



Davos and the Franciscans

Somehow, my invitation to this week's World Economic Forum in Davos got lost in the post; nor was I invited to attend the charity fundraiser at the Presidents Club last week. In the case of the latter, this was a fortunate occurrence: I wouldn't like to have been the husband having to explain what went on to his wife when the Financial Times story hit the news stands earlier this week.

It is perhaps unfair to link these two events. The Presidents Club was notoriously all male; Davos, while male dominated, has greater female representation than ever before at 21%, or at least that's what the publicity makes a great deal of.

And it is possible that some good stuff occurs for the wellbeing of humanity at each event. The Presidents Club, on the night, raised £2 million for charity, though charities are queuing up to refuse the money, and perhaps the connections made at Davos will help improve humanity.

However, I can't help but be suspicious. Being a high profile networker does not necessarily mean one is a high-quality doer of good. The most represented countries at Davos, in order, are the USA (with 26), then Saudi Arabia and the UAE joint second (with 13 each).

There are around 300 delegates in all: is it really necessary for Liechtenstein to be represented by three, Luxembourg by two and Monaco by two?

One danger of this sort of 'top table' networking is that it fosters a self-importance among those who are 'in'. They are the chosen few, and the very event of their being chosen to mingle with other remarkable high achievers reinforces a self-belief that they are wise and brilliant.

Worse, it's a fantastically skewed sample. Are there any people there whose yearly salary is under, say, £20,000 a year? In fact, is there a delegate there whose yearly salary is under £100,000 a year? So when these people discuss, say, international tax reform, whose interests will they have at heart? How keen will they be to ensure an even redistribution of world resources?

Instead, this week I did have an invitation to spend two days at the Franciscan Friary at Hilfield in Dorset. There, the brothers have literally no possessions beyond the most basic of clothing; for the most part, they eat only what they grow; in general, they try to live as sustainably as possible, welcoming in wayfarers as and when they come.

It's almost miraculous that places like this still exist, living out their principles of humility, love and joy. And yet there they are, inspired by St Francis, who lived 800 years ago. In 800 years' time, I believe there will still be a Franciscan community there: I believe they will still be praying the psalms each day.

I don't think people will still be meeting at Davos.

January 2018. 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