

Empires come and go



2026 has seen the re-introduction of an old word into our vocabulary and one which focuses the ongoing crisis in world affairs at the present time - and that word is 'imperialism'. Imperialism is of course very familiar to us not least because our own British Empire was, at its height, the largest empire in human history, incorporating a quarter of the earth's peoples. In recent years we have begun to reflect as a nation on what empire and colonisation has meant for indigenous peoples and the less powerful and that leaves many of us feeling uncomfortable. The triumphalism of imperialism, and the building of empire, comes at the cost of leaving many people being disenfranchised from meaningful political engagement and, sadly, the erosion of their culture, language, heritage and sometimes even religious freedoms. Smaller countries, from Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia on the Russian border, to Greenland, within reach of the United States, and Taiwan within the orbit of China, find themselves consumed with anxiety about national security and the very real possibility of simply being caught up in the 'wilderness' of real politick in which the rule of law is abandoned and replaced with 'might is right'.

The New Testament makes much of the Baptism of Jesus and the beginning of a new chapter in the unfolding story of God's love for all humanity. Pivotal to this story is John the Baptist. John takes himself off into the wilderness and it is in the wilderness that he contemplates the meaning of life and what it is that God is saying to the people around him. It is no coincidence that the Gospels place John in the wilderness. The wilderness was where the Israelites wandered for 40 years after fleeing the wrath of Pharaoh in powerful Egypt. In the deserts of the wilderness the Israelites rediscovered their identity as God's people; they repented of the fact that in Egypt they were not always as faithful as they might have been and they rediscovered the meaning and value of the rule of law as a way of living a fruitful, faithful and wholesome way of life.

John must ultimately give way to the Messiah – the ‘Anointed One’. He has done his best in communicating the need for a new way of life that is faithful and honourable in all things. In Christ the wilderness years are banished as the Kingdom of God – a new vision for society - comes nearer to us, and the gulf between Creator God and God’s creation are brought together in love.

History – the unfolding story of God’s salvation – teaches us that imperialist powers, and the empires that they build, come and go. British history alone teaches us that there is folly in investing too much in the immediate events of the day. This is not to deny the often-tragic consequences for those people and countries who are vulnerable, sometimes caught up in events, being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Christian faith teaches us that the human story often repeats and that the current events unfolding on today’s world stage is not new.

Empires come and empires go - but God is ever constant - and our faith in God is constant too.

God Bless.

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