



How to protest

There's an interesting dilemma with Extinction Rebellion, embodied by the man who was dragged down by a crowd of commuters after standing on top of a tube train yesterday.

An awful lot of people have sympathy with the message, but the relentless attacks on the transport infrastructure of the city mean that the collateral damage is felt by many people who have nothing to do with the causes of environmental damage at all. Indeed, arguably taking shared public transport such as the tube is the environmentally friendly way of commuting. Why go out of your way to hinder that? Haven't they gone a bit far?

Moreover, there are a minority of protestors who don't have convincing green credentials: they come across as serial protestors who have latched on to a cause rather than being driven by true belief.

Against this, the fact is that the vast majority of protestors have sincerely held beliefs; and their protests, albeit disruptive, are entirely peaceful.

The crucial point in their favour, though, is that they're right. And not just that they are right, but the polite ways of protesting, by logic, reasoned arguments and voting Green, has been tried for decades, but have made virtually no progress at all by reasoned argument.

So in this sense, to my mind, they are pretty much entitled to do anything so long as it's peaceful.

The awkward truth for the mainstream who find Extinction Rebellion's activities an almighty hassle is that:

i. they are right

ii. There were environmental 'prophets' giving the same message at least since the 1980s and the general public ignored them and carried on driving their cars, turning up the heating, using one-use plastic and so on, because it was just too easy and tempting to do so.

Until we change our behaviour by a hell of a lot more than we're inclined to do now, Extinction Rebellion hold the moral high ground, in my view.

Equally, there are no points for being on the moral high ground. The points come from actual change. The jury is out as to whether their type of protest will actually work. The thing is, we tried it the other way before and nothing happened, so it can't get any worse.

There are, though, other actions too. I got chatting to two colleagues at a clergy conference the other day. In the last nine months, each of them has independently decided to give up their cars, despite the fact that they have seven children between them and it's going to be an almighty hassle getting about without them (the cars). That was pretty compelling and got me thinking and doesn't disrupt anyone outside their own family. There are ways and means...

Oct 2019 Thought. for the Train is a short column by the Rev'd Robert Stanier, vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train. You can also read "Thought for the Train" at www.surbitonchurch.org.uk.