

A Sermon – Following Great Britain’s Referendum on Leaving the EU

RECEIVING A KINGDOM THAT CANNOT BE SHAKEN : HEBREWS 12:38

As Christians we are in the world but not of the world. In the world we most certainly are. This last week we have, many of us, exercised our democratic rights as citizens of this free country. These are things that belong to us ‘in the world’. We are going to have to live with the largely unknown and at present unknowable consequences of this Referendum vote last Thursday. I am not aware of any of us are planning to emigrate or disappear to some remote jungle or wilderness. So we shall all, unless death part us or the Lord returns, be staying ‘in the world’ that is the UK 2016. So the economic pains and gains, however these balance out, will affect us all. The new political and cultural landscape will become the new world that we are in.

But we are not ‘of the world’. We have an address in this country. But this is not actually our home. It is a stopping off point. It is a temporary shelter as we process on to our heavenly home. That is actually our home. Heaven. It is vital that we remember this. We are but temporary occupants of this post Brexit UK. Blows the wind and we are gone. Our time will soon be done and we are soon cut off and fly away.

But, until then, we do actually remain ‘in the world’ but, more importantly, in Christ Jesus, where we occupy a unique position, not shared by politicians, Eurocrats, political pundits, economists, journalists, bloggers or anybody else. It is a privileged position. Being ‘in Christ Jesus’ and therefore ‘not of the world’, we have a perspective that is out of reach of the non-Christian. Our worldview is not based on some ideology or man-made philosophy. Instead it is derived from the inspired word of God, as interpreted to us by the Holy Spirit of God. Moreover, our outlook and capacity to think and evaluate has been shaped by our walk with the Lord over, for some of us, the course of many years. Never has this accumulated spiritual capital been more relevant than it is now. Never have we needed to adhere to our core teachings more than we are to do now. Never have we needed to entertain Biblical hopes and expectations than we do now.

Last Thursday

The word that is often being used to describe the events of last week and the outcome of Thursday’s Referendum vote is seismic. Indeed seismic does not seem to be an exaggeration. Our household went to bed Thursday night with ‘Remain winning by a whisker’ as the expected result. We woke to learn that the Leave vote had returned the higher number. The BBC programme we were tuned into chewed, or maybe choked, over the implications of this. It was evident to us all I am sure. The world would never be the same again, as if it ever does stand still. But the verdict this vote delivered set our nation

on a wholly different course to the course she was on before. Some of the shared assumptions and expectations that have been part of the warp and woof of our culture are going to give way. At some point, and this is somewhat contested, the rather prosaic sounding Article 50 will be set in motion and formal notification be served on the other Member States that we are leaving the EU. Then, apparently, although some are trying to throw in obstacles to this, there begins the process of extricating ourselves from the European Union, for which there is no existing blueprint or established procedure.

As if this is not enough to contemplate, the Prime Minister has announced his resignation and will carry on in a virtual caretaking role until the Conservative Party has elected a new leader, who will of course also become the new Prime Minister. The position of the Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition is by no means certain. Tomorrow will bring a test of his leadership at the meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party. Rumours abound of a vote of no confidence being served on him. As if that has not been enough, politicians in Scotland are calling for another Independence Referendum that might well spell her secession from the Union. Nationalists in Northern Ireland are calling for a similar Referendum to test whether there is appetite for joining the Republic of Ireland.

That is before we have even tried to assess the effect on the wider world, on our relations with European Countries or, beyond those, with nations like the US. If you will allow me this little illustration for the benefit of our younger friends, it is a little bit like the situation Scrat, a squirrel in a cartoon entitled 'Ice Age' created. His character is always frantically hunting down acorns in the bleak ice wasteland. He eventually manages to manoeuvre one into a position where he can crack it and finally enjoy the delights of its sweet contents. He breaks it open on the ice. There is an ominous cracking sound and the fissures in the ice rapidly spread out triggering a massive glacial event. The coming ice age is speeded up and the film then sees its main characters having to work out the implications of the changed landscape he had produced. Brexit has been like this. A vote in a distant place has sent shockwaves around the world.

The money markets have reacted predictably in a state of unbridled panic. Bankers in London had to work through the night sustained by a continuous supply of strong coffee and pizzas. The stock market crashed and then revived. Through the last few days European leaders have been giving their points of view, some of which have been brief and unpublishable. We will learn a lot about them over the following months. Parties in other countries, such as France and Holland, are now openly calling for their own opportunity to hold a referendum. Popularity for the European project has waned in many Member States that any Government compelled to bow to the pressure of public opinion, might find the same result as in Britain. The much vilified class of experts are being wheeled out to give their learned opinions as to what will happen. Social media and published media are often to be found generating more heat than light and insults are being bandied about liberally. Commentators everywhere are trying to grasp what has happened, why it happened, where it is all going to go. It will be a long while before we can give as full an answer to these questions as we might wish for. Yesterdays' architects of Project Fear have now changed guises and donned the mantle of Project Reassurance to calm our

troubled nerves. Companies as diverse as Nandos and Milky Way have felt it necessary to issue reassurances to their startled customers that they are not abandoning the UK, but will be trading as usual. I am still somewhat on edge until I hear that the coffee house chain Costas are not quitting these shores. It is always said that if there is one thing markets hate it is uncertainty. It is true among the general public as well. Nobody has yet needed to issue a promise that we will still have air to breathe in five years' time – but there may need to be some expert wheeled out soon to quell the state of uncertainty.

And then there are the deep divisions that have been opened up in our society. Or, rather, not so much opened up as emphatically exposed. Much of London has shown itself to have a different set of evaluative criteria to the rest of the UK. Brighton, Manchester and some of the leafy districts of Surrey recorded majorities in favour or remaining. All of Scotland and much of Northern Ireland also registered majorities in favour of Remain, sometimes by hefty margins. Young people, by and large, chose 'Remain' while the older generation, by and large, opted for 'Leave'. Neither should we forget that in many places where Leave won, that margin of that victory was slender. Indeed the result was not a landslide at 52% to 48%. A lot of people have been left disappointed, angry, or frightened by the result and what it might imply. Our nation has shown herself to be fractured, the vote, I am sure, not only revealing deep-seated distrust of the European project and its leaders, but also considerable grievance against the wider UK political class in general. Digesting the implications of this is not the matter of the moment. But the reactions of those, both from 'Remain' and 'Leave', towards each other in particular, will be critical in the immediate days ahead. I have to say, from the soundings I have taken, the prospects do not look especially good. There were, as of last night, 2.4 million signatures now appended to a petition calling for a re-run of the Referendum. 110,000 have signed a petition to make London an independent state with its own links to the EU. An MP has said Parliament should overrule the Referendum result so as to end this madness. The anger that is being vented is not a healthy sign.

Implications for Christians

Christians have found themselves divided over the issue, some, after considerable prayer and personal agony, coming to one decision, and others to another. The weighting that we each have given to different issues, events, arguments have meant that different people have come to different conclusions on the matter and thus voted differently. The language of the world and its haste to label people and generalise should not be so among us. We have not become a church of racists and bigots, or dupes of a faceless bureaucracy. We have, all of us who have exercised the vote, examined our consciences, attempted to weigh arguments, come to judgments about people we barely know and prayed. There have been differences of opinion. There still are. But I am very confident in our maturity of outlook and general behaviour that we will be able to agree to differ in that loving, gentle, forbearing and good-humoured way that makes us stand out from the world. We do our business differently. And that is without suggesting for a moment that the issues involved are not important. They are. And the effects of Thursday's vote, for good or ill, will stay with our nation for decades to come.

Families similarly have experienced differences of opinion. Some have voted one way and some another. Some indeed have not voted at all, feeling overwhelmed by the task at hand and the responsibilities that the vote has brought with it. It is a time then that requires of us restraint, great understanding and discretion. Places of work and education can become areas where you need to walk on egg shells for a while. This may continue for a long time to come. I have no clear idea of the process of disengagement from the EU but I am sure there will be heated debates along the way and negotiation hurdles that have to be overcome at numerous junctures. The issue is not going to go away any time soon. I can only too well imagine that scraps of news or data will be seized upon by one party or the other for vindication of their case. There is a long way to go and it is probably fair to say that the hard work has only just begun.

But a lot of this and more we know already. I am only telling you what you can already see and I am sure have pondered much for yourself. As Christians, as I said earlier, there are perspectives that we have that no others can share. These are a comfort to us and may be to others as well.

The world is not stable – and it is not going to change

People are looking everywhere for peace and prosperity. They are looking for secure pensions and economic stability. They are hoping never to see another war. They are hoping never to see another terrorist outrage. They are looking for the defeat of evil so that their families can live securely and that their children can grow up in a safe world devoid of threats. But this is not the world of the Bible. It is not our expectation that we will achieve this before heaven. I am not in that regard a post-millennial, expecting a period of prospering Christianity here on earth where the gospel gains such success that whole nations are influenced by it. Rather we are destined to have to live through difficult, changeable and uncertain times. Matthew 24:3-7

Is it controversial if I were to say to you do not believe men or believe that men have all the answers to the problems that are facing the world? There can sometimes be a comfort we draw from having big international organisations that somehow they work on a higher plane and have powers of problem, solving and ethical conduct unsullied by petty national interests. But the hope can be easily dashed. Indeed, perhaps it should never have been entertained in the first place. 'Some trust in chariots, and some in horses; But we will remember the name of the Lord our God. (Psalm 20:7). Give us help from trouble, for the help of man is useless. (Psalm 108:12). Isaiah 31:1-3.

Man's best effort was Babel. It was intended to reach up to heaven. (Genesis 11:4). It was a city state with power and organisation supposedly capable of usurping God and His prerogative. The people were scattered and the languages of the earth were invented by God and visited upon mankind as a judgment to separate and humble men. (Genesis 11:5-7). These judgements were intended to check the ambition of man and make the work of imitating God's authority harder. Man's best efforts are never going to be enough. God will continue to disrupt and scatter such enterprises, however well-meaning. The

tools He may use have the capacity to surprise us. Economic crises, troubles, damaging leaks to the media, microphones inadvertently left on, extreme weather events, referenda, might all be part of the Lord's purpose to halt man's ambition to make some great name for himself, or become some world power that is able to stop war and bring peace and prosperity to all. It is all very attractive to people who crave certainty and stability. But I think man's solution to achieve this is not what the Lord is going to allow. There will always be upheaval. There is only one Being in the universe who is justified in making a name for Himself – and that is the Lord. He will not share His glory with another.

We cannot then expect a world free of crises and tense moments. The Lord has made no such pledge to us. He has not invited us to be part of something that will work smoothly and perfectly. There are going to continue to be accidents, providences that will make us weep, makes us fearful. There are no pension guarantees. There is no promise of economic stability. We are not told that there will be no warring nations or groups like IS. We are told the opposite and we simply do not believe those who promise a contrary view to us while on earth.

Modest expectations

One thing I can say. The Brexit vote has not solved everything that we might want to see addressed. Some of us have been led to hope for something, certainly something different and better than what we had before. But we are not carried away as though this was a vote by people who share the Christian convictions that we do. It cannot be denied that there has been racism in the DNA of some who voted at the Polling Stations, some ugly dislike of people who look differently, speak differently, eat differently. We are, as a general rule, to have an openness of embrace towards people from other nations, especially the household of faith. We are to be careful how we speak. Generalisation is always a danger and we are to qualify what we say as carefully as we can and be open to review our thoughts and revise them in the light of more information.

But whatever we might hope for from the vote, one way or the other, our expectations should be modest. We may have new leaders but they too will be sinners in need of salvation. They will have moral difficulties and disfiguring personal ambitions. Their capacity to deliver the hoped-for outcomes may be severely compromised by the complex world that we inhabit and by the need to reach out to people who did not vote 'Leave'. God may bless our nation with remarkable economic favour and cultural development. But He may not. We were a nation under judgement on Wednesday evening on the eve of the poll. I think we are nation still under judgment when the poll was announced Friday morning. It may be that the Lord has provided us a breathing space. The 'Leave' vote was not a vote for Gay Marriage, political correctness, and multiculturalism. It was not a vote for the mantra that Islam is a religion of peace. It was, in many regards I think, a vote against all that. In that way it does actually help us. It makes it more possible to speak more openly about our unhappiness with gay marriage or with the influence of Islam in our country. It might be a further nail in the coffin for some of the efforts to label Christians as extremists and give the powers-that-be pause for thought rather than push through

legislation outlawing comment about, for example, Gay Marriage. The vote does allow us to feel that there might be more sympathy for some of our moral positions. But our expectations regarding the future spiritual health of our nation remain firmly in check.

For example, Thursday's vote was not a vote for rule by the Lord and a return to Biblical values. Christians may have voted that way with that desire. But a lot of other people did not. There may be disillusionment with out-of-touch metropolitan elites in London and on the continent. That may have been expressed. But it remains to be seen if it is a token of some further blessing, including conversions. People can be happy to cast off the restraint of a perceived foreign potentate without having any desire to end the adulterous relationship they are in, show proper care for their children or have any desire to marry the partner they are currently with. There has been no hint of any such change and I certainly have not found any evidence on the streets of anything approaching a spiritual and moral awakening. A lot of people have simply expressed their unhappiness with the present situation and articulated a hope for something better under a different set of arrangements with Europe than previously prevailed. Beyond that we are not entitled to draw too many conclusions, I think, about what the Lord may or may not be about to do.

The need to pray

Our nation most certainly needs our prayers. We are to pray for our rulers, and, I suppose, that should include prayers for those in Brussels and elsewhere. (1 Timothy 2:1-4). We simply do not know what things will look like in five weeks' time let alone five years' time. But we know we must pray. Our nation is not at peace with itself. That section of opinion that was disappointed with the outcome of the vote and comes from the more committed, vocal and angry support group of 'Remainers' are not going to take this lying down. Many of those who voted Remain did not do so out of love for the European Union and its officers but after concluding that it might be the lesser of two evils. They have been dragged along on this voyage into the unknown against their will.

We need to pray that out of this divided situation the Lord will bless His people. We look to lead quiet and peaceable lives in all godliness and reverence. The prospects for this kind of living might be improved in the short-term if the Lord has indeed granted us a breathing space but the underlying divisions seem set to continue. Poorer than hoped-for economic data or a messy and acrimonious divorce from the EU may leave people unhappy and full of recrimination. Likewise the inability of key players to deliver on the promises made or the hopes raised could produce a toxic environment. There is a great need for the Lord's grace. Many sections of the evangelical church have, I think, largely speaking, opted for Leave. It is not difficult to imagine that accusations and insults might come hurtling her way, perhaps even from within other more liberal wings of the wider church.

So we must pray that despite these potential cross winds that the Lord might be with His people and will bless His church. We need to pray that there will be a vastly improved environment where we can evangelise and that there will be peace. That the raw emotions sparked by the referendum, whether of elation, joy, despair or anger, present tinder liable

to conflagration seems to be an evident truth. The legacy can be smouldering resentment, ugly triumphalism or hostile apathy and much else besides. It is not a nation at ease with itself. And that is before we add in the extra complexity of Scotland and Northern Ireland. We need to pray for peace among our citizens. It would be profoundly sad to see outbreaks of violence, demonstrations and marches creating further alienation and estrangement. Our nation was in a sad state when we began last week. Arguably she is in an even sadder state at the beginning of this week where her wounds are so publically on display. We must pray the Lord may yet smile upon our land and prosper us. She is in a sad and troubled state.

Higher things

But we read that passage earlier from Hebrews 12:25-29. We have been describing uncertainty and near chaos. We have something so much better. It is turmoil out there. But not in the kingdom that we are receiving. The writer to the Hebrew Christians is writing to people whose world is in turmoil. They are being persecuted. They are looking to go back to Judaism in the hope of fending off the threat of trouble that might come if they are known to be Christians. They seem ready to refuse Him who speaks (v25) and to discard their Christian convictions. God had shaken the world once at Sinai. His voice had issued the law and the place shook. Moses quaked and was exceedingly afraid. But that order of things was set to be removed (v27). The old covenant was not the future for the people although they thought it would be a good place to find a refuge. It was actually destined to disappear. It was not a place for persecuted Christians to be camouflaged from persecutors. They were wrong. They were failing to see that something better, more durable and wonderful had come with the coming of Christ. He had shaken the heavens as well. His work was reverberating around heaven. It was the source of wonder to the angels. It was a ministry in the tabernacle that is above, heaven itself.

This new order, the new covenant, is indestructible. Kingdoms may be shaken, and they surely are being at present, but Christians are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken. The EU may come and go. The UK may come and go. Any number of nations may not be on the map in twenty years' time. God appoints their times and their boundaries. The Middle East is in flux. Artificially created nations are groaning and proving to be unable to hold together the different and sadly non-compatible groups that are within their borders. Who knows what Syria will look like by the end of this decade? We don't. But the Lord does. It is His prerogative to shake nations. But it His gift to us to give us something that will not fade away or be subject to upheaval. Our allegiances and hopes are transferred to this higher entity. It is ours forever. We remain, not leave.

The Lord has not promised in vain. While the world runs around in a state of fear, we have some more solid foundations and hopes. (Matthew 6:31-32). That is the world of the Gentiles. Worry. Worry. Worry. Will there be anything to eat? Will we hear that Nandos and Milky Way are going to hang around? People are in a state of apprehension as though the world was about to end. It will one day but I am not convinced that His time-piece is set to British Summer Time and awaits our vote to be able to move His ultimate plans forward.

We belong to an order of reality so far above this. Here there will be panics, there will be selling, there will be buying. If we thought scare-mongering was the preserve of the campaign, forget it. We may not have heard anything yet.

Do not be dismayed. Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom (Luke 12:32). Romans 8:33-34. He has done all this to give us this kingdom to which we belong. We are safe there. We are secure there. World leaders may come and go. Some may collapse in scandal. Some may be removed by a clear judgement of God. They are shaken but we are not. All the terms of the covenant by which God has pledged to give us this home are written in the blood of Christ. It is finally heaven. That is what we receive. The best that Brexit can give us will be nothing compared to this. No Project Fear to startle you there. No angry petitions to have the terms of the granting of this kingdom reassessed. No grumpy foreign rulers setting harsh terms for your possession of your real estate. No experts to offer comfort that amounts to no comfort at all. This is solid. This is lasting. This will never end. Where are your hopes? What are you looking for?

Pastor Chris Hand

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