



Heading to the extreme

In an interview last night, the ex-footballer Gary Lineker said this:

“More people now really dislike me than ever before; and more people now really like me than ever before.”

This is largely to do with two things. First, that he has made some political statements, especially about welcoming refugees; second, he has an enormous following on Twitter: 6 million followers and counting.

Twitter enables him to reach huge numbers with his views, which are still mostly about football, but it also exposes him to great torrent of abuse. Even for someone who has been famous for as long as him (over three decades in the public eye), it is difficult to come to terms with.

To some people, he is emblematic of all that is wrong with England: the sort of man with a huge private income who likes to posture about welcoming refugees when he is so distant from everyday life that it never costs him anything; the sort of man who makes statements about morality, even though he has left his wife for a considerably younger model, twice over.

To others, he is exactly what England should be about: proud of his country, but happy to have worked abroad; a working class man intelligent enough to speak two languages, and decent enough

never to have a bad word about anybody. (He also scored some crucial World Cup goals, which helps.)

Whatever your view of Lineker, the interesting thing is the way he experiences people's feelings as more extreme than ever before.

On the wider stage, for the first time since 1983, we have a General Election, which is not being fought over the centre ground. And the leaders of all three major parties can be viewed as conviction politicians. In one way, this is exciting; different views are being represented.

The problem, for me, is that there is also an unseen force pushing people in this direction, which is the way we interact with media: it starts to entrench people in positions they always held.

For sure, this has always happened. Lefties read the Guardian; conservatives read the Telegraph etc. But we can now personalise more than ever before, from our Netflix selections, our iTunes playlists, and to who we view on Twitter. While there are more outlets than ever before, paradoxically we may be more exposed only to one type of thinking than ever before. This inevitably pushes normal people to become more extreme in their views.

It seems to me that the truth is usually, though not always, somewhere in between extremes. Lineker should truthfully be seen neither as saint nor as pariah. As should other views.

May 2017 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. You can also read "Thought for the Train" at www.surbitonchurch.org.uk.