

St Andrew's, Chesterton
Remembrance Day 2008
Ezekiel 31.1-14, Matthew 13.31-32
Preached by Nick Moir

Listen to this, the editorial from a leading weekly news journal:

There are times, I'm ashamed to say, when one feels prone to sneer at Americans. Why must everything they experience be described as 'awesome'? Where is their restraint? Why do they gush so?

This is not such a time. On the contrary, the lesson of this extraordinary election is that the very qualities which trigger British condescension – naivety, love of hyperbole, maudlin religiosity – are integral to that magnificent and essentially unexportable commodity, American democracy.... What British PM would ever rise to such soaring rhetoric as this, from Obama? 'Starting today, let us finish the work that needs to be done, and usher in a new birth of freedom on this Earth.' And what concession speech from a European politician ever attained the religious grace of this, from McCain? 'Senator Obama has achieved a great thing for himself and for his country. I applaud him for it, and offer him my sincere sympathy that his beloved grandmother did not live to see this day, though our faith assures us that she is at rest in the presence of her creator and so very proud of the good man she helped raise.' Democracy, with its tawdry compromises, may amount to nothing more than the 'least bad form of government': but in America this week it was much more.

I know how to describe the election we've witnessed: it was 'awesome'.

Jeremy O'Grady, Editor-in-chief, The Week

America is constitutionally a secular nation, the separation of state and religion enshrined in its constitution; Britain is constitutionally a Christian nation with an established church. And yet the truth is that we as a breed are a pretty irreligious lot; even believing Prime Ministers daren't 'do God' for fear of ridicule and public scorn. Yet American would-be presidents dare not omit references to God for fear of public rejection.

In that remarkable Old Testament reading from Ezekiel, the prophet has a picture of a forest dominated by one vast tree, the mighty and glorious cedar of Lebanon- my favourite tree, as it happens. What is this tree and the others referring to? Well, it makes it clear from the beginning:

Consider Assyria, a cedar of Lebanon with fair branches and forest shade, and of great height, its top among the clouds.

Assyria was the America of its day, the only superpower with an empire stretching far and wide. That empire, like the tree, had boughs that had grown large, branches long. In it the birds of the air made their nests – commentators believe that this refers to vassal states, smaller countries that lived under the military and economic protection of the empire.

The Assyrians, under Sennacherib, had conquered and laid waste the northern kingdom of Israel and had besieged and almost strangled the southern Judah, yet despite this treatment, a Jewish prophet could gaze admiringly at this empire:

It was beautiful in its greatness... The cedars in the garden of God could not rival it... no tree in the garden of God was like it in beauty.

And yet the prophet foresees the bringing low of the Assyrians – their arrogance, their hubris would be their downfall. The tree would be felled and the birds of the air hop along its fallen trunk.

Human empires down the ages have risen and fallen; none have lasted, not even the mighty British empire, and perhaps hubris has got a lot to do with the reason why.

And perhaps a reason why America still enjoys its leading position in the world has something to do with that maudlin religiosity secular Britons are so prone to sneer at. In Ezekiel's vision the tree was *Beautiful in its greatness, in the length of its branches; for its roots went down to abundant water.*

In our thinking about the tree of life this past month or two we have thought about the roots; that it is when we are rooted in Christ and draw our sustenance from him through prayer, through listening to his word, through the sacraments of the bread and wine in Communion – it is then that the tree of life and faith can grow and bear fruit and healing leaves.

But what of the roots of our society, our nation, on this our national day of Remembrance?

I have been reading recently a book by Richard Harries, the former Bishop of Oxford, called *The Re-enchantment of Morality*. In it I read these words, written months before most of us had even heard of terms such as credit crunch or liquidity.

Seriousness about the moral life, which has characterized so much of western history, died out, according to the novelist Rose Macaulay, in the 1920s. According to T S Eliot, by 1938 it was doubtful whether our civilization was built on anything more secure than a belief in financial institutions.

Was he right? It may be that the next few months will be a test of that. It may be that those institutions have been the great Cedar of Lebanon of our age and they could still come crashing down, perhaps because of the hubris of some or many who have been powerful within them. It is a good question whether the real modern empires are not political states but commercial and financial institutions that have global reach with their vast boughs and branches – banks, branches, isn't that rather a prescient image?

But back to Richard Harries. He goes on, and I'm going to quote him at some length:

Thank God, World War II proved [Eliot] wrong. Many millions fought and lost their lives to oppose Naziism. So those who grew up in the 1940s and 1950s were brought up in a world in which certain moral values were secure, were regarded as fundamental and were taught in families, schools and churches. But, we are now living on moral credit, in particular the credit provided by the Christianity of the past, for all its manifest flaws...

Of course the balance is not all negative. There are a number of areas in which our generation has a great deal more moral awareness than our forebears, and is active on crucial issues to which our ancestors were blind... the environment, fair trade, human rights and child abuse to mention just a few. But most of these are political issues. When it comes to personal morality, to the kind of environment in which children are brought up, there are major doubts. Many commentators now, who certainly cannot be accused of belonging to 'the good old days' brigade, talk about a social recession in our country. The prisons are fuller than they have ever been, and teaching in some of our urban schools is a harrowing task.

So perhaps in these days of worry about financial recession we should be as worried if not more worried about this social recession. T S Eliot was not right – our civilization is held together by more than our financial institutions, thank God – and I think the recent events in America have shown that – but I believe all these things should give us and our nation much to ponder. Today we remember those who courageously and selflessly have demonstrated that some things, which we too often take for granted, are worth dying for, that some lofty trees have to be brought low for the good of all. As we honour their memory it is right to be stirred from any complacency in our generation and to be inspired to do what is right and good and noble and true.