

12th May 2020

Civilisation

“Civilisation is nothing more than the effort to reduce the use of force to the last resort.”

José Ortega y Gasset, La Rebelión de las Masas

What makes for a civilised society when we're "allowed" and "not allowed" to do certain things? We debate whether restrictions on us are too harsh, or how long they'll last, and who should make decisions about our freedoms anyway. For example, when "lockdown" rules begin to be eased, how many people will be permitted to gather, and where will that be, and how often might it be legitimate? And what about our churches? If, say, we're "allowed" to have ten people together, what happens if there are twelve? And if we're "allowed" to gather in a certain place, what happens if we choose to go somewhere else? And who will police that?

The Riot Act of 1714 was used regularly in the 19th century to force people to disperse if there was a chance of a riot developing. They needn't be *doing* anything, just *being* together. If twelve or more people were "unlawfully ... assembled together" then a "Riot Act Declaration" could be read, giving people an hour to disperse. If anyone remained after that, they could, in law, be killed by troops called in to enforce the Act. And we say restrictions on us now and the policing of them might be draconian? The Riot Act was last read in the UK 1919 – thank God!

Being civilised means *not* calling on troops to disperse or shoot at people who meet "illegally". What matters in 2020 is dispensing with an unnecessary use of force, persuasion rather than imposition, a society where fairness and freedom are key. But civilisation also requires cooperation. We need to see the bigger picture, each one of us *not* doing things because we feel our purpose and rights are more important than everyone else's. Civilisation is an acceptance that we're in it together, and have respect for the whole, not just our individual part.

A prayer for today

Loving God, St Paul reminded us we are "one body". If one part hurts, we all hurt. If one part rejoices, we all rejoice. Help us to work together, as one body, through pain and joy, for the good of the whole. Amen.

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