

The Chaplain asks...*is this the end of democracy?*

On the fourth Sunday in Lent this year, preaching a sermon at Evensong in Holy Trinity Church, I made a personal confession. I had found, I said, the first few months of 2016 something of a challenge to the theological virtue of *hope*. The words I used were as follows: *I have to admit that I have found the first months of 2016 a challenge to hope. As I look at our world, it seems full of the darkness of death. On every side is the poisonous stench of the ways of division, death and decay. Syria, a huge refugee crisis, the sound of the Trump (the politician that is), the possibility of a British exit from the European Union. So as 2016 comes to an end, have I lost hope altogether, with the black clouds of Brexit and Trump – not to mention any of the others – now confirmed realities?*

Well, the answer is that your Chaplain has *not* lost hope! Though I am now more convinced than ever that Democracy is under very profound threat and that this crisis must be seriously addressed by any of us who continue to value our Western civilisation, based as it is upon the democratic process, the rule of law and justice, mutual tolerance and respect and the upholding of human rights.

The crisis is not new. When I worked in Strasbourg, part of my brief was as an Associate staff member of the Conference of European Churches' Church and Society Commission. The Strasbourg office interacted a great deal with the Council of Europe and for some considerable time the Council has had the matter of addressing the 'democratic deficit' high on its agenda.

A wise President of the United States – it was Franklin D Roosevelt – once said that *Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education.*

I do not disagree with that statement, though I would wish to qualify it slightly for our age and time, and the challenges that democracy faces through demagogues like Trump and Farage. Education alone is at best a partial solution. There has to be also a process of

conscientization – to use the term coined originally by the Brazilian social theorist and philosopher Paulo Friere (who, coincidentally whilst exiled from Brazil in the 1970s worked at the World Council of Churches here in Geneva).

Essentially conscientization is about educated and informed reflection upon our social realities, and particularly subjecting our *inherited social myths* to critical analysis. All of this to lead to action which *transforms individuals and societies*. The expression found a ready home within an earlier generation of political theologians working to transform and empower oppressed peoples in South America, where poverty was used as a weapon of the state and the threats of torture and ‘disappearance’ for dissenting voices now sadly well documented.

Although material poverty is sadly far from absent in Western democratic societies, the real problem is a *moral vacuum*, a huge poverty of spirit, which refuses to call to account some of our society’s deepest, darkest and determinedly held myths. Post modernism has left our Western world in particular the horrendous legacy of suspicion of *reason* and *expertise* along with a complete relativism, particularly in the ethical field. *‘It doesn’t matter what you believe just so long as you believe that it doesn’t matter what you believe’* is the tautologous definition of the postmodernist, but very revealing!

Looking at the recent shambolic Presidential election and the earlier Referendum on European Union membership in Britain, we see some of the consequences of a failure of moral education. The opposing sides in the Referendum in the UK did not offer any reasoned arguments, but rather – on the one side – fed the fires of jingoistic xenophobia. The Remain campaign lurched from one reaction to the next, with no underlying *reasoned* strategy, which is not surprising as the instigator of the Referendum was interested only in saving his own political party’s future. Even a post-modern society has a residue of morality which would reject *that* reason! As to the United States election, there has by general agreement never been such an unpleasant and brutal campaign. The analysis of voting suggests a number of things – most particularly that the greater part of President-elect Trump’s support comes from older,

white men, and that a substantial number of his voters were not prepared to state their voting intentions. The United States has deep divisions, and there will be much work for politicians to do to help bring the country back together, let alone to 'make America great'.

Now of course there are exceptions to these sweeping generalisations. Not everyone who supported Trump or Brexit can be castigated as a moral unregenerate! And I do not for one moment wish to suggest that! But *some* (and I stress that word) of the unexpectedly large support for the maverick politicians who have recently succeeded does indeed come from the uncritical acceptance of social myths encouraging separation, independence and the dark fears of difference – be it racial, cultural, social, economic, educational or whatever. Such myths must be constantly challenged by a civilised society.

So where is the *hope* in all of this? For the Christian, our hope is in the risen and ascended Christ, King of the Universe. If, as members of his Body, the Church, we live his Good News in our communities where *all* people are valued and respected, if we have a concern for the poor and afflicted, the stranger and the outcast, if we continue to live as people who believe that acknowledging Christ's reign leads to human flourishing, healing and health, then hope continues alive in our world. If we are prepared to let Christ speak words of judgement on our darkest social myths of suspicion and separation, then hope continues alight in our world. If we care about Christian ethics, and have the courage to say that *some things are just plain wrong* and come from deeply disordered hearts, then there is hope.

And hope, indeed, for the democratic process. For many years people have spoken of a democratic deficit – a sense of alienation of ordinary people from the political process, not least because of a suspicion of the 'professional politician', further fuelled by hostile and largely amoral media empires, not to mention the freedom to express the most extreme of views through social media. It is now imperative that this be effectively addressed before further damage ensues. There has to be a *reconnection* between elected and electors, and a new process of engagement, based on educated consciences, for the saving of the democratic political process as we

have come to know it and, for most of us, to value it. Consciences need to be educated not just in the hearts of electors, but also in the hearts of those who seek public office. It can never be acceptable to give up on means of truth for the sake of the end of achieving power. We have seen too much of that in this year of unexpected and unwelcome outcomes.

So as we prepare to welcome 2017, let us do so as Christian people who have a vision of hope because we have a vision of the risen and ascended Lord, whose purposes are of truth, justice and peace, and of human flourishing for *all* people.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alec Gordon". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.