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Churchman

EDITORIAL

The Turn of the Tide?

Every once in a while the television news contains an item related to the tide. If the story is about people, it is usually because someone has wandered off along an isolated beach or waded too far out to sea, only to discover that the tide has turned and he has been caught unawares. Sometimes we are treated to a gallant rescue operation in which daring helicopter pilots brave the elements in order to rescue the unfortunate victim, though when that happens it must be admitted that the subtext of the plot often reads something like “But of course, the idiot should never have got himself caught up like that in the first place.” If the tide is ebbing, rescuing people tends to fade out of the picture, giving way to saving sea creatures instead. Whales and dolphins sometimes find themselves stranded by retreating water and have to be coaxed back into deeper water by complex manoeuvres that can make rescuing human beings seem almost like a piece of cake. Sadly, these stories do not always turn out well. People drown, and beached animals cannot always be revived. The sea is dangerous, and the tide must be watched carefully, since we cannot always see when it is about to turn.

Tides have often been used as analogies of human affairs. The popularity of political figures and their parties is said to ebb and flow, and “fluctuation” can describe anything from the temperature to the currency exchange rate. Everyone knows that these things are constantly changing, but it is often difficult to know what their next move will be. Economists and weathermen predict recessions or spells of good weather which do not materialise when they are supposed to, and when they do, they usually manage to catch the would-be prophets off guard. Depression in the mid-Atlantic is nothing compared to the look on the forecaster’s face when he has got it wrong, and connoisseurs of the genre will have noticed that it is when the weather is brightest that the presenter seems to be at her most glum. “I hope you all enjoyed a nice weekend” is a phrase that often carries a note of reproach, as if it neither the sunshine nor the enjoyment of it was supposed to happen!

Those who follow the news will have noticed that 2017 is the fiftieth anniversary of the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in England and Wales. As commemorations go, this would not seem to be a particularly noteworthy one, but the British Broadcasting Corporation has taken a different view. Ignoring the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, perhaps because it happened a long time ago and in a foreign country, the BBC has spared no effort in its drive to celebrate what it calls Gay Britannia. Even an organisation as staid as the National Trust has got into the act with “Prejudice and Pride,” its way of joining remembrance of Jane Austen, who died in 1817, with what it sees as the most important event of 1967.

But the really interesting thing is that there has been a reaction against this kind of thing. Writing in *The Times*, Libby Purves let it be known that she has heard more than enough about Gay Britannia, despite her liberal views on the subject. Nobody seems to have bothered about Jane Austen, but since Andrea Leadsom recently described her in Parliament as “our greatest living author,” she probably has nothing to fear. On the other hand, several people have been upset that an obscure country squire in Norfolk, who left his house to the Trust when he died in 1969, has recently been “outed” as gay, and this (contested) claim has to be celebrated, especially by those who volunteer to work for the Trust. Many of them have objected to this and a few have even cancelled their membership, which has led the Trust to apologise and insist that nobody will be forced to join in these questionable festivities if they do not want to. Freedom of non-expression on this subject is so unusual nowadays that it made the mainstream news, and just as remarkably, it did so in a way that failed to present those involved in the protest as homophobes, Christians or other undesirables. Is this a media oversight, or are we witnessing the beginnings of a turning tide?

As the promoters of Gay Britannia well know, we are now in a situation where it is virtually impossible to speak out against the widespread embrace of homosexual behaviour. We are not talking about criticism of private activities among consenting adults, which might reasonably be thought to be nobody else’s business, but about things like public displays of nudity, which are apparently now a standard feature of the widely-publicised Gay Pride parades. The idea that anti-social behaviour like that is inappropriate at the best of times and that those who object to it (or who are uninterested) should not be forced to view it, is dismissed as narrow-minded, or simply passed over in silence. Britain has not yet caught up with the Republic of Ireland, whose taoiseach (prime minister)

has made a point of marching in Pride parades, not only in Dublin but also in Belfast, in what he probably thinks is an imaginative attempt to bridge the sectarian divide in that country, but are we far behind? Theresa May has expressed her support for the homosexual agenda, though she has so far avoided taking part in such potentially controversial events, but nobody can be sure that such restraint will last for long.

Nor does the pressure stop there. Shortly after the recent UK election, the leader of the Liberal Democratic Party resigned, not because he had lost—in fact, he had not done too badly—but because he had been mercilessly hounded over his views about gay marriage and abortion. Tim Farron has been a Liberal Democrat for many years and had been a relatively obscure MP until he was elected party leader in 2015, following the massive defeat the party suffered under the once-charismatic Nick Clegg. Mr Farron's advantage was his very obscurity. He had managed to avoid an unwelcome association with the coalition government that had been the downfall of Mr Clegg, and nobody disliked him enough to stand in his way. At the time, relatively few people noticed that his election marked the first time in living memory that an Evangelical Christian had been chosen to lead a major political party.

Mr Farron has never hidden his faith, but he does not wear it on his sleeve either. He has never tried to persuade people to vote for him because of it, nor has he pushed an agenda that only a committed believer would support. His policy has been one of “live and let live.” He wants the freedom to be a Christian, but in return for that, he is prepared to grant others the freedom not to be. In practical terms, this has meant that he has supported things like same-sex marriage for those who want them, without being committed to them himself. Yet as soon as he was elected party leader, there were some in the media who were determined to out him as an unreconstructed homophobe. The only evidence they had for this was that he is an Evangelical, a fact that is assumed to guarantee that he must be homophobic. That his homophobia is well hidden beneath apparently liberal views makes it even more imperative to ferret it out—after all, Adolf Hitler presented himself as a “social democrat” to voters who presumably would never have voted for him if they had known the truth, so who knows what Mr Farron might be capable of?

The initial attempt to discredit Mr Farron ran out of steam however, perhaps because it was thought that, as the leader of a small and failing party, he could be safely ignored. But that changed as the 2017 election approached and it was rumoured that the Liberal Democrats might benefit from growing dissatisfaction with the two major parties. Mr Farron

therefore had to be dealt with, and the media were not slow to rise to the task. He could not be attacked on his voting record or on anything he had said in a speech, so the interviewer tried a different tactic. She asked him whether he thought that “gay sex,” as she called it, was a sin. It was a loaded question, and initially Mr Farron deflected it by saying that we are all sinners, perhaps hoping that he could then move on to talk about more important matters. But he was not let off the hook as easily as that. After persistent hounding, which even those unsympathetic to him and his Christian views found distasteful, Mr Farron was finally pushed into saying that he did not think it was sinful, an answer that he hoped would finally let him change the subject. Unfortunately, that was not to be, and he soon realised that he had stepped into a trap that had been set for him.

Most Evangelical Christians understood what Mr Farron had been subjected to and were sympathetic to his plight. Without condoning his answer, they recognised that his faith is sincere and that he had succumbed under pressure. A few days later, after the election was over, he confirmed that perception by telling the world about his inner spiritual conflict and by resigning, because in the end, his faith matters to him more than his career. He must have realised that even those he was trying to appease did not believe what he had said about “gay sex”—and that their scepticism was justified.

What the Farron episode did was bring out into the open something that many people had known for a long time but that nobody had ever stated publicly. This is that people with Christian views and principles are not welcome in public life, and cannot now lead a major political party. There were some commentators on the left, like Polly Toynbee in *The Guardian*, who refused to accept Mr Farron’s explanation and tried to claim that he had been pushed out, not by his faith but by his electoral failure, but few people agreed with her. There were even some secular columnists, like David Aaronovitch in the *The Times*, who came to his defence and rounded on the supposedly liberal media for its inquisitorial techniques. The archbishop of York wrote in *The Daily Telegraph* that the hounding Mr Farron had experienced was unacceptable, and even the archbishop of Canterbury tweeted that he was a good man who had been badly treated.

Lesser folk were left in something of a quandary after all this. Did Mr Farron’s experience mean that Christians could now forget about political involvement altogether, or did the mixed reaction from outsiders signal that things had gone too far and that what had happened to him would not be repeated? The issue was clouded still further because at the

same time as this was happening, the government was entering into a pact with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Northern Ireland, which on this subject holds views indistinguishable from those of Mr Farron, but which unlike him, does not keep those views to itself. The alliance with the DUP was widely criticised, not least by Ruth Davidson, a lesbian who is also leader of the Scottish Conservatives, who said that if she had to choose between her party and her sexuality, the latter would come first. Ms Davidson was not able to scupper the deal with the DUP however, so it is hard to say where the nation stands on the issue, and it may be some time before the matter is tested again.

While this drama was playing out in the political sphere, the Church of England found itself caught up with it in a different way. The Scottish Episcopal Church held its general synod in June, where by a single vote, it chose to alter its canons, making same-sex marriage acceptable. Clergy and parishes were allowed to decide for themselves whether to perform such marriages, but at the time of writing apparently only a tiny number—all the usual suspects, of course—have actually done so. Is this a sign that the activists may be out of touch with the grassroots, and that what seemed to be an irresistible tide may be turning? It will be some years before we shall know for sure, but the failure of the great majority of Scottish Episcopalians to take advantage of their newfound freedom, despite some pressure from outsiders to do so, may be an indicator that the reality on the ground is not what the media would have us believe.

More intriguing still were the July sessions of the Church of England's general synod, where motions related to sexuality dominated the agenda. There are differing reports of what happened, but there is no doubt that a couple of sensible amendments to what were deliberately controversial motions were defeated in a way that left a bad taste in many mouths. Particularly disturbing was the manner in which the archbishop of York, of whom better was expected, put down Andrea Williams after she had made a speech in defence of orthodox Christian faith. Mrs Williams was neither aggressive nor particularly controversial in what she said, but the archbishop dismissed her with some irrelevant remarks and advised the synod to vote against what she was proposing. It is hard to know what he was hoping to gain from such a brush-off, because although the proposed amendment was duly lost, so was the archbishop's reputation among orthodox believers.

Dr Sentamu is unlikely to get that reputation back, not least because the Church of England Evangelical Council (CEEC) has now weighed in on the issue. There had been some criticism that the CEEC had gone

“missing in action” after the synod, but if that view was ever justified, its open letter published a month after the event, and in the middle of the summer holidays, quickly dispelled any such impression. Under the chairmanship of the bishop of Blackburn, a man of great integrity and courage who is a true leader of the Evangelical wing of the church, the CEEC pulled no punches. The July synod had shown that things have got out of hand and that the attempts made to accommodate liberal opinion in the church have not worked. The house of bishops had signed off on a statement that reaffirmed the traditional position on Christian marriage but had also opened the door for the “radical inclusion” of homosexual people within the church. Nobody knows what the boundaries of “radical inclusion” are, but it is a fair assumption that it does not extend to allowing a bishop to become the patron of a Gay Pride parade, as recently happened in Liverpool. Nor is it likely to mean opening cathedrals to gay events, including “pride eucharists.” The latter had already come under fire on the ground that the eucharist is by definition inclusive, and that to aim it at one particular group is an abuse of the sacrament. What would the reaction be if a cathedral were to offer “black eucharists,” for example?

It is too early to say whether these stirrings amount to a real push back against the rising tide or not, but perhaps there are grounds for thinking that the seemingly unstoppable flow may at last be starting to ebb. It would be nice to think that the church would take the lead in this, but that is probably not going to happen. Whether we like it or not, the church has followed the social drift in this area, and it will probably only be when the public mood changes that it will start to change too. The good news is that perhaps that is happening and if so, then those who fail to notice it in time may find themselves stranded like the unfortunate victims who did not wake up in time to escape the rush of the oncoming flood. This year has seen many historical commemorations, but one that has been overlooked is that it was in 1717 that the convocation of Canterbury was shut down for 135 years, because it had become a disorderly talking shop in which nothing of any importance could be decided. Is general synod, the modern descendant of that convocation, heading in the same direction? History seldom repeats itself exactly, but perhaps our rather too complacent prelates should consider whether their ineffectual deliberations are of any use, and do what they can to avoid being stranded like whales on Dover beach, as the tide of faith ebbs away.

GERALD BRAY