

WINDS OF CHANGE

A Reflection on the Grenfell Tower Fire

When Harold Macmillan was Prime Minister he gave a speech to the Parliament of South Africa in Cape Town on 3 February 1960 which was widely regarded as prophetic. The wind of change, he said, was blowing through the continent of Africa. In his tour he had noticed a great rise in national consciousness in the African nations at that time under colonial rule. He described this rise of national consciousness as a new political reality, and added, 'We must accept it as a fact, and our national policies must take account of it.'

His words came back to me after the disastrous fire that destroyed Grenfell Tower in Kensington, and the outpouring of anger that it released. Our hearts go out to the injured and the bereaved, and to those who have lost everything, including their homes. We recoil in horror as we imagine what they must have gone through. The anger and outrage that have followed are, it seems to me, signs of a new wind of change that seems to be blowing in our day. The anger is a new political reality which our national policies need to take into account.

There have been other signs of this new reality: the rise of Isis, the vote for Brexit and the election of Donald Trump. While the factors that have led to these things are many and diverse, one common factor, it seems to me, is the angry demand for justice from those who feel left out or oppressed by the world of power. Those who lead us do not seem to know the way that leads to peace. There are ever-widening gaps between rich and poor, between the elite and the ordinary people, between the governors and the governed, between big business and

local communities. The poorer people in Kensington are angry that over the years they have been treated less well than the better off; that their repeated warnings were ignored, that building standards have not been upgraded in the light of previous disasters – there have been repeated calls for the installation of sprinkler systems, for example, but almost none have been installed. And there is anger at the inadequate response on the ground – chaotic compared with Manchester and the London Bridge bombings – anger that those responsible will not accept responsibility, a pernicious feature of today’s blame-averse culture. The head of the management company was conspicuous by his absence, and by his failure to accept responsibility. Its not surprising that there has been such an outpouring of anger and outrage.

We’ve had enough! That’s what these diverse events seem to me to be saying. I’m not a fan of Jeremy Corbin, but he picked up this feeling and articulated it in the election. We’ve had enough of things being done in the interests of the few, not the many. The Indian scholar, Pankaj Mishra, has described the times we live in as the Age of Anger – that’s the title of the book he’s written about it. When justice is denied, anger erupts, and fuels the winds of change. Like African national consciousness in Macmillan’s day, the anger of the poor is now one of the facts we have to accept, and our national policies have to take account of it.

In biblical times, when national disasters occurred, the response of the prophets was to ask where the hand of God was in what had happened, and they often had surprising answers. For example, when the tyrant Nebuchadnezzar (who had nothing to learn from ISIS about brutality), conquered Israel in the sixth century BC and deported its leading citizens to Babylon, Jeremiah declared that that this disaster

had come upon Israel because she had been faithless and had not followed the ways of God. I doubt that that was the view of the King and the leading citizens at the time, but it is the view that has been preserved in the Bible – as holy scripture, no less! And that ought to make us think.

Is God somehow involved in these events? Well, Yes and No. I don't think we can say God is directly involved, willing disaster or using people like the London Bridge terrorists, in a direct way, like Jeremiah believed that God was using Nebuchadnezzar – such a God would not be consistent with the way he revealed himself in Jesus. But when these things happen I do think that God in effect holds up a mirror and says to us, 'Look! See what happens when you depart from my ways.' And there are many modern-day prophets, in the unexpected guise of journalists and political commentators, whose message points the same way. They direct our attention to the factors that lead to the outpouring of anger, whether its the anger of the terrorist, or the electorate, or the victims of disaster.

So what is it that God wants us to see when he holds up the mirror? I think there are two things in particular. The first is that there is no peace without justice – and it is social justice to which the Bible refers. The prophets berated the rich and the powerful because they ignored the law which required them to be generous towards the poor. For example, slaves had to be freed after seven years, and it was not enough just to let them go; they were to be showered with gifts upon their release: 'when you set him free, do not let him go empty-handed. Give to him lavishly from your flock, from your threshing floor and from your winepress. Be generous to him as the LORD your God has blessed you.' (*Deut. 15.13-14*)

Over recent decades the gap between the rich and the poor has widened steadily, and is now gross. Austerity falls proportionately much harder on the poor, than on the rich, including the moderately better off. We are not all in it together. Many in this country, like most of the world have little or no hope of sharing in the prosperity of the rich, and this produces anger. Eventually it boils over, and some resort to violence. Of course, nothing, not even extreme poverty, justifies terrorism. The people who do these things are evil, but if God is holding the mirror he wants us to see that economic injustice provides fertile ground for evil to take hold, and that the unequal provision of resources leads to disasters like the Grenfell Tower fire.

A second thing is the way economic considerations drive out spiritual and ethical concerns. Economics now provides the way in which the world is understood and solutions to its problems are sought. Profit and shareholder value have become the only bottom lines, driving people to cut corners and routinely take the cheaper option to keep costs down. This is what happened with the cladding used at Grenfell Tower. Another type of cladding that is fireproof could have been used, and at a small extra cost of just under £5000, but the cheaper option was chosen. It was within the rules – another, fateful example of people doing the minimum necessary, and defending their actions by saying: ‘We’ve done nothing wrong.’ Sometimes, just doing the minimum is ethically inadequate – like Philip Green’s bail-out of the BHS pension fund. There are some areas of our lives that simply do not belong in the realm of profit.

Below profit there are two, more basic, bottom lines: people and the planet. Meeting these bottom lines requires ethical commitment and spiritual courage. We have to move away from the economic view that

sees people as consumers, defining us by our appetites, to a view that sees us as spiritual and ethical beings, defined by our hopes, our relationships, and our values – a view that is so evident in the response of the local community in Kensington. It ought not take a disaster to remind us that first and foremost we are spiritual and moral beings. As Jesus taught us, the spiritual and the moral come before the economic: ‘Do not ask anxiously, “What are we to eat? What are we to drink? What are we to wear?” Set your mind on God’s kingdom and his justice before everything else, and the rest will come to you as well.’ (*Matt. 6.31, 33*) Jesus – indeed the whole of the Bible – is clear: social and moral concerns take priority over economic concerns. In Harold Macmillan’s words, this priority we must accept as a fact, and our national policies must take account of it.

If God is holding up the mirror, this, I believe, is what God wants us to see, and I pray that the winds of change will blow us in that direction.