

The Great Reversal?

Phil Jump asks whether churches should withdraw from the world in the face of the current troubling state of geo-politics, or whether we should face the realities of evil and unscrupulous power, and sing the Lord's song in a strange land.

Recent events have served for me as a poignant reminder of my last contribution to FIBQ, which explored the dynamics at work when we claim divine endorsement for a particular political or societal view. It was prompted by the rather bizarre speech from Azerbaijan's President Aliyev at the opening of the COP29 summit in November 2024. In it, the president claimed his nation's natural resources as "a gift from God" which carried an implied responsibility to consume and distribute them.

Even then I made passing mention of the US Presidential election, but in the weeks that have followed, narratives around the idea that Trump was somehow appointed by God for this moment have gathered significant momentum in some quarters. The same dichotomy of view that I outlined at the time quickly emerged when the Bishop of Washington, Mariann Budde, implored him to "have mercy

on those people in our country who are scared". Her argument was simple – if the incoming President truly believed himself to be appointed by God, it was incumbent upon him to display a Christ-like attitude towards those he had relentlessly lambasted in the run-up to his inauguration. Needless to say, as Trump's subsequent social media posts revealed, the President was less than impressed.

Whatever divine endorsement we may or may not believe Trump to enjoy, few would dispute that the world order has significantly changed since he took up office, with the cause of almost all of these realities in some way or other being traceable to the Oval office. Many are deeply troubled by the current state of geo-politics and there are increasing questions for those of us who hold to a Christian faith as to how indeed we sing the Lord's song in these increasingly strange lands.

God's Choice – delusion or a disturbing wake up call?

Many would, no doubt, argue that Trump's claims to be divinely appointed and anointed are entirely delusional, citing the turmoil and harm that his actions have initiated as evidence in itself that this is the case. The argument is pretty compelling, but it is by no means the only possible conclusion. I am reminded immediately of those Old Testament prophets who spoke into an equally frightening and unstable world, insisting to a people who demanded words of relief and reassurance that no such narrative was authentically of God. Their argument was that the nation's impending disaster was indeed part of a divine purpose, intended to underline for them the inevitable consequences of their corporate abandonment of the values and purposes of God.



**Is the Lord not in Zion?
Jeremiah weeping over
the nation (1512)
Michelangelo
Sistine Chapel
Photo: Wikimedia**

I feel at this stage I need to offer something of a health warning. I am seeking to think out loud here and not necessarily endorse every idea I pursue. But I want to explore a possibility that to some might seem not only preposterous, but downright offensive. Yet it seems to me that we need at times to inhabit the space from which we might normally recoil, if only to properly test our reasons for doing so. So how might we understand our world if we embraced the idea that the various players in the current geopolitical order, for all their apparent misdemeanours, may indeed be there at God's will? And is it possible to distinguish between divine installation and divine approval of the agendas that subsequently follow? There is at least biblical precedent for such a proposition. The church in Rome would have been all too aware of being at the political centre of an oppressive earthly empire, yet are encouraged by the Apostle Paul to see such authorities as established and instituted by God (Romans 13:1-2).

The planks in our own eyes

I count myself amongst those who harbour considerable unease about the current state and direction of our world, but it is this that has caused me to re-examine the underlying assumptions that give rise to my own Christian activism. I am prompted to

question the degree to which I have embraced a Judaeo-Christian world view that has always contained a foundational strand of synonymity between nationhood and faith identity. In other words, an instinctive belief that it is the task of any Christian believer with relevant influence to seek to advocate and create a societal order that reflects and embodies the ideals of their faith. When the writers of the Old Testament spoke of God and People, this almost entirely found application in the development and direction of the nation as a whole.

I sense this is a world view that enjoyed particular revival through our Victorian forebears whose endeavours reflect a belief that we could indeed become a Christian nation in which religious values could be embedded in our laws and institutions. As we view history with clearer eyes we perhaps recognise that this was not as much the case as they imagined at the time!

But to what degree is Jesus' establishment of an "Ekklesia" intended to stand in contrast to that inherited view, and has the contemporary Church fully grasped this? Was the "New Israel" intended to be a renewed community within wider society rather than a renewing of society as a whole? And in the light of that, to what degree should we expect our world to be chaotic, disordered and

disturbing? Might we go so far as to consider whether the well-intentioned endeavours of Christian campaigners and activists to make our world better, have at the same time masked the full reality of its true state? Could we therefore conclude that the far more troubling picture that is now emerging is a truer endorsement of our broader faith narrative?

These are big questions, but we are by no means the first people to be confronted with them. The problem for those who first heard the uncompromising message of the Old Testament prophets was that they understood their designation as a "holy people" to bestow an unassailable right to a life of peace and prosperity within the land assigned to them. Hence they assumed that God would contain and subdue any serious threat to this equilibrium. Yet the message of the prophets, realised through the subsequent events of history, conveyed a very different reality. It was not so much a right as a responsibility, and when that responsibility to live out the divine covenant of justice and righteousness was abandoned, despite the attempts of earthly rulers to create an illusion of well-being, their world began to collapse around them.

Those rulers who, probably with good intent, sought to abate the impending disorder quickly found themselves



You cannot serve God and Mammon

The Tribute Money (c. 1610–1615)

Peter Paul Rubens

Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco



at odds with the messengers from God. An unpalatable reality had to dawn as a powerful representation of society's true spiritual state.

Applying this principle to today's world – is a backdrop now emerging that might actually help God's people to communicate their message with greater clarity and definition?

Our contemporary response to the challenge of singing the Lord's song in an increasingly strange land, might often be described as seeking to create a familiar land in which its melodies can comfortably prevail, either through striving for societal change or by forever shrinking our horizons to that which we can control and contain.

Might this also account for many of the ethical dilemmas that confront Christians who take the interface of their faith and work seriously? There will be moments when our faith values will not sit easily with the expectations and behaviours of our workplace. But this is not a reason to doubt or despair, but to recognise that there is a real and true distinction between the world that we inhabit and the Kingdom we ultimately seek. Nor

should it prevent us from seeking to influence positive change, but let us do so without cause to despair when our efforts are thwarted.

Renewing a narrative of hope

It is hard to argue that current events have generated anything but unease across our society which in turn generates a desire for voices of assurance and hope. Might we offer that voice not by mindlessly assuming "all will be well" but by affirming that "it was ever so"? Unease and concern might well be a more theologically accurate assessment of reality than the security and stability that our human nature craves. The Psalm writer implores us not to put our trust in princes [Psalm 145] nor to despair when we see evil individuals prosper [Psalm 37]. Is not the implication of the latter that we should at times expect this to be the case? Jesus later reminds us that you cannot serve God and Mammon [Matthew 6:24].

Yet it is the contemporary equivalent of princes that have become the objects of society's trust, while the economic drivers of mammon relentlessly

determine so much geo-political policy, particularly in the West. So should we not be more disturbed if the world was not in a state of turmoil?

Might we have greater cause to doubt the truth of our faith if a world so committed to these human ideals was settled and secure? For while we might be deeply troubled by some of the things we see happening, is this not how we, as Christian disciples, should expect our world to be?

One of the ironies, particularly in a context like this one is that despite his messianic facade, Trump's key *modus operandi* seems to be that of a businessman. The constant narrative of cutting a deal, holding the cards, and largely disregarding issues of heritage, culture and identity seem to be the order of the day. Gaza has become a real estate opportunity while Ukraine is portrayed as the arena for a card game. Borders are nothing more than inconvenient lines on a map – and who wouldn't want to join the party as the 51st (and perhaps even 52nd or 53rd) state? Tariffs have become the political weapon of choice and so I could go on.



**Singing the song of the Lord
in a strange land**

St. Katharine Cree Church

Photo: squaremilechurches

Maintaining our faith in business

While Trump's supporters celebrate this "seal the deal" diplomacy (if indeed it is appropriate to describe such antics as diplomatic) many respond in despair to such gung-ho politics with genuine fear of their consequences. So does this not simply strengthen those arguments that faith and business simply don't mix? Unleashing the dynamics of the boardroom on the world's geo-political stage simply underlines the extent of the damage that they have the potential to inflict.

Yet for all his claims, Trump does not represent the world of business *per se* but a particular way of doing business. A way of doing business that many enterprises and corporations have long since abandoned and shunned, or at least sought to constrain and reform. Could not the exposure of the potential impact of such practices instead be claimed to highlight the urgency with which the faith values of stewardship, human well-being and social justice need to be secured within our business practices?


After all, people will always need to trade and interact if they are to flourish on this planet. Human creativity needs

to be harnessed through useful work both as an act of personal fulfilment and mutual benefit. The need to manufacture, to produce, to form purposeful collaborations, to trade and to consume will never go away; human existence relies on them, but the way that we do these things matters.

I can't help but recognise a significant amount of commentary at the moment that seeks to parallel the trajectory of the decades of the emerging century with those of the one before. While public debate focusses on issues of xenophobia and military ambition, I recall that in my own Free Church tradition the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century were also known as the era of "great reversal". This was a time when evangelical churches in particular withdrew from social activism and political engagement, believing that the only feasible Christian response to an increasingly disturbing society was to "come ye apart". It took until the closing couple of decades of that century for many Free Churches to re-discover their social conscience.

I have always lamented that original withdrawal, but as I reflect on it in the light of our present crisis I find myself wondering if they had a point.

The events of the early 20th century lifted the lid on reality, and I sense that many Christians at the time reached the realisation that society could never be the religious utopia that they previously had believed themselves to be living in, or at least progressing towards. They needed to work out a way of singing the Lord's song in a world that might never be as the Lord intended it to be. Yet for many, their chapels and meeting houses simply became religious ghettos around which they could build a life of holy detachment from society.

I sense that what I am advocating for these present times is not so much detachment as non-reliance and thus a response of non-anxiety. Our anxiousness is not alleviated through cutting ourselves off so much as transcending the narratives of fear and despair, by seeing within them signs of the reality of our faith narrative, and thus a cause for hope, even amidst this earthly chaos. Our world is in a mess – that is difficult to dispute – yet is it too naïve to imagine that this might be God's way of reminding us of our true human condition? As our facades of human success and self-reliance are increasingly stripped away, might this be a moment to re-awaken society's sense of reliance on God? 



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