

Sunday after Ascension

A friend sent me a spoof Church of England strapline this week.

Below the familiar purple C of E logo were the words:

Loving Jesus with a slight air of superiority since AD 597

But the church **has**, from time to time, been shaken out of its superiority. In the mid 17th century the Church of England was sacked. Cromwell had condemned not just Bishops, but also members of the Lower House, saying to members of parliament

Ye are a factious crew, and enemies to all good government. Is there a single virtue now remaining among you? Ye have no more religion than my horse; Gold is your God....

I shall return to Cromwell's notion of virtue later.

So England continued to experience revolution from 1653 to 1660. The King was dead, the covenant between monarchy, parliament, church and people broken.

The concept of covenant lies at the heart of Biblical thinking. It affirms that the God of all creation has made an abiding faithful commitment to the people of Israel. This commitment, enacted at Mount Sinai, asserts that the God of Abraham, Noah and David is first of all a God who is related..not a God who is isolated. God offered the possibility of land, and peace and fruitfulness to his people, so long as they obeyed his commands. If these were disobeyed, the covenant relationship would be at risk. And the people punished. As, argued the prophets, happened in the 587 BC destruction of Jerusalem, and the exile which follows. But the damage was not irreparable: the covenant could be renewed, the people brought back from exile, restored and forgiven. As Ezekiel articulated God's words:

'A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove from your body the heart of stone, and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to obey my ordinances. Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; you shall be my people, and I shall be your God.

The concept of covenant has gained currency again in recent months, first in our thinking about the armed forces. General Sir Richard Dannatt has spoken of the military covenant. That soldiers offered their lives in the service of the nation, and in return expected to be equipped adequately, housed decently, given good hospital and rehab treatment if injured, and know that their families would be supported if their were killed. General Dannert said that the covenant was being breached. Lives were being lost, and appropriate support had been unforthcoming.

The government was slow to respond. But not the public. Crowds started to line the street when units returned home, or when bodies were repatriated. Last Monday a

collection at a memorial service in this cathedral for local judge raised £2000 for Help for Heroes. And this week Joanna Lumley won her campaign in support of settlement rights for Ghurkhas.

Then the Daily Telegraph began its publication of MPs expenditure under their allowance arrangements. Over recent days it has become obvious that the covenant between members of parliament and the people of the country has been under increasing strain. In fact it had been whittled away over recent years, as power has been sucked away from constituency MPs into the Executive, sucked from the cabinet into No 10, sucked from No 10 into the European Parliament. There are major changes, including better financial regulation and political re-structuring which need to be introduced. It will be a very long time before the covenant is restored, and in the meantime the risks of on the one hand political breakdown, on the other hand of the increase of extremism, are high. All of us might in the next week ponder very carefully for whom we should vote in County and European elections. The welfare, wellbeing and stability of this country do lie in our hands. We need to use that power carefully and wisely.

But beyond Election Day there is far more profound work to be done. As a writer in the Tablet put it this week¹, what we have learnt from the current bankruptcy of the market and the contemporary corruption of politics is that the assertion of self-interest is never in the general interest. The current constitutional crisis reveals not so much the bankruptcy of our political institutions, but the absence of virtue in much of our ruling elite, and most of our governing culture. Virtue is an old fashioned word, familiar to Cromwell and it the 17th century, but not to us. But it is a word we might need to bring back into common use because it means simply the public practice of morality. As the people of Israel knew very well, morality is not a private or interior faith. It is about obedience to commandments, it is about the choice of the better over the worse, the good over the evil, and the holy over the profane. We have a demanding task before us if together we are to craft a political, and wider cultural life of shared virtue, where the entire nation debates, and establishes, and inculcates the God-given good which shapes human beings into the sort of people they ought to be.

But for most of us that seems way beyond our pay grade. How can you and I change national culture? Surely that is presumptuous and absurd. Well perhaps there is encouragement in the prophet Ezekiel, writing for people in exile. We are not the first nation to get it wrong. Israel was torn apart, scattered. Defeated. It needed, as Ezekiel vividly put it, a heart transplant to get it back into relationship with God. The situation also required a liturgy: the sprinkling of cleansing water. And the filling of the Spirit.

Sprinkling of water...filling by the spirit: this is familiar stuff for Christians, re-enacted in the nave of this cathedral on Easter Day, and again two Sundays ago. Those to be baptised were asked if they turned to Christ, if they renounced evil, if they repented of their sins. I say it again, this was not about private, interior faith, it was about obedience

¹ The Necessity of Virtue, Phillip Blond, The Tablet 23 May 2009

to the God who longs to bring transformation. That is why the promises were made in front of a large congregation. Those who were baptised might have been little, but they were being brought into something very big indeed: a covenant relationship with the God who, with them and through them yearns to turn the world upside down.

Desmond Tutu, who led the people of South Africa in ways of virtue rather than violence, wrote recently² under the title 'God only has us' 'You are the indispensable agent of change. You should not be daunted by the magnitude of the task before you. Your contribution can inspire others embolden others who are timid, to stand up for truth in the midst of a welter of distortion, propaganda, and deceit; stand up for human dignity and decency at times when these are in desperately short supply. God calls us to be his partners to work for a new kind of society where people matter more than things, more than possessions, where human life is not just respected, but positively revered, where there will be more gentleness, more caring, more sharing, more compassion, more laughter'.

In other words, a covenant restored. And maybe a new strapline drafted:

The Church of England: renewing the life of the nation in penitence and courage.

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• ² *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*, [Doubleday](#), 2004. [ISBN 978-0385-47784-0](#)