



The system and choice

We are all individuals with free will; of course we are. And yet, in a sense, we are not: we are all in the grip of forces that are wider than ourselves as individuals.

The news that Kenya's elections would be racked by dispute and boycott is depressingly predictable; how often have we seen in sub Saharan Africa situations where democratic process is thwarted at every turn?

Completely differently, there is the imminent decision of the Catalan politician, Carles Puigdemont, about whether to declare independence for Catalonia or not. On the one hand, it is for him to decide: declare independence and arguably fulfil Catalonia's destiny or end up in jail for thirty years. It's an acute dilemma, but one where superficially he has the cards in his hands to play.

What I would argue though, is that, that his individual free will is extremely limited. I am sure that if you spoke to him, he would hardly feel like a man of freedom; he would feel like he was a small pawn caught in the winds of historical changes.

Similarly, you can pick out individuals in Kenya's story, Odinga or Kenyatta or whoever, but I am not sure it is realistic to expect individuals to change the situation. Ever since colonial times, democracy has struggled to assert itself in most African countries (Botswana being the exception that proves the rule). And one can in turn try to blame the British, the French, the Belgians and the other colonial powers

for leaving the African countries in such poor condition when they left them for independence, having fleeced them successfully since the 19th Century. Or you could feel that blaming the British is a cheap shot considering they left half a century ago...

Whatever the case, individuals exist in the grip of forces that are wider than themselves. From the outside, it is easy to blame Africans for being corrupt; it is less easy to criticise if you also grow up and operate within the system, and have only risen to the top because of the system whose very corruption one may wish to reform. When a system is corrupt, possibilities open up to you which do not occur when you have not been exposed to the system. (From a very different sphere, one might look at how the drug culture operated among Tour de France cyclists.)

This is where Jesus' teaching about the coming of the kingdom is very relevant. Sometimes, it is true, he addresses individuals and their individual decisions; more often, he is attacking a system, be that the trading at the Temple or whatever. When Christians pray "Thy kingdom come," it is a pray for a greater change than just a bunch of individuals coming individually to a different decision. It is about a shift in an understanding of a community to become a new kind of community that behaves in a manner closer to God's way of doing things.

It's much harder to address, but it is truer to how things happen.

October 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.