



Trump & the great echo chamber

If there is someone who lives in Surbiton who is happy that Donald Trump will be the new President of the United States, I haven't met them. Or at least, if I have, they haven't dared to tell me.

The Twittersphere I inhabit is also ablaze with emotions from despair to anger: there is no delight or triumph, just a sort of shared grief. This is the phenomenon of 'the echo chamber'; when we talk and listen only to 'people like us'. And, after all, there must be someone here who thinks Trump winning is a good thing.

Before worrying about Trump, isn't there something more to worry about the echo chamber?

There was a similar thing going on with Brexit, though funnily enough the more disparate views within the church congregation contrasted with the homogeneity of views in my peer group and saved me, at least, from some foolish positions.

It has led me to recall some words from Rowan Williams in his time as Archbishop of Canterbury. The controversy he was dealing with concerned the retracted appointment of an openly gay man, Jeffrey John, as a bishop.

Williams received hundreds of emails and letters. Roughly half of them were outraged that Jeffrey John had been turned down on the basis of his homosexual relationship; the other half were outraged that

John had even been nominated for preferment in the first place.

What united both sets of messages, however, apart from their anger with Williams, was a sentence at the end of them which went something like:

"I have spoken with many other people at church about this and they all agree with me."

Each side was convinced that all 'right thinking' people were with them. They were unaware of just how many people disagreed, because within their social circle, they never met them. They lived in an echo chamber.

Williams saw his role as trying to mediate between them, so that liberal Christians and conservative Christians at least acknowledged each other's existence and their right to a point of view. Whether this worked is another matter.

But I wonder if there isn't also a lesson here for the United States and the UK more generally. When Hillary Clinton spoke of half Trump's supporters as 'deplorables', she was probably only voicing what a lot of people think. But half of Trump's supporters equates to 30 million adults. You can't just write them off. In the long run, you have to engage. Listen to why they feel that way, and, after that, explain your own position. Win the argument, sure, but don't just dismiss them. Get out of the echo chamber.

November 2016. Thought for the Train is a short column written by the Reverend Robert Stanier, the vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train, or elsewhere. www.surbitonchurch.org.uk.