

A light in the dark



JUSTIN WELBY REFLECTS ON CERTAINTY, UNCERTAINTY AND THE POSSIBILITY OF HOPE.

Starting a new job in a cathedral just before Christmas, as I did last year, is madness. There are no certainties except that of putting one's foot in it every five minutes. There is also always somebody who is the cathedral equivalent of what we had on the oil rigs for new recruits: sending them to bring back a well head, or find the Christmas tree (Google it to see). And, of course, Liverpool is known for its sense of humour, which is not unkind but can be quite... well, 'amusing' had better do.

The fascinating thing about Liverpool is that the city fell apart and is putting itself back together again. I was in the old Martin's Bank banking hall yesterday, one of the biggest in the country, now closed and dusty and cold. This year Liverpool has been the European Capital of Culture, with amazing numbers of visitors. There is a tangible sense of movement and hope, and yet you still drive in to the city centre through acres of boarded-up housing.

People misunderstand the place very easily. In the summer there was a think-tank report suggesting that it more or less be closed and we all shift to live round Oxford and Cambridge (nobody asked them either: Oxford with a scouse accent?). It's the friendliest of cities, warm in spirit, and yet in the 1970s to 1990s it fell apart economically.

In 1959 Chinua Achebe, a Nigerian author, wrote a wonderful novel called 'Things Fall Apart'. It is the story of the life and suicide of an Ibo man, who loses his understanding of what makes sense of the world and his religion and relationships when the British come to Nigeria, and the rules of the game are no longer true. I watched it one evening as a play at an open air theatre in Kano in northern Nigeria on a stifflingly hot night, while a small riot caused occasional stones to fly into the audience. It was memorable.

Things fall apart. Perhaps that sums up the year for many. It is true every year for some people, but for the average treasurer (if there is such an unlikely thing) certain givens seemed to provide the boundaries to uncertainty: major banks don't fail; credit crises are avoided by good central banking; notice of drawdown of a loan is always honoured. Those pages about relationships among the syndicate of banks are at best of only academic interest. Once one certainty has gone, all other certainties seem much less certain.

In a church there are a number of certainties. One is that there will be complaints over Christmas. The bishop (my boss) received one recently complaining that the writer had arrived with a party of visitors and discovered the building had been hijacked by a religious group. It was a Sunday morning and I was doing my thing. Still, it may have been a spoof.

Another certainty is that I will make a catastrophic blunder at some point. Confused by moving last year I welcomed people warmly at one event to Coventry Cathedral.

Tiredness is always a problem. Many will remember the embarrassment of falling asleep in a meeting. This year I fell deeply



asleep in a service I was leading; so much so that the length of the pause meant no one could mistake it for silent prayer. I suppose the fact that I had toppled over with my glasses round my ear may have given the game away.

Those sort of certainties are on-the-job ones, like the recording of mixed-up foreign exchange transactions always being dodgy when you think you are in the right. But when things fall apart what makes the difference that triggers recovery? Not recovery in terms of the prices, but will the vibrancy that has characterised the participants be renewed?

Christmas is not a good time for thinking about such things; it may be time off (and surprise deals on 23 December are probably always unlikely), but it is not time to think. Anyway, there must be a point when we think about something else. But it does have some sort of underlying point, that gives it the magic that seems to be another certainty, almost whatever your religious belief or absence of one.

The story of a refugee family in a country at war, harried and hassled, nevertheless finding a way, is based in hope. That is such a powerful word. I am writing just after the US election which has seen hope as the theme of the winner, a word that seems to have motivated a vast part of the US that had not voted before.

There will be a lot of people this Christmas for whom hope is not the most obvious or favoured four-letter word. There will be all the normal strains, some made tougher by worry. But at the heart of the Christmas story is hope that is born and stays alive and throws light even when circumstances are violent, tortured and hopeless. It is hope that provides the motivation and the means to rebuild when things fall apart.

Have a good break, and a much better New Year.

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