

On the night President Trump was sworn in as the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States of America Kay and I were at the Royal Shakespeare Company Stratford to see a performance of *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare. The central role was an outstanding Prospero by Simon Russell Beale. The production also featured the use of the very latest technology to project an avatar series of images of the sprite Ariel. But perhaps what struck me most forcefully was the profound wisdom of the writing in contrast to what was going on in the United States. This is a play about the desire for revenge but the reality of forgiveness. It is about human love, regret, anger, laughter and deep compassion. It is about changing your mind too. Prospero's stature as a human being grows when he abandons his plans for revenge and destruction of his enemies and sees them as human beings too. And his recognition of the possibility of new beginnings, in this performance at least, allowed the monster Caliban to stand straight and proud and loved as well.

The key moment comes in Act 5, when Ariel, Prospero's spritely messenger, reports to his master that his former enemies are contrite:

Ariel: *'Your charm so strongly works 'em,  
that if you now beheld them, your affections  
Would become tender.'*

Prospero. *Dost think so, spirit?*

Ariel. *Mine would, sir, were I human.*

Prospero. *And mine shall.....*

*Though with their high wrongs I am struck to th'quick,  
Yet with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury  
Do I take part. The rarer action is  
In virtue than in vengeance. They being penitent,  
The sole drift of my purpose doth extend  
Not a frown further. Go release them, Ariel.  
My charms I'll break, their senses I'll restore,  
And they shall be themselves.'*

What a moment this is! The moment when Prospero realises that his power as a human being to enable others *'to be themselves'* is far greater than the imagined power he has to conjure the tempest from the winds. And it is this transformed imagination of her father that enables Miranda to see in their former enemies the goodness and beauty in human nature:

'Miranda. *O, wonder!*

*How many goodly creatures are there here!*

*How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world*

*That has such people in't!*'

How curious that the one phrase borrowed for a book title by Aldous Huxley – *Brave New World* – when he wrote in 1931 about a dystopian future of 2540 should, in its original form, be about the recognition of the beauty of human nature. What Huxley used ironically has become a sort of short hand for what we now see in the United States. '1984 tops Amazon in *Brave New World* of Trump'. The commentators are playing on the idea that Trump won through deliberately lying and claiming that this was, as his advisor said this week, 'an alternative truth': a feature of Orwell's 1984 with its Ministry of Truth.

To me, as a Christian, I must find the truth in the cross of Christ. On the Sunday after the inauguration the text for our readings was I Corinthians 1.10-18. St Paul, faced with a church that was already dividing into factions, brings his hearers back to the foolishness of the cross: *'to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.'*

This, I think, is how we measure the truth of our view of the world. Are we proclaiming a worldly gospel, or a gospel that looks foolish in the eyes of the world because it is founded on the crucified and risen Christ? To me, the message of the so-called prosperity gospel is in complete and total contradiction to this. Essentially the message goes a bit like this, as voiced by Detroit bishop Wayne T Jackson: "Donald Trump is an example of someone who has been blessed by God. Look at his homes, businesses, his wife and his jet. You don't get those things unless you have the favour of God." This is very much in line with the teaching of Normal Vincent Peale, minister of Marble Collegiate church in New York's Fifth Avenue, where the Trump family worshipped for many years. He wrote a book called: 'The Power of Positive Thinking' – 'Formulate and stamp indelibly on your mind a mental picture of yourself as succeeding. Hold this picture tenaciously. Never permit it to fade,' he wrote.

No, we serve the man who said 'You cannot serve God and money' and, in the powerful interpretation of St Paul to the people of Corinth, *'...we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.'*

So, we may feel somewhat bewildered at the strange times we live in and dismay at those, like Trump, who have attained great power. Yet, we may remain confident that human compassion and forgiveness, which remain at the heart of the Gospel, are, in the end more powerful than the false gods of wealth. I hope that will be our focus in these times: to know that truth about our faith, and to acknowledge also that human reason, can, in Shakespeare's words, be noble and pursue what he calls *'The rarer action (which is) in virtue (rather) than in vengeance.'* But, as Shakespeare also observes, it takes a penitent to open up the door.

Perhaps, then, for the sake of humanity, what we need to pray for is the conversion and repentance of Donald Trump?