

St Nicholas Church, Prestwick

The Thought for The Week

Sunday 15th November 2020

The events across the Pond these past days are like something out of a Brian Rix Farce, and we watch with interest to find out whether Mr Trump will eventually concede defeat to President Elect Joe Biden, and leave the White House to his successor without any further tantrums and outrageous claims.

When Donald Trump does eventually quit the Oval Office, Joe Biden will be the 46TH President of the USA, and hopefully the world will witness a far more statesmanlike Leader of the Free World in the next four years, instead of the inane ramblings of someone who often appeared deranged, even suggesting on one occasion that we inject ourselves with disinfectant to get rid of the Coronavirus!

This coming week is the anniversary of the death of a President whose name is still revered.

It is reckoned that many adults remember exactly where they were when they heard the news.

I remember it very clearly – the evening of the 22nd November 1963. I had just returned home from the Cubs and my Mum and Dad were watching the news that John F Kennedy, the thirty fifth President of the USA, had been assassinated in Dallas, Texas.

John F Kennedy remains a hero for many people. His broad smile, his youthful appearance, his relaxed style, his glamorous and attractive wife, Jacqueline Bouvier, made him an ideal president for the 1960s, a time of changing attitudes and new freedoms.

JFK, as he was known, had grown up in a famous household. His father, Joe, had at one time been the American Ambassador to Britain.

But he had made a name for himself in his own right – during the Second World War, he commanded a torpedo boat in the South Pacific. The boat was attacked and crippled by a Japanese destroyer and Kennedy was instrumental in gathering his men together in the water. One of the men was badly injured and Kennedy pulled him to a nearby island, holding the man's lifejacket strap between his teeth. For this act he was awarded the prestigious Navy and Marine Corps Medal.

When the war was over, JFK spent the 1950s fighting in the political arena. In 1960 he was elected as the first Roman Catholic President of the USA, and with his inauguration he brought with him an enthusiasm and a vision and an optimism that inspired his fellow countrymen and women.

In the speech which he made at his inauguration ceremony he said, "My fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country!"

His was a presidency that was characterised by an interest in solving the immense problems of poverty and unemployment that blighted the world's strongest nation, along with dreadful urban decay and poor housing and inadequate healthcare.

Kennedy was a great believer in public service and in the combined potential of the United States, yet he was not afraid to make executive decisions. In 1962, a spy plane photographed nuclear missiles being shipped to Cuba by the USA's great rival at that time, the Soviet Union. There being nuclear weapons in Cuba posed a direct threat to millions of Americans. Despite great anger and confrontation on both sides, Kennedy and his Soviet counterpart, President Nikita Khrushchev, were able to negotiate a peaceful resolution to the crisis, preventing a nuclear war that could have cost billions of lives.

Of course, like every great leader and person in the public eye, he met great opposition – many did not approve of his social programmes or his civil rights agenda.

On Friday, 22nd November 1963, as President Kennedy's motorcade drove into the city of Dallas in Texas amidst the cheers of the crowds, shots rang out and he was struck by a fatal bullet.

One moment the thousands of people were shouting and cheering and clapping and in the next, they were stricken with horror, in a state of shock, crying and embracing each other.

Though the person of Lee Harvey Oswald was arrested as the assassin, still to this day, there are a whole host of conspiracy theories surrounding JFK's death and his killing is still the subject of widespread debate.

Three days after the shocking event, the world watched on television as the solemn funeral procession made its way down the streets of Washington DC, and the body of John Fitzgerald Kennedy was finally laid to rest in Arlington Cemetery.

It is a tragedy that he himself did not live to see the passing of the Civil Rights Act which he had created which protected African Americans from discrimination.

It is a tragedy that he did not live to see the landing of the men on the Moon as he had ordered the Apollo 11 Mission to Moon in his presidency.

But he remains one of the USA's most dynamic presidents.

JFK was unafraid to stand up for injustice and fight for what he knew was right.

If you look down through the annals of history, all great leaders have done precisely that – they have been men and women of courage, of vision, of charisma, of determination.

Following the assassination of John F Kennedy, the vice president, Lyndon B Johnson, was sworn in as President aboard Air Force One with the First Lady, Jackie Kennedy, standing beside him, her coat covered in the bloodstains from her husband's fatal wounds earlier that day. And President Johnson vowed to continue the programmes that Kennedy had started. His motto was "Let us continue".

Yes, Kennedy was a glamorous leader.

Yes, he had his many flaws like the rest of us, just like you and me.

He had his highs as well as his lows, but he found what he could do and made it happen, and in so doing, changed the world.

Christian people believe that God has a purpose for us all, a vision, a job to which we are to use the talents He has given us.

Do you ever ask yourself what you could do, however small, to make our world a better place?

So, what can you do, however small, for our town, our Church?

What will be your legacy to those who come after us?

The Revd Fraser R Aitken

Locum Minister