

Where Your Heart Is

Prime Minister Harold Wilson famously said that a week is a long time in politics. One can only think that had he coined the phrase today he would have said that a week is an *extremely* long time in politics.

A few days before the referendum someone remarked to me that 'there is a lot of emotion about at the moment'. I believe that person was right, and further believe that there has been even more emotion in public life since then. Emotion often begins to flow when people are uncertain and when they sense that change is afoot that they either do not desire or do not understand. We are also emotional, though in a slightly different way, when we look back and remember events in the past - whether they are delightful or dreadful. Many people have found themselves moved as the Battle of the Somme has been commemorated, and they have been drawn closer to the human side, the human *cost*, of history.

At their best, emotions make us wiser, drawing from us intuitions that are more profound than the workings of the rational mind. The famously unemotional Mr Spock of Star Trek was excellent at some tasks. But he was hopeless at others. If we are to flourish then we need to learn how to feel, understand and respond both to our own emotions and to the emotions of others. Empathy, sympathy and compassion are integral and vital in all human relationships and all human communities.

I was speaking with some people about medical education recently, and one of the points that came up was that while we might want to encourage doctors to have empathy, and to train them to be sympathetic and compassionate, there are limits to these, as to all other, virtues. Personally I want a doctor to be full of sympathy and empathy when he or she

is talking with me about my problems. But when it comes to the technical side of the work I don't want empathy, I want precision, efficiency and an excellent result. In cases like surgery, this should be quite simple. As far as I am concerned the empathy can stop the moment the anesthetic kicks in. But what about more complex areas like physiotherapy?

The subtleties of emotional life are indeed complex. When children are very young it's no good if their parents try to organize things so that the child will never be upset. On the contrary, the parent must determine *when* the child is upset. Part of the role of the parent is to be in charge of the boundaries that make the child's life safe and manageable and healthy. Part of the role of the child is to test and to seek to transgress those boundaries. Fast-forward seventy or eighty years and things may well be reversed. Power of attorney is arranged and the children might now have to upset their parents by making decisions about care and wellbeing and even such basic things as whether someone can live at home any longer. These will be times of strong and difficult emotion – and rightly so. Emotion is a proper and important part of life.

Emotions rise when choices are faced, and the starker the choice and the closer the deadline, the greater the emotion. A referendum is therefore bound to raise more emotions than a general election - and the aftermath is bound to be more emotional. Just as a knockout competition is more exciting than a league, and why penalty shoot-outs are knife-edge affairs, especially when they get to the stage of 'sudden death'.

If well attuned and proportional, our emotions can make us wise, but if they are excessive, they can easily make us foolish. Very often when emotion pushes us to make a mistake we go on, flooded with the further emotions of guilt

or embarrassment, to make more and more mistakes so that the whole thing spirals out of control until something or someone, or maybe many things, or many people, get very badly hurt and we decide, far too late, to stop it.

And so it is that we look back at the wars of the twentieth century with a tear in our eye, and look at the current state of our politics and feel at least a little bit anxious about where it is all heading. For a long time the most motivating words in politics and economics have been 'growth' or 'change'. Looking at things today many of us might find words like 'stability' and indeed 'sustainability' more attractive.

However there are times in our lives when change is not an *option*; change is the point at which we have arrived. We have recently seen graduation ceremonies here, and today we come to the end of the Chapel's academic year, and so we are saying goodbye to our Year 8 Choristers and our recently graduated Choral Scholars.

One of the nice things about institutions is that they generate and evolve traditional rites of passage. These help us manage the inevitable emotions and make good transitions. Sometimes such traditions involve food, a dinner perhaps, with speeches. The Choral Scholars have a dinner tonight, and I gave the Choristers a dinner a few weeks' ago. It is worth noticing in this context that the talking and eating, the conviviality and shared emotion of such occasions, mirror that of the Eucharist with its focus on the meal of bread and wine and the sharing of the word of God through readings and sermon. If we use these occasions to be emotionally generous and intellectually truthful then they can be more than good ways to manage the emotions of transition. They can become gateways to the transcendent; windows that open us up to the guiding, supporting and sustaining love of God, who is grace and truth.

And it is to that eternal love that I would want to commend our leavers, and all those who are at this time experiencing complex and deep emotions; all those who have been taken by forces both outside and inside themselves to a place of disequilibrium and stress; and all those who have in recent days been on the receiving end of hurtful remarks or violent actions sparked by the unfortunate emotionality of our recent political process.

The love of God is more than a match for all this trouble and strife. God's future is far more positive than the naive mix of anxiety and optimism that dominates our current politics, and bangs on about change and growth as if they were ultimate values.

Time and again Jesus and his followers have said that it is the heart that matters most. Certainly it is our hearts that can become dangerous when inflamed with raw emotion but it is our hearts that are the seat of our deepest values and the place of our spiritual struggles.

The message of this final sermon of this year is simple: put your heart into the hands of the God of love, truth, peace, forgiveness, hope and joy. These are the things that matter most deeply, for they are the qualities of both of God and of human beings at their best. And it is when we pursue these that we find ourselves, our lives and our world transfigured and transformed and discover that we are easing our way towards a positive future in the sustaining company of the God of grace and truth.

Sermon preached at King's College Chapel, Cambridge
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The Revd Dr Stephen Cherry, Dean