

CAESAR BEWARE!

(Sermon Summary)

Reading: Exodus: 8: 20-32.

So, we find ourselves going back as a nation into a state of lockdown. We are not sure what to call it. Is it back to the old 'new normal'? Or perhaps a new 'new normal'? Pastors and preachers have longed to be able to talk about something other than COVID-19 but find themselves again and again needing to revisit the subject. We have looked over these last months at the question of our liberties and seen that these are not the gift of Government but the gift of God. Then we looked at the subject of what we should render to Caesar and how this fitted in with our love to God. Government is a gift of God to society, including the church.

Faced now with the requirement for our churches to close, there are some things that are the same and there are some things that are different. We will be looking at these in a moment. But, as we shall also see later, this time round 'Caesar' has now been put on the spot. It may be that this time he is guilty of interfering in weighty and serious matters.

1. Nothing has changed

In some respects, nothing has changed with the announcement of this new round of church closures. The reason that we are given by Government as justification is that this will save lives. We are told 'Stay home. Save lives. Protect the NHS' which was the summary advice given in the first lockdown.

So, we are still following the rule of the Sixth Commandment, that we should not kill people. Our Lord made it part of Sabbath observance that we should use the day not to kill but to save life (Mark 3:4). If by meeting on the Lord's Day, we were causing death to people, then there would be grounds for not meeting and this therefore would be an appropriate response.

Paul even envisages advantage in people not meeting at all, if their coming together brings the name of Christ into disrepute. We find him in 1 Corinthians 11:17 observing that they were coming together not for the better but for the worse because of their behaviour towards each other and the offence it was to the Lord. Sometimes, 'no meeting is better than a bad meeting'. The Lord Himself even threatens that He will cause the church in Ephesus to cease if it does not return to its first love (Revelation 2:4-5).

We are perhaps still right to see this suspension of our liberties and our giving them again on loan to the state, as just a temporary state of affairs. Neither are we being compelled to stop preaching or to embrace a moral position that, as Christians, we simply cannot subscribe to.

2. But it is different this time round.

While the reasoning behind the closure of churches is the same as in the first lockdown, this time there are clear differences.

Schools and universities are staying open. Construction and manufacturing industry are not being required to stop.

Medical science has also moved on and there is more knowledge about the virus and how best to treat people who have caught it. Workers in the Health Service have more protective equipment ready and available to use. It is also a lockdown where we have been given an end date for it, something which we must believe the Government is serious about.

Also, we personally have more experience of coming through and surviving a lockdown. Back in March, things were more uncertain, and we were not sure at all how severe the virus might turn out to be. This time we might find ourselves calmer and benefiting from the experience that we have acquired from the earlier lockdown.

3. We are different this time round.

It is also hopefully true that we are different people, as Christians, to the people we were when we entered the first lockdown. We should now be better prepared. We have had the benefit of reflecting upon our situation biblically, examining our hearts before God, reading the Bible, hearing sermons and reading various articles that have stimulated us to think more deeply about our circumstances and the complexities of our day.

Certainly, there is now a different mood among the churches than there was back in the spring. Some are prepared to defy the regulations and to continue meeting, despite the Government instruction. They feel that the Government has overstepped the mark and has infringed upon the church's authority to follow the Lord's commands. Others, perhaps not many, are ready to comply in an uncritical way, not really thinking very deeply what it is the church is now being asked, once again, to do. Others are complying but are doing it, as I am, under protest. In this respect the Christian Institute has spoken for many believers in questioning the validity of the latest Government order that churches should have to close.

This last position accepts that we are obligated to obey the duly constituted powers, based on the reasoning they have given. But the state's authority is being contested. In the second sermon on rendering to Caesar, I mentioned that we, as churches, should ask to see Caesar's 'homework', to make transparent the evidence behind this latest shutdown of churches. This is now what is happening. Experts in various relevant fields, who are just as eminent as those who are advising Government, have questioned the rationale for the lockdown and queried whether it is the best way to save lives. When before the House of Commons Committee on Science and Technology last week, neither of the two advisors could give any evidence where churches had led to a spread of COVID. The approach was that any event where people gathered, however small the risk it posed, was to be stopped on the principle that 'every little helps.'

4. Caesar beware!

With so little evidence to prove the necessity of closing churches on public health grounds, there is the danger that Caesar will start to take from God what should be rendered to Him, namely worship.

A big part of why we meet together on the Lord's Day, as we know, is our own edification. We come to hear the preaching of God's word and for fellowship, among other things. These things are for our instruction and learning. We miss these things when we are not able to meet.

But beyond this, we come together to worship the Lord and to bring glory to His name. This is not something that we 'get something out of' but is a demonstration that His name is hallowed by us, and that we hold Him in high esteem and consider Him worthy. This is where we give praise and thanks to God. We learn from our Lord that the Father is seeking people who will worship Him in spirit and in truth (John 4:23-24). God seeks the worship of His people. We learn many times that we are to give praise to God and give Him glory (See Psalm 29:1-2; 8-9; and Psalm 95:1-3). In Psalm 100: 4-5, we are told to come through His gates with thanksgiving and enter His courts with praise. It is therefore a big thing when those gates are shut, and the public worship of God ceases. If Caesar requires this, there have to be good reasons to deny the Lord the glory that is due to His name.

This is where the experience of Exodus 8 is instructive as the Lord was calling His people to worship Him by holding a feast to Him. Pharaoh refused to let the people go and defied God, denying Him the worship and glory that is due to His name from His people. The Lord, as we know, dealt very firmly with Pharaoh. We would not typecast our Prime Minister as Pharaoh but there are still warnings to Governments who prevent the Lord receiving the worship that is due to Him. 'Caesar' needs to beware lest He is found to be fighting against God. He needs to have good reason for halting the public worship of His people. In this regard, we can perhaps see how members of Government can carry the

spiritually disabling and blinding effects of secularism into their appraisal of what is valuable and what is not. To slight the glory of God, is a dangerous and foolish thing to do. 'Caesar beware!'