

Funding the Future

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Yesterday the Archbishops of Canterbury and York attacked the government's plans to deport asylum seekers in the UK to Rwanda. I use the term deport carefully, because these asylum seekers will be forcefully removed from the UK to a country not of their choosing, which is illegal. There is no return ticket.

The reaction has been furious, and hostile. Jacob Rees Mogg said the Archbishops did not understand the spirit of redemption within the scheme. It's quite reasonably been argued that only a Pharisee could see what he finds in it.

Priti Patel has said the Archbishops offered no alternative. Actually, I think she will find they did. The Christian message has always been of welcome to the stranger, albeit the Church forgot it for long periods.

Tom Hunt MP and other Tories argued that the Church should not be teaching about the gospel of Jesus at Easter, of all times (their choice of words, not mine).

The media reaction has seen The Times, Mail, Express and Telegraph all run front-page stories criticising the Archbishops for being political. These paper's claim is that is not the role of the Church. Clearly, none of them has read the New Testament. It is a profoundly political text. It was only when it was depoliticised by Constantine, and hidden from many by only being available in Latin for more than a millennia that this was forgotten. Until then the reason why Christians were persecuted was that they profoundly upset the political status quo.

And so they should. Especially now. You do not have to be a Christian to appreciate the radical teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. His instruction was to have bias to the poor, to love your neighbour, to forgive debts, to end the tyranny of the money changers and much more. All of that is deeply radical. Try the Magnificat in Luke for a flavour. That is said or sung at evensong every day in the Church of England. This is no peripheral text: this is what is at the core of CoE thinking.

But of course, the Tories and their media supporters do not know that, or want to know that. Let alone do they want to hear it. They want to believe God is on the side of the achiever and that the sacrament of wealth (there isn't one, just for the record) is the

true outward sign of inner grace.

If they can't have that from the Church then something more sinister happens. They now demand silence. "Who will", the papers ask, "rid us of these troublesome priests?" (I only misquote a little). The precedent is not encouraging, but relevant. In these demands there is an implicit menace. The threat is that the Church should comply, or be silent. The demand made of it by the Tories is for endorsement, not questioning, let alone opposition.

I know that the Tories are aware that from many churchgoers acquiescence will be forthcoming. But they will also know that amongst the very early inmates of Dachau concentration camp there were quite a lot of priests whose silence could not be bought.

In that case every priest now has to face the question we all might have to consider at some time, which is whether we have the courage to oppose, come what may?

The Tories need to also consider this question, because their whole modus operandi is now based on intimidation in the expectation of fearful response. Priests, they say, must not teach Christianity. Lawyers must not uphold the law. Opposition politicians must not oppose. Acquiescence is now the demand. And some will give it.

But others won't. And that number will grow. That is because courage is, at least in part, liberated by the realisation that there is no alternative but to take a stand. Those who will do so on principle are small in number but big in impact.

But they are going to be joined by millions who are pragmatically fearful. They will be those who can no longer pay the bills. Their houses will be unheated. They or their children will be unfed. Their homes will be at risk. They will also have nothing left to lose. Their families are at risk. They too will cross a line.

And their condition is commonplace. It is not one chosen, politically. It is one imposed, actually. So even those inclined to oppose those with principles will recognise themselves and those they know in these people.

There is in this the real danger for the Tories. And danger for us all, of course. Creating the potential for volatility, which someone as calm as Martin Lewis thinks likely, is an inherently reckless political act. The risk for everyone is that much might go wrong. But the simple fact is that Tory politics is now moving so far into extremism, and appears so fascist in its approach, that many will see no option soon but to oppose a government that is giving them no choice but to oppose, because all other options will have gone.

I wish we did not live in such dangerous times. But it seems that we do. And we have to ask in that case what this demands of us.