

### Lent 3: 24 March

As usual, the Bard has the best insight:

Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,  
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.  
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments  
Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices  
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,  
Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,  
The clouds methought would open and show riches  
Ready to drop upon me that, when I waked,  
I cried to dream again.

Poor Caliban. The only native of the island on which the hapless victims of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* are washed up, his is a life of servitude and frustration. Such is his sense of abasement that only in his mind can he hear the sweet airs that delight and hurt not. In a play full of illusions, Caliban's are perhaps the most poignant and desperate: the sweet sounds can only become reality when his tormentor, Prospero, is destroyed, but then he acknowledges that, only in dreams, will riches be ready to drop on him. That isn't going to happen: I cried to dream again.

Well, the Isle is full of noises, and in this place and at this time they do indeed give delight and hurt not, but elsewhere, the sounds are not sweet airs but the hectoring wrangling of those caught up in the vortex of Brexit. In dreaming, Caliban says, the clouds will open and show riches: however, this is emphatically not a dream. This is reality. Prospero's magic will not work in this Isle.

It may be my own peculiar kind of illusoriness to suggest that a sermon, a sermon for goodness' sake, can offer anything tangible to say on Brexit. What has the Gospel got to say about backstops and the semi-moveable feast that appears to be Article 50? Not a lot, perhaps. But away from the mind-numbing details that can make or break a deal, there are things that the Gospel can offer, and which perhaps should be heard. Not in a smug, detached, holier-than-thou sort of way, but in a way that can broaden perspectives and ask deeper, more positive questions about the *reality* underpinning Brexit. Because what Brexit is actually about is identity and the failure to address, over many decades, who we are as a nation, as a people.

Everyone is captured to a certain extent by their history, by their past. We are all products of what came before, and how we engage with the world around us tells us an awful lot about the extent to which our past holds us in its thrall. This is as true of nations as it is of individuals. Dean Acheson, President Truman's secretary of state, said, in the early 1960s, that the British had lost an empire and not found a

role. That, I think, is the fundamental reason why we have had so much heart-searching over our relationship with Europe, because, ultimately, as a nation, our heart has not been in it. We, the British, are still searching for a post-imperialist role. For 300 years we have faced away from Europe building up our commercial and territorial empire, but for the last couple of generations, we have faced the other way, towards Europe, and we are still scratching our heads about what this means. So, our identity has come under the spotlight: what do we really stand for as we approach the third decade of the twenty-first century? Of course, Europe is not the sole reason for this soul-searching, but it is a huge factor because it is symbolic of so much else: loss of status, loss of prestige, loss of security. There are no easy answers to these issues, as the current turmoil bears witness to, but we do have to recognise that different parts of the UK, both its constituent countries and its citizens, are beginning to answer them in different ways. Hence the current noise.

Christians, like everybody else, can be trapped by their past, only we have a theological term for it. We call it guilt, that corrosive element of our lives which imprisons us to a past event or action that, by not addressing, keeps its insidious hold on us for a long time. Overall, we do guilt very well, because we, along with everyone else, find it very difficult to change, to face up to the truth of who we are. We can wax lyrical about the forgiving love of God, but unless you can take that in, and be truly repentant (which not only means saying sorry, but also means turning towards the love of God in a new, creative way), that guilt will stake its claim on our ability to love properly for ever and a day.

Freed from guilt, though, we can be more positive about the future, not forgetting the past but not letting it be something that shackles our future. Our faith, therefore, makes a difference about who we are and how we live in the world; it gives us an identity that is secure but ever-changing by the experiences that encounter. Our faith helps us, then, on the journey from who we are to who we are to become. This doesn't always follow a smooth, happy trajectory, but at least it keeps us forward-looking, Kingdom-visioned.

So, whatever the Gospel is, it *has* to be about hope, and therefore has to be about the future. It also concerns doing something about the future here and now, by loving our neighbours as ourselves, and in an era of tough-sounding, 'might is right' leadership, where walls keeping people out is 'right-on' politics, the radical message of the Gospel has never more been needed in our political life than now. The last thing I am asking for in saying this is for the archbishop of Canterbury to become the home secretary, but I do feel that, in our politics at the moment, there is a lack of vision about where we are going. The referendum result in June 2016 told us what the majority of us didn't want. It didn't tell us what we did want. And we aren't much further forward now. Which is why we are facing this moment of

intense crisis in our national life. The chickens of our imperialist past are coming home in droves to roost, which is the fate, after all, of all earthly empires.

Caliban may have wanted to dream riches falling from the clouds. But Prospero has the last word on illusion:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,  
As I foretold you, were all spirits and  
Are melted into air, into thin air:  
We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.

To some extent, we all live with illusions, with how we want the world to be. We may all wish that we could wake up and find ourselves in an arcadian idyll. But life isn't like that. We are, as they say, where we are. Our politics may be holed below the water line, but a decision will be taken, and the world will move on. Just how much of our historical baggage we take with us, goodness only knows, and what this means for our economy and our national integrity, time will tell. But in every corner of the Isle, there will be noises, envisioned by a sense of the common good, some of which will be inspired by this funny thing called the Gospel, by people who faithfully pray 'Thy Kingdom come' every day, and who will get on with their lives loving their neighbours the only way they can, believing, hoping that somehow they will make a difference. You see, it may not be the mighty oak, creaking a bit after withstanding centuries of stormy weather, that points the way forward, but the tiny acorns which gives the growth.