



Busy doing nothing...

It is a myth that Nero played the violin while Rome burned in 64AD, though it is possible that he read poetry while the flames went higher: that is the story that Tacitus mentions. Certainly, as a person he had more interest in the arts of music and theatre than the difficult art of dealing with a mass emergency in the city of which he was the ultimate ruler. That night he proved his worthlessness.

The leadership elections in the Conservative party this week have had a similar feeling of displacement activity. What needs to happen, of course, whatever your desired destination, is forensic and detailed analysis and negotiation on a task so long and challenging that even Sisyphus might not swap it for rolling his rock up a hill. This is difficult, unrewarding, boring and thankless, in that you'll end up with a compromise that can always be dismissed by a rhetorical swipe from one side or other. But it's what needs to happen.

Instead, what we find is politicians doing what they really enjoy doing: building slates of support, persuading a gratifyingly tiny electorate of their own merits, cajoling, analysing personalities, feeding journalists titbits, trying to work Facebook, Twitter and the rest to their advantage, putting out policy notifications, and engineering the optimum position in the political version of the Grand National.

With four months to go till a crucial deadline, the processes of Parliament have ground to a halt and

nobody is doing anything of any use whatsoever.

In life, there is always a tension between what needs doing and what we want to do; it's certainly true of ministry. My own personal weakness is putting off organising the rota until I absolutely have to: I'll do anything else first: home visits, marriage preparation, confirmation classes, all that... But at least, I have got an awareness of it.

What is grating me with this election is the pitiful level of engagement with the crux issue: it doesn't seem to be discussed at all. It's as if it's come down to "I will deliver this on October 22nd" or "I may deliver this a little bit later than October 22nd" and doubling down on all sorts of statements around that, as if that was a proper discussion of Brexit.

The great advantage with discussing dates of departure is that you can do it without really having to fuss oneself with the troublesome details. It assumes the train will leave the station; it's just a question of when. Yet what really is needed is a complete rewiring of the train engine, the railway, its links with the stations, and figuring out how that can be done in different arrangements.

There was another Roman emperor called Galba, who ruled Rome briefly for six months before being overthrown: Tacitus remarks, "he would have been a great emperor, if he'd never actually been emperor." It was true of Theresa May; I fear that's going to be true of whoever wins this one.

June 2019 Thought for the Train is a short column by the Rev'd Robert Stanier, vicar of St Andrew and St Mark, Surbiton, for people to read on the train. You can also read "Thought for the Train" at www.surbitonchurch.org.uk.