

So, as you've probably all heard, churches are allowed to open for public worship again as of next Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> July and we're certainly planning on having both an 8 o'clock communion and our regular 10 o'clock service in Wye next week. But we haven't *formally* announced that yet cos there's still some confusion about exactly what is and isn't allowed, specifically around numbers.

So, when I read, on the BBC website, that the Prime Minister had announced that, as of 5<sup>th</sup> July, 'places of worship will be able to reopen for... services – including *weddings* with a maximum of 30 *people*', I took that to mean that the limit of 30 people only applied to the *weddings*; because that's how the sentence was constructed and punctuated.

So, I thought we were all systems go to re-open as planned. Cos as I said a few weeks ago, we've already re-ordered Wye church so we can safely seat up to 90 *people* with everyone a full two metres apart from anyone outside their household. And we're not planning on *changing* that even though the recommended distance has now been dropped to just *one* metre. a) because we don't *need* to; I very much doubt we'll have more than 90 adults turn up next week and b) because it seems right to me and the wardens to err on the side of *safety*; so you'll literally be twice as safe in *church* as you would be in many other situations.

But then I saw something on Facebook which rather *alarmed* me. Paul the vicar who I did my third year placement with during my

training in Bristol posted ‘Well, I guess that means we’ll either have to issue *tickets* or turn people away at the door once we hit 30’.

So I rang him and said ‘I thought the 30 people limit only applied to *weddings*? That’s the natural reading of what it actually says’. To which his reply was ‘Well, the BBC were quoting Boris *Johnson* and we all know he went to a third-rate school so I wouldn’t trust *his* grammar!’

That’s a joke, for those who aren’t regular members. As Paul well knows, Boris and I were at the same school! Although we only overlapped for one term in 1982...

But Paul went on to explain that, punctuation aside, it simply wouldn’t make *sense* to say that you could only have 30 people at a wedding on a Saturday but then... 90 people the very next day! So, *logically*, the prime minister *must* have meant ‘you can reopen for services (including weddings) up to a maximum of 30 people...’

So, it was back to the drawing board for me and the wardens and, with heavy hearts, we met to discuss what we’re going to *do* – and sadly, operating a first come first served policy seemed like the lesser of two evils. *However*, the Church of England *then* released a statement on *twitter* saying ‘We understand that the reference to a maximum of 30 people applies only to *weddings* and *not* all services, where numbers will depend on the size of the building and the specific circumstances’.

So, once again, David Ross was right! Cos as a highly-skilled barrister (who, as I've said, sees himself as Sergeant Wilson to my Captain Mainwaring; although I see him more as a cross between Keir Starmer and Peter Falk's *Columbo*) *he* tried to point out, at our meeting, that, regardless of what my friend Paul had said, it made even *less* sense to suggest that you could only have 30 people at... a service in Canterbury Cathedral!

But I'm afraid to say that I poo-pooed him! Because we were already *in* a situation that didn't make any sense...

So, currently, it would be against the rules for the group of 5 or 6 us who say morning prayer together every week-day to do so in *church* cos that would count as a *service*; but it would be absolutely fine if... *twenty-five* people *happened* to be in there praying 'privately' at the same time. Which is crazy, right?!

So sometimes, the law is an ass – which is why I didn't believe David. But it seems that, once again, he was right and I was wrong. Although we haven't actually had that confirmed yet which is why we haven't been able to make any formal announcement. I'm hoping that we'll get some clarification *some time* this week because it would be kind of useful to know what we're doing before Sunday – but like I say, we're prepared either way. Watch this space.

Meanwhile, I think there's some spiritual principles at work in the process I've just described...

Those of you who are friends with me on Facebook – and if you're not, please do send me a request – but you might have seen something I shared the other day entitled 'Important phrases we should all be willing to say as we learn and grow'; and there were six of them. They were:

In light of that new information I have changed my mind...

Oh, I didn't know that before. I guess I was wrong...

From the evidence provided, it appears I need to rethink things...

You make a strong argument, I'll consider what you said.

I can't support my opinion. I don't know why I think that...

I never thought of it that way. Thank you, now I will...

Well, how often do you hear people say any of those? How often do you say them *yourself*?!

Now, actually, I think I do quite well on this score. I know I'm hopeless or high-maintenance in lots of other ways but I don't think this is one of them! And that's not because I'm morally superior to any of you; it's because I'm a recovering drug addict.

So when I first *crawled* into an AA meeting 32 years (and two months) ago yesterday, they told me that unless I was *ruthlessly* honest with myself and other people *all the time*, I would *die*. And I didn't want to die. So I took that *very* seriously and it's kind of become a way of life. Not that that means I don't have any blind spots

– I know that I do – but I genuinely want to know what they are! And in fact the 12 step groups talk about *three* key spiritual principles that are essential for ongoing recovery: honesty, open-mindedness and willingness – willingness to admit that you’re wrong and to receive feedback from other people. And that’s what these six phrases represent.

I found number 5 particularly amusing: ‘I can’t support my opinion. I don’t know why I think that’ cos really it’s absurd to have an uninformed opinion in the first place! And one of my friends picked up on that in the comments saying ‘If you simply don’t *have* opinions, then you don’t need to defend or change them’ and he may have a point. But personally, I think it’s *fine* to have an opinion as long as you can back it up or are prepared to *abandon* it or at least *reconsider* it in the light of alternative *evidence*...

Which brings me to two of my favourite quotes. Oliver Cromwell famously said, in a speech to the Synod of the Church of Scotland, ‘I beseech you, *in the bowels of Christ*, think it *possible* you may be mistaken...’ And, less-well known, C.S. Lewis said, in *The Screwtape Letters*, that, ‘[in the past, people] still knew pretty well when a thing was *proved* and when it was not; and if it *was* proved they really believed it. They still connected thinking with *doing* and were prepared to alter their way of life as the result of a chain of reasoning’. And he went *on* to say that that was no longer the case and, of course, one of the *hallmarks* of what we call post-modernism,

our contemporary culture, is that many people reject the whole idea of objective truth: ‘What’s true for me is true for me and you can’t tell me otherwise’. ‘I’m entitled to my opinion. Even if it’s demonstrably wrong’. Or as a racist taxi driver once said to the comedian Stewart Lee who was trying to challenge some of his more outrageous assertions, ‘Well, you can prove anything with facts, can’t you?!’

Well, yeah. And if someone proves to you that something you believe is *wrong*, you should change your mind immediately. Or at least say one of our six phrases. It’s called humility and last time I looked, that’s quite an important value in our faith...

Of course, we need to be careful about being proud of our humility! I once heard that the militant atheist, Richard Dawkins, who’s often accused of being rather arrogant, said, in response to that charge, ‘I really don’t think I’m arrogant. I just display a greater humility before the facts than other people’! You couldn’t make it up! Except it turns out that someone did! He never said that! And when I *discovered* that, I had to stop quoting it, much as it’d been useful to discredit him, because *truth matters*.

And that’s one thing that Professor Dawkins and I agree on. Cos he hates post-modernism as much – if not more than – he hates religion; and something I know he *did* say is that if he believed that the laws of physics were nothing but social constructs – which is the kind of thing that a *really* radical post-modernist would argue – ‘[he] would never get in an aeroplane again because [he] wouldn’t trust a set of social

constructs to keep [him] airborne at 30,000 feet'. You can't get much more objective than that.

But even if he *didn't* say that other thing, humility before the facts is, surely, what we should all be aiming for? Particularly as Christians who claim to be followers of *The Truth*. And I'd like to end with a concrete example of someone in this congregation who really did that this very week.

So, obviously there's been a lot of debate around the whole Black lives matter – no, all lives matter – issue recently. I talked about it two sermons ago. And I don't know if what *I* said was anything to *do* with this but one member of our congregation posted the day before yesterday 'I *was* "all lives matter" but I looked into the black lives matter [idea] to understand it and [now] I get it' and I was just so impressed by that. Would that there were more people in the world willing to do that. So, God bless you, Nikki Bateson, and as we move into a time of prayer now, I'd like to re-read the six statements and invite you to reflect on them and more importantly challenge you to make them part of your regular repertoire of responses to other people. So let us pray...

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