

The Times, They Are A-Changing (October 2019)

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By Rev Paul Graham

Writing for a magazine that is published on a bi-monthly basis is problematic at this time. They say that a week is a long time in politics, so just think what the world might look like once this particular issue reaches the end of its time. What nation-shaping events will have occurred between now and the end of November? Writing this article in mid-September, the only thing that I can say with certainty is that our current political landscape with a prorogued Parliament and negotiations continuing between Westminster and Brussels won't look the same in a few short weeks' time. Or maybe they will. But we will have had plenty of potential upheaval in the meantime.

The movable incontrovertible date for the UK leaving its membership of the European Union has been set, but time will tell whether that will also shift. We might be cut adrift, ploughing our own furrow, negotiating trade deals, facing societal breakdown, celebrating our independence, hand-wringing or making the best of it. We just don't know at present.

What we also do know is that the behemoth of Brexit has done a sterling job of causing division. Dividing the nations that comprise the United Kingdom, dividing political parties, even families. Actually, causing division may be overstating it; Brexit has just brought into the light the dark undercurrents of division that already existed. An increase in hate crimes, the rise of extremism and the victimisation of the marginalised, voiceless or just plain different is evidence that points to an existing problem being magnified rather than new problems initiated on the 23rd June 2016. The plea to be heard, to rage against those who would seek to cheat us of something that we own, have won or in which we find our identity; these were all there long before anyone marked their ballot paper. What Brexit has done is given them a label, or possibly more importantly, give their "enemies" a label. So Brexiteer and Remainer (Remoaner) enter our common parlance and mode of address.

So we live in changing times, but wasn't that always the case? Apart from the technological shock, would this present world's situation look so far-removed from the Industrial Revolution, Civil War, or any other of the thousands of events that mark out the history of this nation? Maybe it's different due to the advent of social media and the blurring of news and speculation, either of which require more time than is afforded here. Maybe it's different because, unlike those mentioned above, we don't know the end of the story. Whenever that might be.

But what Brexit has also done is take our eye off the ball in other ways. The rise in knife crime, the increasing threat of "county lines" for the supply and prevalence of drugs, even in our idyllic Suffolk countryside, the pressure put on finances that result in reliance on foodbanks; these are all at risk of being drowned out by our shouting about something that we don't actually have control over.

But here we're also at risk of drowning out some of the loudest and most insistent calls of the Gospel. Time and again, those who follow Jesus Christ are entreated to care for the widow, the orphan, the "alien in the land". Not once are we told to allow ourselves to be blind-sided by bitterness or anger, but rather to act justly and to love mercy whilst walking humbly with our God.

The parables of Jesus tell time and again of how we should treat others and how God views us all. (One wonders how a Remainer would treat a Brexiteer lying broken and bleeding beside the road. Or vice versa.) Every encounter Jesus has shows us how to respond to those around us; not just in our embrace

and welcome to friend and stranger, but also to call to account those who have twisted “truth” to their own ends. Even if their “truth” is culturally, even nationally driven.

Jesus points us to a higher truth: that God is sovereign over any national claim and that God’s love for all humanity compelled him to sacrifice everything for the sake of even the least of us. And that one day, Jesus will return to once and for all set the record straight. Isn’t that something that ought to be offered to the world instead...?