

## “Je ne suis pas Charlie” – St Paul

*A sermon preached at St Stephen’s Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 1 February 2015, by David Gill. Readings were 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 and St Mark 1:21-28.*

Every so often, the bible presents us with a passage that might have been written as an editorial for the morning newspaper. Today’s first reading is a case in point.

We were all shocked when, just over three weeks ago, two men attacked the offices of the Paris-based satirical magazine known as *Charlie Hebdo* (Charlie Weekly). Twelve people as well as the gunmen were killed. The response, in France and throughout Europe, was immediate: sympathy, outrage, mass marches. Everywhere we saw people carrying signs reading “Je suis Charlie”. I am Charlie – implying I identify with those who died, I condemn the violence that took place, I stand resolute for the freedom of speech that journal was exercising.

Fair enough. But. Things may not be quite that simple. Sympathy for the victims, sure. Condemnation of the violence, certainly. But freedom of speech, no matter what? We learned that *Charlie Hebdo* specialises in ridiculing not only people but also their most cherished beliefs, including the country’s vulnerable Jewish and Muslim minorities. With curious French logic, a Muslim woman in France who wears a hijab commits an offence, but anyone is free to write the most scurrilous stuff about her religion or draw cartoons that are guaranteed to hurt and offend.

Now, freedom of speech is one of the most important gifts we have received from centuries past, but nowhere does it come without some limits. Even in France, where you are not allowed to advocate violence. Even in Australia, where we’ve been debating the restrictions written into section 18c of the Racial Discrimination Act. Without buying into the argument about where precisely the legal line should be drawn, let me make just one point.

Whatever may or may not be enshrined in law, there are always moral constraints on how we should act, what we should publish, what we should say. What people have a *right* to do, and what they *should* do, are not the same thing. Responsible journalism, responsible behaviour in any area of life, recognises this. Focus only on what the law permits or forbids, as some do, and a very important consideration drops out of the picture.

St Paul said as much in the advice we heard him giving this morning to the Corinthians.

There had been problems in the Corinth congregation. One of the tensions, apparently, was over whether Christians should eat food that had been involved in ritual offerings to idols – presumably meat from animals that had been slaughtered in temple sacrifices.

The obvious answer for Paul would have been: go ahead. We don't believe in idols anyway. Such food has no magical power. So eat, drink and be merry. Enjoy.

But that's not the answer Paul gives. For some in the Corinth congregation the consumption of such food would have been very troubling. Think of them, he says. Take their feelings into account, and adjust the way you deal with this issue accordingly.

It is an echo of how Jesus sat loose to the law – for example, when he taught the Sabbath was made for people, not vice versa. Being right, whether in what you believe or the way you behave, must be set in the context of God's person-centred caring for all. It's never just about who has the best argument or what the rule book may say. It's about sensitivity to the people around you.

When being right is the only thing in our minds, we almost always end up getting relationships wrong. That goes for conservatives, progressives and all the rest of us in between. And it goes for all areas of life.

If you've ever tried to help friends sort out a marriage problem, you know what it's like to have two people sit in front of you, spell out what they're fighting about, then demand that you take sides and pronounce on who is right. You won't do that, of course, if you're clever. Instead, you'll try to shift the conversation, very gently, to the question: when did you guys stop listening to each other, why do you think you stopped and how are you going to fix it?

The preoccupation with being right not only lands partnerships on the rocks. It can wreak havoc in the Church too.

Thirty five years ago, as general secretary of the newly born Uniting Church in Australia, I was the official babysitter of the church's regulations. If there was a fight in a congregation, if a presbytery was seriously split, if somebody had a gripe about denominational procedures, my phone would ring, with the question: what do the regulations say? Often I found myself telling people to

forget the confounded regulations. Put them in the bottom drawer. They are not weapons to be wielded in combat. Use a bit of sanctified common sense instead. With hindsight, maybe I should have emphasised more strongly that word *sanctified*.

What is true in a partnership and in the Church also holds true for society in general.

Every country needs laws: good laws, well enforced, backed by an accessible, competent and just judicial system. As Martin Luther King once remarked, "It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me, but it can stop him from lynching me, and I think that's pretty important".

We do need law. But no society worth living in can run on law alone. Lose our vital mutual respect and caring, what St Paul was underlining for the Corinthians, and we're sunk. Multidirectional love is the name of the game.

So, go back to where we started. What would St Paul have said about the tragedy in Paris three weeks ago?

Shock? Yes. Sympathy for the victims and their loved ones? Certainly. Outrage at the violence? For sure. But would we have found him with one of those signs announcing "Je suis Charlie"? I doubt it.

I think we'd have heard him saying: whether you're an editor, a cartoonist, something else entirely or nothing in particular, take care that you do not act just to gratify yourself. Never ask merely what the rules allow. Before you say or do something, think of whoever will be on the receiving end. Before you skewer someone's race or religion, remember those who will be hurt and ask – what will this do to them? Before you dip your pen in vitriol, think of the pain you're about to cause and ponder -- will this particular exercise of freedom really benefit our community?

No, I cannot imagine Paul proclaiming "Je suis Charlie".

Perhaps his sign would have read "Je suis vous". I am not Charlie. I am ... you. Each one of you. Because I follow a man who lived and died for you. Especially you who are poor, forgotten, pushed out to the fringe, treated with contempt.

May we all follow more faithfully that man who lived for others. And may the bread and wine of his presence make us strong for the journey.

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