

Taking back control?

Phil Jump sees the parallels between the current political situation in our own nations and Israel under the Roman occupation. Some of the early disciples hoped that Jesus ‘would be the one who set Israel free’. However, the message of Jesus, and Israel’s own prophets, is not so much to ‘take back control’ as to restore God’s calls to justice and equity to their rightful place in their society.

During the currency of this particular edition of FIBQ, two key festivals that feature in the Christian calendar are Easter and Ascension. Such has been the case for centuries, but as we engage with them in the current political climate, we might notice within the original New Testament narratives a common concern that not only connects them, but bears a notable resemblance to some of our present preoccupations.

One of the well-known resurrection narratives is the story of the Easter Day conversation on the road to Emmaus. Gradually an unknown stranger catches up with two bewildered travellers and reveals the deeper purposes that lie behind the events of Calvary. They eventually discover that their companion is none other than the risen Christ, causing them to rush back to Jerusalem to share the news of their encounter. Yet the conversation

begins with a statement of disappointment “We thought that he would be the one who would set Israel free” (Luke 24:21). And whatever explanations and assurances were offered en route to Emmaus, this aspiration appears to have never really left Jesus’ first followers. The question that is posed by the Apostles immediately before Jesus declares them to be “Witnesses . . . to the ends of the earth” is “Will you at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6)

Behind these aspirations lie some very real and challenging political circumstances. Israel found itself bound into a pan-European empire with its centre of power in Rome. For many this was portrayed as necessary for cohesion and stability, but for those with a sense of deeper national identity this was both an affront and a source of despair. This was particularly the case for Jesus’ compatriots whose

religious identity was rooted in their inheritance of a land that had now been reduced to a Roman colony.

Few were satisfied with the status quo, causing many to rehearse those Scriptures that portrayed the coming of a Messiah whom they expected would enable them to “take back control” and reclaim their national sovereignty. And so, as his followers increasingly recognised Jesus as fulfilling this promise, their expectations were inevitably fuelled that he would indeed restore their nation to its former political greatness – at the very least being able to operate independently of Rome, if not taking its place as the dominant superpower of the region.

We might assume that behind these conversations and questions lay not only a set of expectations and assumptions, but a growing sense of frustration that these expectations were not being fulfilled.



The parallels with the current political situation in our own nations are somewhat obvious. The narrative of Brexiteers is that we are similarly locked into a political entity from which we would be better free. Remainers argue with equal passion that the EU has provided a cohesion and stability that previous generations fought and longed for. It is quite an unnerving task to produce a piece about Brexit for a quarterly journal because, despite the ongoing political stalemate at the time of writing, I have no idea of the likely state of affairs by the time this is published and read! So please bear with me if I've called it wrong!

Despite their differences, Leavers and Remainers alike are expressing increasing frustration that our inability to progress the Brexit issue has pretty much paralysed our national politics. Recent climate protests highlight how bigger and potentially much more important issues risk being sidelined while wary politicians seek a way forward on Europe. We can recognise within this many of the same frustrations that lay behind the Ascension Day question of when Jesus was going to get on with the job of delivering the new Kingdom.

We may have our suspicions about the underlying political motives, but the presenting issue from our politicians is that no one is really clear about what "Brexit" actually means. Hardliners argue that we should go for a straight "no deal" while the moderates argue that the British People always assumed, in voting for Brexit, that this would involve an ongoing managed relationship with Europe. Then there's the whole issue of the numbers – only 52% of the electorate actually voted for Brexit, which

means that the remaining 48% also need to be considered. Some of those arguing for a second vote have even advocated this on the basis that in the intervening years some older voters will have died off and been replaced by younger citizens who are more likely to be pro-Europe. The result of the original referendum does not represent, they argue, the mind of the people today.



Again, as we return to the Gospel narratives, we might recognise that while there was common consent that Jesus was the Messiah, views were more diverse about what Messiahship actually entailed, even to the point of being at odds with Jesus' own sense of vocation. And dare I suggest that the common thread of human nature that we can detect in both is that, whether we are talking about Messiahship or Brexit, we all have a tendency to assume that our take is the right take and it's up to those in whom we invest our expectations to deliver it.

But are these parallels anything other than an interesting observation or might the questions raised by the early disciples have something to say to our present circumstances? Well at the very least they remind us that humanity has been this way before, and they dispel the myth that the narratives and traditions of our faith have nothing to say to the complexities of our present world.

However, it seems too that when we explore the broader narratives of Jesus, he offers a radically different take on what he means when he invites us to seek the coming of God's Kingdom in a form other than mere political reorganisation. Had those with aspirations of political freedom looked more closely at their Biblical texts, they might have

noticed that the principles of justice and equity that he espoused were embedded in their nation's fortunes from the start. The early history books invite the people not simply to "take the land" but to establish a society where the weakest and most vulnerable were valued and cared for; where principles of "Sabbath" moderated exploitation, wealth inequality and over-consumption. Priests, Monarchs and Prophets alike constantly reminded the people that their prosperity rested not on political or military alliances but their observation of a law code that was expressed through social justice and founded on a call to "love the Lord your God" with every ounce of their being.

The constant thread throughout the Old Testament is that if their political fortunes were wavering, their call was not so much to "take back control" as to restore God's calls to justice and equity to their rightful place in their society. We should not be surprised therefore that when their "Messiah" arrived, he did not come to play political and military power games, but to renew this call to embrace God's values in their national life. This was a Kingdom based not on political borders but common humanity.

As our United Kingdom awaits its "Messiah" – a figure who can somehow rise from the political foray and lead us, one way or another to a wonderful resolution to the current Brexit impasse – my fear remains that it will actually resolve very little. And as we forever seek political and economic solution to our world's ills, God's Word shows itself to be irritatingly relevant and tenacious in its call to seek truth; seek justice; and seek first the Kingdom of God.  



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