspended from his party. He had said that the dreadful weather being experienced across Britain this winter was God's judgement on the nation, for the passing of the law last year allowing homosexual couples to marry.

Such a view is entirely reasonable for anyone who takes the Bible seriously, so he might well be right, but whether or not you agree with such a view is not quite the point here. The point rather is this: the complaints regarding the Russian laws focus on a demand for total freedom. But the UKIP man, in speaking his beliefs under the traditional freedom of speech in this country, got instantly sacked. No freedom of speech for him! The explanation given by UKIP for suspending him was - "We don't want any candidate standing for the party whose views are extreme, barmy or nasty".

If his view was extreme, that tells us nothing about its truth or falsehood. That merely highlights the great gulf that now exists in Britain between the values of an orthodox biblical approach and the values which "the thought police" in their many guises now insist are to be our mainstream values.

Who is to say that his view was "barmy"? Surely it is God's view that should matter. From what God has revealed to us of Himself and His ways in His holy Word, does He think the comments of this Christian man were "barmy"? Can we assume God is content with this "Same-Sex Marriage" law? Is He applauding

from His throne? Or is He, in His mercy, speaking loudly to our nation, over this issue and others, be it by bad weather or prophetic voices or whatever?

And was the UKIP candidate's view "nasty"? The man was voicing what he believes to be God-given, biblical truth, and if he is right, despite any offence that may have been caused, he is doing us all a great favour. Sometimes God's ways and God's truths are deeply unwelcome - just think of the frequent reaction to the Lord's prophets throughout the Old Testament period. Rugged men of God like Samuel, Nathan, Elijah and Jeremiah faithfully spoke God's truth to the leaders and the people of their day, whatever the consequences for themselves, but it rarely made them popular.

So as those seeking to be Christ's faithful sheep, let us be very aware of the tide of liberalism surging around us. This tide is nothing new, but its intensity is something new. Liberalism demands the complete acceptance of its own views - but the instant silencing of anyone who dares to disagree with those views.

We might just notice there is something of a contradiction there. Liberalism turns out to come with a very large label, that simply says "OR ELSE".

We keep the Faith, and by God's mercy may we have the courage to speak God's biblical truth, whether it is welcome or not.

Matthew 5.10-12.

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