

Thought for the month, February 2021

Whenever I hear the words 'I'm just saying what everyone is thinking!' my first thought is usually that I *wasn't* thinking it. Then I wonder whether if it *was* true that everyone was thinking it, was it necessary to express it?

Perhaps it was. Daylighting difficult or destructive thoughts can be a way to expose them to scrutiny and challenge, opening routes to examine why they are there: the attitudes that underpin them and the circumstances that shape those attitudes. But only if the person expressing them is open to that critique. Usually claiming to say 'what everyone's thinking' is not an invitation to engage in that process.

That doesn't mean people should be prevented from speaking their mind. Freedom of speech is a hard-won right. But it also comes with responsibilities. And the greater the power and influence of the individual speaking, the greater those responsibilities are. There's no question that the language of Donald Trump, both before and during his presidency, has been appalling, inciting hatred, justifying prejudice. So it's tempting to fall in with Twitter's decision to suspend his account, taken shortly after the violent incursion of his supporters into the US congress in January.

But there is a problem. The trouble with cutting the microphone is that it gives people who for whatever reason agree with extreme and derogatory views the excuse to claim that they are not heard; that their right to a point of view is not respected. Then that becomes the story, instead of the consequences of the views being expressed. Twitter, Facebook and other new media platforms are themselves vastly powerful actors in the world, their influence only lately becoming understood. They may have the best of intentions (though I suspect few would characterise them as wholly philanthropic) but they are unelected and for the most part, still unregulated.

Personally I don't want a *debate* with anyone who tries to justify prejudice, injustice or hatred. I simply want to say: 'I uphold your right to form your own views. I disagree profoundly with them and I'm not obliged to give you a platform to express them *but* if you insist on inflicting them on everyone I will speak all the louder for justice, integrity and peace.'

However, even trying to outshout people with our own version of reason doesn't get us very far. An antagonistic reaction to extreme and provocative language may be natural but is it often motivated more by distaste rather than compassion? I can certainly recognise that tendency in myself.

Perhaps in the end it's more effective to speak with the voice of love than to silence others, however uncomfortable we find their words to be. And that voice is more often than not a quiet one, expressed through action rather than words.