



The veneer of civilisation

At one point in Ken Burns' recent and brilliant documentary about the Vietnam War, a veteran now in his Sixties is asked what he learned during his time in Vietnam. His response hits on a terrible truth:

"I learned that the veneer of civilisation," he says, "is very thin. Young men would arrive in Nam; they were nice kids, brought up in nice families and just weeks later, they would be doing the most horrendous things."

Thucydides observed the same phenomenon in 427 BC of the massacres in revolutionary Corcyra (modern day Corfu): otherwise ordinary people began to commit terrible atrocities. "War is a violent teacher" he wrote.

The fact that we are at a time of peace makes the chanting of "Send her home" at the recent Republican rallies all the more awful, the person in question being an American congresswoman Ilhan Omar, of Somali birth. Even so, I think that phrase, "the veneer of civilisation" remains relevant.

So long as it essentially doesn't happen, there are certain forms of behaviour which society shapes us into thinking of as wrong. It is one of the healthy things about living in a group, and since our politics is rooted in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, there is often a core of Christian morality that has some influence. This assumed behaviour about what is or isn't right, is, however, easily lost and it seems to me that

the chants in America are an example of that.

I wonder how the people who were at that rally reflect on their chanting, now that they look back on it in the cold light of day. Are they embarrassed? Do they put it down to being caught up in a mob mentality? Or do they think that they were right all along, that this objectionable woman is inherently un-American and merits the chants that she should go home?

Has Trump tapped into a core of racism that has never left America, that was never fully dealt with either in the Civil War or in the Civil Rights movement of the Sixties? By this logic, there has been a mere veneer of civilisation, or of non-racism, but now Trump has cut through it to reveal the base metal at the core of that country.

Whatever the case there, certainly I think it is easy to underestimate how shallow-rooted is our ability to be good. It leads me back to thinking about the story of the garden of Eden and the eating of the apple. Adam and Eve didn't need much encouragement to disobey God and to eat the fruit; a couple of cunning utterances from the serpent were all it needed for them to turn their good intentions into something else.

Now that we are about to have a prime minister with a vacuum in the area of personal morality, it is something that we in Britain need to guard against more than ever, or we could head that way too.