



Being attentive to the truth

Fifteen years ago, I attended a lecture in Cambridge given by Rowan Williams. It was a year after the invasion of Iraq, no weapons of mass destruction had been found, and the talk was of dodgy dossiers: word had got around that Williams would be addressing this in a lecture.

Hence, many more journalists gathered at a church in Cambridge than would ordinarily be reasonable. Basically, they were desperate to hear the Archbishop of Canterbury declare that Prime Minister Tony Blair had lied to the British people, that he had sexed up the dodgy dossier and all the rest of it.

Instead, what they got was a meditation from Williams about the nature of paying attention to texts and the world around us, be that scriptural texts, with their many layers, or the world itself, with its fickle cultural trends. The closest they got to a condemnation of Blair was that there were indications that the country's leaders were being insufficiently attentive to the evidence laid out before them.

The media was disappointed, and lambasted Williams for being wilfully obscure. They had all traipsed up to Cambridge and had no soundbite to show for it, but I have ruminated on that lecture ever since.

What Williams was exploring was our tendency only to see evidence that confirms our pre-existing bias, whereas being truly attentive to evidence requires something else: it requires not just clear eyes, but

also sufficient humility to see that the truth may point us in directions that we have not seen before.

There's a strand of conservative Christianity that often struggles with this, that deals with difficulties by ever more vigorously stating that the real problem here is our level of belief; if only we believe some more, or with greater fervour, then the difficulties that have appeared will be overcome. Applying this to Iraq in 2004, we WILL discover WMD in the end: we just have to have more faith. But we never did.

With our new government, what is happening is that the political equivalent of conservative believers have taken over, and are now encountering our situation. It's not as if any of it was new—the Irish backstop, the refusal of the EU to give free market privileges outside of freedom of movement, and so on. But now they are finding it from the heart of government and they have to address it directly. Except they haven't yet; instead, Johnson exhorts his supporters to believe ever more strongly, to have confidence, and all shall be well. It parallels the preaching of conservative Pentecostalism.

Conversely, the rhetoric of Remainers is often that the Prime Minister is a liar. It's an easy shot, but I wonder if the more acute analysis was rather given by Rowan Williams. Beyond rhetoric of lies, the deeper issue is the need for true attentiveness to the facts, and that requires not just clear-sightedness, but also humility, and the problem is the lack of humility.

August 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.