

A few words from the Vicar

One of the most intriguing comments I read about last year's Brexit Referendum campaign came from John Redwood MP (repeated recently by Michael Gove), who said in a speech that it was like '... fighting the English civil war again without the muskets.' I have an interest in English history so, for all sorts of reasons I won't bore you with, I can see where he is coming from.

He has a point. It took centuries for the democracy we enjoy today to evolve. There was a time in our history when divisive political disputes were settled by a clash of arms, with the leaders of the losing side being swiftly dispatched by the executioner's axe (no lucrative speaking tours for them).

Even Prime Ministers were not averse to challenging political opponents to a duel. For example, whilst serving as Prime Minister, the Duke of Wellington fought a duel with Lord Winchelsea at Battersea in 1829 over a political argument. The equivalent today, perhaps, of Theresa May squaring up to Jeremy Corbyn, pistols at dawn on Clapham Common!

Opposition and Government benches in the House of Commons are precisely two sword lengths apart for a sound reason!

Thank God, we live in a democracy. Voting in elections and the occasional referendum must be preferable to the way we did things a few centuries ago.

The reason John Redwood's remark comes to mind is that on 30th January, on the anniversary of his execution in 1649, Charles, King and Martyr is included in the list of Church of England Feast Days. At first glance this seems odd given that the root cause (I am oversimplifying things here) of the English Civil War was his obstinacy and insistence that, as king, he had a Divine Right to levy taxes and take all the important decisions himself without recourse to Parliament.

The Civil War had a devastating effect upon England, 190,000 out of a population of 5 million died (the impact of the war upon Ireland was far worse). Charles lost the Civil War and was tried and executed as a traitor.

Given his faults and his disastrous reign, why is he considered by some to be a martyr? Yes, he was obstinate and his actions directly contributed to the outbreak of war. Nonetheless, he was also a devout man who defended the Church of England against an English equivalent of the Taliban. Indeed, because his side lost the Civil War, the office of bishop was abolished and the Book of Common Prayer banned, only to be restored following the coronation of his son years later.

Charles is considered a martyr because, it is said, he was offered his life in return for his acquiescence in the abolition of the episcopacy. Obstinate to the end, he refused.

Charles I is not my most favourite person from history. Neither is his adversary, Oliver Cromwell, who banned Christmas and oppressed the Irish. Like the rest of us, Charles was both saint and sinner, which is the reason why I can understand the dedication of a feast day to him.

It seems to me, with all his shortcomings and his good points, that Charles is representative of all of us ordinary Anglicans throughout the ages. We know none of us perfect, which is why we confess our sins regularly as part of our worship. But we also rejoice that Jesus has paid the penalty for our sins so that we, along with all the saints, can look forward to an eternity in God's love.

And during the relatively short time we have in this world, we try our best to do some good; we try to make a difference.

Every Blessing

Dave