

24th November 2023

Opinions

"If all [of humanity] minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, [we] would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than they, if they had the power, would be justified in silencing all of [human]kind."

John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859)

Driving home from a Scotland football match, there was an animated discussion on various aspects of the game among the five of us in the car: the quality of the players; standard of refereeing; tactics of the manager; selection of the team; deployment of the substitutes; tastiness (or otherwise!) of the half-time pies ... It was heated, occasionally extreme, but altogether good humoured. No doubt we'll have an equally animated sharing of opinions on the way home from the next match.

Opinions matter: from who should win *Strictly* to the whether *I'm a Celebrity* is worth watching; from potholes in our roads to service in the local supermarket; from the Church's future to the best restaurant; from the standard of the Broadband Network to the quality of my driving! But reflect for a moment on the wisdom of the philosopher, John Stuart Mill, quoted above. If someone has an opinion, and *everyone* else has a contrary opinion, then to silence the one opinion no one agrees with is, in effect, to silence everyone. Of course, opinions can be strongly held and vociferously aired. But – as in post-match discussions – two things matter. Firstly, respect. Even when disagreements are deep, each of us has a right to our opinion. And secondly, tolerance. Even when there isn't a meeting of minds, tolerance allows us to disagree and stay friends.

I fear that in the present political climate, and particularly around our responses to the events in Israel and Gaza, there's a danger of losing respect for the right of people to have opinions that are different from our own. And I'm equally afraid that the loudness – indeed, the provocative nature – of strong opinions, show worrying signs of a societal intolerance.

Let's encourage opinions, and not threaten to silence them. And let's understand that opinions will always differ, no matter how strongly they're expressed. The person shouting the loudest isn't always right. But *please* let's ensure that respect and tolerance still prevail, for the good of all.

A prayer for today

"Fools find no pleasure in understanding, but delight in airing their own opinions." (Proverbs 18:2). Goodness! I hope that isn't me! Amen