

Introduction

During this coronavirus pandemic we may have learnt a few new words or come to see familiar words in a different way. Experience has probably given us a better understanding of the meaning of lockdown, social distancing, sheltering and a bubble. I always thought bubbles were things children blew with soap solution. Do you remember the song "I'm for ever blowing bubbles ? However, during lockdown bubbles have meant something else. Recently I found another use of the word bubble. It's been used to describe our culture, the social environment, the norms of behaviour and even the thinking of people where we live.

Some weeks ago I told people that throughout our lives, moment by moment, we are called upon to make decisions. Some are not particularly significant like "What shall I wear today?" but others can determine not only our own future but can also significantly affect others. Just by the attitudes we take and the words we decide to use we can help other people or cause trouble; we can give comfort or cause distress. Our decisions and actions can seriously affect those closest to us, those in our community, those in other parts of the world and even those of future generations. We have been given freedom to determine the future. What a privilege and what a responsibility this is, to have to make what can be life changing decisions.

I now realise that we are not really as free to make decisions as I thought at that time. We are very strongly restrained by the bubble in which we live, the local culture. For example, when driving a car, in theory we are free to decide whether to drive on the left or the right. However I'm sure that in this country you and I would always decide to drive on the left. It's what everybody else does and it is the law of the land. For those reasons and for self preservation we have little choice but, like others, to drive on the left. It seems the decision is made for us. We are constrained by the bubble.

It's interesting that restraining cultures, the bubbles, vary from place to place and from time to time. For example if you drive in this country you would almost certainly drive on the left but if you drive in France or Germany you, like everyone else there, would drive on the right. Differences in cultures also can be seen in the way people greet each. In the UK before lockdown the formal act of greeting was a handshake; in Japan people bow. In India people put their hands together and give a slight bow of the head. Eskimos, the Inuits, press noses together and in New Zealand the Maoris press foreheads. I am also informed that to greet each other Buddhist monks stick out their tongues. The culture can also determine how people dress. In some countries the culture allows women to go about bare breasted but in others that would be unacceptable. If you travel abroad it might be worth knowing some of these things.

A few years ago the HSBC bank put out an advert claiming that they understood this diversity of local cultures and customs, the bubbles, and could therefore be trusted to manage business in any part of the world. I remember that because my son works for that bank.

Having a norm of behaviour, thinking and values can be a good thing; it can lead to an orderly society. For example it's good that here we all drive left, and, when we sing hymns we sing from the same hymnsheet. I well remember that when I went to a church in the States they had a hymn that I new well, so well I did not need to look at the hymn book. So I sang out, probably rather loudly, the words as I knew them. Unfortunately they used different words. Being the odd one out was rather embarrassing. I soon realised it was better to conform. Imagine a game of football in which everybody made up their own rules; there would be chaos.

On the other hand a norm can be bad, as it was when there was slavery or apartheid or when racism is endemic; or the lifestyle leads to global warming or pollution. .

Paul was well aware of the demands of society, the bubbles, but he had a new gospel to proclaim, with a different set of values and a new and better way of life. When writing to the Romans he warned people not to be limited by their culture but to move outside the bubble.

Romans 12 v 2 puts it well, but I have noticed that this verse has been translated in many different way .

The NIV says “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds”

The CEV says “Don't be like the people of this world but let God change the way you think”

I like the translation in The Message, “ Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead fix your attention on God”

Paul gave that advice to the Roman church. He was not condemning the Roman culture, although there were many good reasons for him to do so; he was saying there is an alternative, a better way.

Individuals and the church can react to a society's norm in several different ways including adoption, toleration

condemnation, which trying to set up ones own bubble; and enrichment which is trying to improve the existing culture. I cannot go into more detail on this now but we might as individuals, as a church or even as sub-groups such as house groups consider how we are reacting and how we should be reacting to the culture, the bubble, in which we live.

I must move on and speak about Jesus. Of course, in the incarnation he was born into and grew up in a particular culture, a particular bubble. It was a very different bubble from ours and I believe that we can best understand his message if we learn about his bubble, the culture of his day; including the ill-feeling between Jews and Samaritans; the low status of women; the religious leaders' teaching on the need to observe God's law as they saw it and their attitude towards so called 'sinners'.

Jesus conformed to some of the norms of his day. We are told he went to the synagogue “as was his custom” and he celebrated the Passover and the Feast of the Tabernacles, but he certainly wasn't constrained by the culture of the day. He was a rebel. He came to show a different way, a better way, a different sort of society which he called the kingdom of God. He came to tell us about that kingdom, but not just to tell us about it but to let us enter it. He challenged the culture of his day and that was at least one reason he was killed. The religious leaders didn't want him upsetting he status quo.

The amazing thing is that the message he gave, the kingdom he describes, the richer better life to which God invites us is applicable to all bubbles, all the diverse cultures and all times. His message was relevant then; it is relevant now. It is relevant to us as individuals, as a church, and as a society. All we have to do is try to understand it and with God's help, which is assured, to apply it to our own lives.

I recently went to a funeral in which the minister spoke about life after death, life outside the bubble of mortal existence. But Jesus assured us that we don't have to wait until after death; we can experience that richer life now. He said then and he says now “The kingdom is at hand”. Halleluia!