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Texts: Amos 6 1-7; Luke 18 9-14

The End of Complacency.

I first became a journalist in the 1980s, during the Cold War.

Those of my generation remember how binary politics were then. A pattern of rhetorical tit for tat, which sadly re-echo in the new confrontation between Russia and the West.

In those Cold War days the confrontation was underpinned by ideology. The world was divided into rival camps.

The Soviet Union would condemn Western capitalism for its pursuit of profit, its inequalities and colonialism. The West would condemn Soviet Communism for its gulag labour camps, the repression of dissent, and a dictatorial system which suffocated initiative and enterprise.

In the West many believed that we 'had it good' and they 'had it bad'. Our comfortable conclusion was we enjoyed openness, prosperity and choice, and the unfortunate citizens of the Communist world did not. Our way of life, and by extension our values, were superior.

Ours was a world of freedoms – freedom of information and religion, freedom of movement and free elections.

Theirs was a world of negatives – no private property or business, no right to protest, no free expression, and -outside a tiny elite -, no foreign travel.

By the 1980s, even Soviet citizens were quietly chafing at their country's restrictive practices.

If you lived in the West, it was tempting to feel a little smug.

That appearance of black and white lulled us into a sense of our own righteousness. After all, Communist repression was a useful alibi. It relieved us of responsibility.

The citizens of the Soviet bloc were safely behind an Iron Curtain. There was no real risk they'd seek to share our world. Their own governments forbade it.

And other societies doing less well than our own were also safely at arm's length. We could assuage our consciences through charity donations and government aid programmes, but leave the world's problems at arms' length. Few asylum seekers or refugees had the means or even the ambition to make the difficult voyage to our countries.

We were like the Pharisee in the second reading today – a parable familiar from our childhoods. The Pharisee thanked God that he was not like the robbers and evildoers, or the tax collector praying next to him. He was confident that his life was more virtuous. But in congratulating himself, he failed to see his own shortcomings and his own lack of humility.

So too, we Westerners used to thank our lucky stars that our democracies were so much better, and that our Western values so much more admirable, than those of the Soviet bloc. Like the Pharisee, how easy it was to assume our superiority. How easy to fall into the trap of complacency.

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Now so much has changed.

The clear East West divide has gone. The Berlin Wall has come down. The Eastern bloc has disappeared. Former Soviet citizens can travel with relative ease.

No longer can the West heap blame on the Soviet government, while quietly relieved that millions of people were prevented from streaming westwards.

And not just the end of Soviet Communism has changed the world. Global trade and digital communications have also dismantled barriers.

The world was always interwoven, but now we are more aware of it. Countries beset by turmoil, like Iraq and Syria; asylum seekers, refugees, economic

migrants – they are part of our world too. They arrive on our shores, seeking a better life. Their dreams are in our hands.

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Yet without our old alibi of a divided world, how ready is the affluent West to embrace a more joined- up state of humanity?

The calls have grown louder for less inward immigration, for new walls and fences, for new restrictive laws in the name of security.

It's an understandable self-defence mechanism. We all share the sense of being bewildered and buffeted, of feeling we are losing control.

But this instinct to pull up of the drawbridge is also an uncomfortable retreat. What happened to the West's once firm support for freedom of movement and other rights?

And it's not just uncomfortable. It's possibly dangerous.

If our defence of these rights rings hollow, what do we stand for?

How do we answer the tyrants and terrorists who call us hypocritical and self-serving? How do we stop them from claiming that democracy is a sham?

And how do we stop them from using our failings to justify entrenching their own authoritarian regimes?

How do we keep safe our core beliefs?

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To these difficult questions, there are no easy answers.

To deal with this moral unease, perhaps the best starting point is to scrutinise our own individual behaviour. Unlike the self-satisfied Pharisee, we should be ready to admit where we have fallen short.

“For those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted,” ends the parable.

So the first step would be to accept that this is, indeed, the age of the end of complacency.

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And maybe there is a deeper lesson.

As a former correspondent I often get asked: who is the most impressive person you have ever interviewed?

I think many people expect me to name some distinguished statesman or woman. Or perhaps a well-known author or celebrity.

But it is not a prominent figure from politics or the Arts who comes to mind. It is a quiet woman, let's call her Donna, who I met while making a film about poverty in the United States in the 1990s.

Donna and her family came from the Sioux tribe of the Great Plains. They lived on a Native American reservation in the barren, windswept South Dakota Badlands. Spending a week with them was revealing.

Their home was a log cabin with no running water or electricity. Heating came from a wood-burning stove. Cooking was done outside on an open fire. They depended on welfare handouts.

In that part of South Dakota there were not many jobs on offer. Donna made some extra money sewing patchwork quilts and weaving dream catchers to sell to passing tourists. Her husband and sons seemed to do very little.

My first impression was of listlessness and passivity. This was startling poverty in what was, after all, the richest country in the world.

It was dismaying. But it was also interesting to document and turn into a film.

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As part of our project, they agreed to let us record a purification ceremony. We all sat in semi darkness inside their 'sweat lodge', a dome-shaped shelter covered in skins. Hot stones were fed with water and herbs. As the atmosphere grew steamier and more aromatic, an elder invoked the spirits of water, air, fire and earth.

At a certain point – unsurprising in this sticky environment – our camera packed up and stopped working. Our cameraman said we’d just have to wait for a few days and hope the condensation dried out.

Donna was very clear what had happened. ‘It’s the work of the spirits,’ she said. ‘They are telling you to stop rushing around and taking pictures. Slow down and take in your surroundings. Appreciate the rhythm of life here. You need to live it and feel it before you can make a film about it.’

And for the next three days that is what we did.

We sat looking at the landscape. We talked to Donna and her husband about their memories. We learnt from them about the animals and plants around us. We helped make traditional corn fritters and squash stew on the open fire. We watched one of her boys - a talented artist – as he painted and drew.

I realised that my assumptions about Donna had been wrong. Yes, hers was a life of grinding poverty. Yes, her every day was a struggle. But in one important way which I had not allowed myself to see, it was also full of richness.

It was a well- deserved prompt to jog me into the recognition that I should stand back from being so self-absorbed in my busy, complicated life; and I should not be so quick to pass judgement on the lives of others.

Donna had gently brought me up short. I felt rather ashamed.

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“Are you better than these kingdoms? Is your territory greater than their territory?” The probing question of today’s Old Testament reading.

Perhaps the deeper lesson is that the world never was black and white. The world is always grey. We may want the quick simplicity of moral certitude - to be sure who is right, who is wrong, who is rich and who is poor. But that apparent clarity can blind us to a subtler understanding and compassion for those around us.

As Donna suggested, maybe we need to pause - to subject ourselves to private scrutiny, even pray a little if that is helpful - before measuring ourselves against others and asserting our own superiority.

If our era is the end of complacency, then maybe humility is what we should embrace in its place.