

Who has our best interests at heart? Who to trust? One could see the Genesis story in this light. Adam and Eve are faced with this fundamental choice of who it is as human beings we should be listening to. Who it is we should trust – or most trust – before embarking on any sort of action. Which choice to freely choose? Nowhere has this fundamental issue become more obvious than in our response to the current pandemic because we seem to be faced with a multitude of choices, now, to satisfy the current government's desire to give us freedom of choice, notwithstanding the latest restrictions. This raises the question of what sort of freedom is on offer, for some choices make us less free than others, as the serpent well knew?

The Guardian has recently explored this in some detail by examining two cases of people sadly and suddenly 'lost to the virus': one because he refused to be vaccinated and the other, although vaccinated twice, still succumbed because she was immunocompromised: her underlying health conditions and their treatment were such that the vaccines were, essentially, unable to work. The former died because he preferred to trust the misinformation fed to him through social media rather than the advice of experts and the latter because she followed the government advice to stop shielding after 1<sup>st</sup> April. This had made no mention of the danger still present for people who were immunocompromised. Being advised to simply 'be careful' was not enough.

You may wonder what this has to do with the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. Well, I think it goes something like this: Mary too is given freedom of choice in a decision barely comprehensible to her and of huge significance for everyone else. She doesn't really understand what it's all about. Who could? But she places her trust in God and does so freely: *Let what you have said be done to me*. This isn't an argument for ignorance but rather for knowing one's ignorance and the need to trust – and to trust the most trustworthy source possible. This raises huge issues, of course, about knowing the will of God, and the serpent has by no means given up on all the arts and wiles of deception: we remain peculiarly susceptible to lies and misinformation. This tension at the heart of our human condition is, perhaps unwittingly, (one hopes not) also evident in the recent statement from the Catholic bishops of England and Wales 'Honouring Sunday'. They were tempted to order us all back to Mass on Sundays but hesitated because it's obvious that the pandemic is continuing to develop in new ways and, more importantly, they've become aware that not everyone is safe even after vaccination, and so their advice is

*As your bishops, we recognise that these prevailing circumstances suggest that not everyone is yet in the position to fulfil the absolute duty to attend freely Sunday Mass.*

Sunday Mass, then, as an *absolute duty* we must *freely* choose. So it's a matter of freedom, after all. And perhaps the significance of this celebration of Mary's Immaculate Conception is that it's the Church's way of expressing the essential impossibility of this without God's action. Discuss.

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