

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 6th February 2022

For me, there is one very positive effect of all the shenanigans from Whitehall that have been dominating our news bulletins these past weeks – the farce has kept my mind off my sore leg as I continue to hobble about the house on my crutch and take my pain killers on a daily basis!

All joking aside, though, as more and more revelations make the headlines, I feel like a stranger in my own country, and I wonder if the qualities which I most value in our culture are becoming a minority cause.

Politics at Westminster seem now characterised by lies and duplicity and self-aggrandisement, whilst integrity and duty and responsibility seem to have been swept under the carpet that self-preservation might remain the priority. It was my hero, Sir Winston Churchill, who said long ago, “Country first, Constituency next, and Party last.”

Those words have long been forgotten by those of the political classes who sit on the green benches at the present time.

Here we are, dealing with the ongoing effects of Covid, huge economic problems, a vastly increased cost of living, rampant homelessness, shocking child poverty, rumours of war in a distant land, and yet, Westminster is so mired in deceit and chaos that the ship of state seems quite rudderless.

O I love Great Britain! I love our Union Flag! Other countries have beautiful brightly coloured flags, but to me, none are more beautiful as the Red, White and Blue of the Union Jack fluttering in the breeze.

And I love our National Anthem. When I was watching the Olympic Games last year, and I heard our national anthem being played as the Flag of the United Kingdom was being hoisted to honour one of our athletes, I got a lump in my throat the size of Ben Nevis!

When I hear the national anthems of other nations being played, none seems to have the pomp and the majesty of “God save the Queen!”

Yes, I love the United Kingdom!

But I don't love what has happened in my lifetime to these four nations that make up our country.

A young journalist once asked Lord Stockton, the late Harold MacMillan, if he thought that there was a specific time the Great Britain began to lose its sheen and its place in the world.

And, without demur, the statesman replied, “The day that the British people stopped going to Church!”

Why is the UK declining?

The simple answer for me is to be found in the Book of Proverbs, Chapter 14, where the author writes, "Righteousness raises a people to greatness; to pursue wrong degrades a nation."

Great Britain was once a great like Israel was great under Moses, David, and Solomon. Both nations were known for justice, peace, morality, wonderful inventions, riches, good government, excellent laws, and God's presence.

But as Israel departed from God's ways, so has this island nation.

Now we are known for excess wealth and dire poverty. How great is a nation where so many of our people don't have decent roof over their head and depend on Foodbanks? How noble is a nation where more money is spent on gambling than religion? What kind of culture sees celebrities and prominent people lie and commit atrocious acts and still accepts them as the norm? How worthy is a country where our political vocabulary has been eradicated of notions of honesty and decency?

None of us, as we read our history books, can ever doubt that our country was raised to greatness. We dominated history for centuries (not always in a positive way, it has to be recognised); we produced eminent scientists and inventors; from our schools and universities, outstanding minds entered the worlds of teaching and medicine and economics and industry and the arts and government, within our own borders and in the great British diaspora.

The protecting hand of God has been evident many times down through the years. Hitler and his Nazi hordes would have undoubtedly invaded these shores had not the weather conditions in Northern France and the English Channel allowed the Dunkirk evacuation.

In the early 19th century, the French historian, Alexis de Tocqueville, travelled the USA from coast to coast. When he returned to France, he wrote, "I searched for the greatness of America in her commodious harbours, her flowing rivers, her abundant factories but I did not find it there. It was only when I went into the churches of America and found them ablaze with righteousness that I found the greatness of America."

He could have said the very same thing about our own little country.

Righteousness does indeed raise a people to greatness.

Righteousness, faithfulness, simply means being fair, upholding the rule of law, not making arbitrary judgements, not showing bias on account of personal favour or gain, showing dependability and consistency and being honest and keeping one's promises.

Leaders who exhibit these virtues are worthy of public support; leaders who don't, are not.

As surely as righteousness raises a people to greatness, so doing wrong degrades it.

It seems to me, in my naivety, that the United Kingdom does not demand greatness of itself anymore.

We do not honour what is good and right.

To the contrary, we honour and reward the dishonest and the disobedient.

So, what's the cure?

In the midst of the despair and the degradation on every side, there can be a resurrection of politics – a politics that thinks the way God thinks, with ideas and practicalities; a politics that values integrity and compassion and honesty; a politics that places a high price on trust and compassion; a politics that is immersed in mercy and truth.

This is not a pious fantasy – this promise comes to us from God.

I firmly believe that our political system, so corrupt and divorced from ordinary people, can be resurrected because Jesus is the resurrection of politics.

Jesus is the idea of God, made flesh, the best that humanity can do and the grace of God that meets us in our weakness.

So, if you are despairing about our country and our politics, please, as I did, go and read Isaiah Chapter 11. Because there you will discover how to walk in God's ways.

Israel is a classic historical example of Proverbs Chapter 14, v 34 – Israel thrived and prospered when the country was led by a good king, and righteousness prevailed. But they suffered and were judged whenever evil leaders were in charge.

What would God's personal message to us be if He spoke to us audibly today?

I believe He would say, "Righteousness raises a people to greatness; to pursue wrong degrades a nation."

Let us pray for this country of ours in these strange days through which we are passing and resolve to do our part to make Britain great again.

What a vision! What a dream!

And it can be ours if we want it enough.

The Revd Fraser R Aitken, Locum Minister.