



A Newsletter on Social Justice Issues

Welcome to the May edition of Do Justice in 2023 as we continue to discuss issues of Social Justice from a Christian perspective in the tradition of Micah and St Francis.

Are there limits to freedom of speech and freedom generally?

The brief visit in late March of activist Kellie-Jay Keen-Minshull, more commonly referred to as Posie Parker, has raised yet again important issues of freedom and, in particular, freedom of speech. The main issue surrounding the visit was the changing of assigned birth gender which was for many centuries hidden from public awareness but has become an issue that is now having an impact. In particular, the question of how to address the situation where a male becomes female, particularly in the use of certain gender delineated facilities and in sport.

Keen-Minshull has spoken out widely, and sometimes aggressively, about the perceived dangers to women of male to female transgender people using female designated facilities. Certainly, if her appearance in Melbourne before her visit to New Zealand, is anything to go by, she is receiving significant support from far-right neo-Nazi groups. There was some opposition to her visit to New Zealand at the end of March, but she was allowed to come here. Her visit was cut short after she attempted to address a rally in Albert Park in Auckland only to be shouted down by groups supporting trans gender rights. One protestor even managed to pour tomato juice on her. The NZ Herald reported that *"the rally was also attended by a small group wearing Azov Battalion and Boogaloo Boys insignia, as well as a member of the white nationalist Action Zealania group and members of right-wing groups including the New Conservative Party, Voices for Freedom, and Counterspin Media"*¹. But membership of none of these organisations is illegal nor is supporting them, so should she have been silenced by people who oppose them?

As far as Keen-Minshull's position on transgender people and public facilities is concerned, is this reasonable? Is she just warning people in the same way that people are warned against walking on a crowded motorway. Conversely there is evidence of people, not many, walking on a motorway but where is the evidence of women being endangered by transwomen in public facilities?

But coming back to the freedom of association question? One of the reasons put forward by those opposing Keen-Minshull's visit to New Zealand was her apparent association with far-right groups. Such groups are not outlawed in New Zealand and there appears to be no reason to outlaw them based on existing evidence. Hence association with such

groups is legal and should not be grounds for restriction. However, should such groups start to advocate change by force or start to use force to promote their ideology then that would be illegal and restrictions legitimate.

Regrettably, Christians have on occasions in the past, and in some countries today, advocated for harsh restrictions on non-believers. As have followers of other religious practices. Freedom of belief is probably our most basic freedom that we must guard for ourselves and everyone else. And equally not to believe in a God or similar is as much a freedom.

But what about those who advocate for things that are obviously wrong. The flat earthers are an example. There are no laws that say that one cannot believe the earth is flat however there is clear proof that the earth is a sphere. Furthermore, believing the earth is flat does not hurt other people so it is not, and should not, be proscribed. Generally, where there is clear scientific proof of something that some people do not want to believe, the general approach is to protect them so long as that does not cause any danger to the general population. Vaccination is an example. In normal times we are free to get vaccinations or not but when lack of vaccination could endanger other people such as in a medical pandemic, then requiring someone to be vaccinated is reasonable as lack of vaccination is likely to endanger those they come in contact with. Society is not saying "you must be vaccinated" but is saying that if you want to be involved in this activity you must be, the choice is yours. Here our freedom of action is being limited in specific circumstances to protect the wider public.

The vaccination situation is an interesting one as the scientific evidence is clear and the opposing arguments appear to be based on false information and conspiracy theories. But vaccination is still voluntary, you even are required to tell the vaccinator that you agree to be vaccinated. However there have been reports that the vaccination rate of children against measles is so low and outbreak of measles may happen with potentially fatal consequences for a small number of children, is this a case for some form of compulsion?

False information and conspiracy theories have been around since time immemorial but what has happened over the last few years is that social media has provided a means for much wider communication of them with little correction. Up until recently we have been able to generally rely on the honesty and integrity of media channels that the news they bring us is accurate and, occasionally there have been lapses but we have been generally able to rely on our media.

¹ New Zealand Herald, 28 March 2023

Now we are not sure, is One News telling us everything or just what they want us to know? There are news channels that have regularly distorted news, an example is Fox News in the USA and its continuing support for Donald Trump winning the 2020 Presidential election in the USA. Despite no evidence, many millions of people appear to believe this. And rightfully, no one is stopping them believing that Donald Trump should be President as that is what freedom means, or does it? Perhaps the greatest safeguard of our democratic system of government is the integrity of our election process.

The real challenge to freedom generally is that any small restriction can lead to greater restrictions until freedom is lost. We won the freedoms we have now incrementally, and we could lose them incrementally. At the same time there is a need to protect people against harm caused by people who may not agree with you or who you associate with. There are some very fine lines here, but we need to be very careful when drawing these lines that restrict freedom of speech, movement or association. The danger that any restriction is protecting us against must be clear and unambiguous. However, this does not extend to groups that advocate harm in any way towards other groups that have different beliefs or practices. Social acceptance may well be the better way to protect different groups rather than legislation. For example in the 1960s there was an entertainment group called the "Black and White Minstrels" whose name is now socially unacceptable to most people because of its racial overtones.

Why is freedom so important?

Much is said and written by Christians about freedom and in many instances there are widely differing opinions on what to believe and say and what to do. Abortion is a good example that has become very political in some countries. The very fact that we have so many denominations within Christianity is because we have had disagreements over, often, quite minor, aspects of theology or practice but to those in the centre of the issue, extremely important. The two most important commandments that Jesus identified, to love God and to love everyone else is a good starting point when looking at the freedom issue. Regrettably the second commandment is often and regularly broken by Christians when they set out to place restrictions on those that do not have the same beliefs as they do.

Virtually all the world's religions have teachings about good relations with those that do not accept your particular belief system. Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism all have similar teachings about loving one's neighbour.² So why is this most basic of requirements for peaceful living so widely ignored? And ignored both at a personal level, when we discriminate against someone not like us, and at tribal and national level.

And it is often the most ardent followers of a belief system that appear to ignore the most basic of teachings of their belief system to love people not to hate people. And they do it in the belief that they are promoting and spreading their particular belief system. Where is the sense in all this? Why

hate someone who believes that God spoke through Mohammad rather than Jesus?

The answer inevitably revolves around power. All the world's religions developed in societies where power was concentrated in very few people. Christianity in the Roman Empire is an obvious example. Despite this, these belief systems encourage us to love our neighbour. Why is this so difficult for so many of us?

Over the centuries theologians and philosophers have struggled with this question as well as the question "are there limits to freedom?". Benevolent as opposed to dictatorial leadership can be seen in the Old Testament, in the ancient Greek city states, in republican Rome but in each case more oppressive leadership was able to succeed. Today many look back to the Magna Carta in 1215 AD as the foundation of our present democratic system but that agreement was to protect the barons against the king, it had virtually no effect on the peasants. The relatively free society that some of us enjoy today has developed over many hundreds of years but it is fragile.

In many ways we are at a turning point, will our society continue to evolve and become freer and more equal or will we put more and more constraints on freedom? Will the relatively affluent majority be prepared to share some of their affluence with those less affluent? Will we understand that there is no such thing as total freedom, that in living together there must be restraints for the good of society. But those constraints cannot and should not be used by groups to restrain other groups.

Maybe our concept of the word "neighbour" is being too narrowly defined. Jesus clarified this strongly in the parable of the Good Samaritan. Following that teaching should we:

- Love our neighbour – the person that looks different and may have a skin colour that is different from ours?
- Love our neighbour – the person whose political beliefs differ from ours?
- Love our neighbour- the person who has a different religious belief to ours or no belief at all?
- Love our neighbour – the homeless person with nowhere to sleep?
- Love our neighbour – the person with a gender identity or relationship choice we might not understand?
- Love our neighbour – the immigrants who only want a better life for their family?
- Love our neighbour – the millions around the world suffering from the effects of war, oppression, and famine?

Let us broaden our horizons, see all others as neighbours. Love our neighbour, desire what is best for them, allow them to flourish. For as our neighbours flourish so will we.

² [Love Your Neighbor: A Common Theme in Major Religions - Mary's Pence \(maryspence.org\)](https://maryspence.org/)