

# The State of the Nation

No one should rejoice - yet some are. All should express concern - yet some do not.

The vote in Parliament on Tuesday 5 February 2013 is alarming. Why? Because it shows that no less than 400 of our elected representatives do not know the difference between right and wrong.

In the 1990s Prime Minister John Major wanted the nation to get back to basics. In effect he argued for traditional morals to hold sway. Yet in private he cheated on his wife.

Now, in the 2010s, we have a Prime Minister who believes he is leading the people of this nation to be more tolerant, more loving and more open. The rhetoric is beguiling. The logic is flawed. We need to explain.

What happened on 5 February? There was the second reading of a bill, the effect of which will redefine

marriage for all of us. Some 400 MPs voted in favour. Yet less than half of the Conservative Party did. Mr Cameron is on a mission. He wants to modernise his party. And he wants to change the world. In the end he will do neither.

We could focus our attention on the main arguments the pro voters use. Arguments, that is, about equality and love. For the moment we shall do something else. We shall ask why government exist. Our question then is: What is government to do?

Some would immediately say it exists to put in place its policies. A political party puts together a manifesto. It is done before an election. We are invited to opt for the ideas of one party rather than those of another.

In some parts of the world people do not get a choice. They live under a dictatorship by a party or a person. We live in a democracy. Every few years (no more than five) the electorate gets to choose. We can keep what we have or vote for change. There is a problem though. The philosophers of Ancient Greece -

men like Plato and Aristotle - saw what may happen. Without proper controls the people would turn their freedom into licence. They would choose what was wrong rather than what was right. They would turn liberty (freedom) into libertarianism (anything you like or want).

History shows they were right. The same problem emerged in Oliver Cromwell's day (the 1640s and 1650s). The same is with us today.

We all need to know why government exists. Once you have a group you discover you need order. We order our own lives in some way. Some do this more successfully than others. But it is an impossible world if every person does what is right in their own eyes. Hence the need for order.

At this point a key idea emerges. It is the notion of *consent*. In a free world individuals agree the system of government they want. That is why we have a constitutional monarchy rather than an absolute monarch. We have a leader (the Head of State) who is not elected. And we have agreed it will be a member of the

Royal Family. We also have a Parliament. To it we elect our representatives or MPs. But both monarch and MPs have the same duty. What is it. It consists of two complementary tasks.

*First* it is the function of government to protect the people. It is to restrain wickedness and vice. In other words government exists to protect us from our enemies. The enemies of freedom that is.

*Secondly*, government has a duty to ensure that godliness and virtue are free to flourish.

Most people agree with the first. Confusion reigns with regard to the second. Why is that? In a word, it is because there is ignorance about who God is.

In recent years two trends have become increasingly evident. First, because many different philosophies and religions exist, it is (wrongly) assumed it is not possible to say one is to be preferred before the rest.

Secondly, because one belief system or worldview is not put first, it is (wrongly) assumed politics is for the public sphere and religion is to be kept private.

These trends are both false. Why? Because Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

If he is not risen what he taught is a fraud. He says he alone gives life; that in him alone there is forgiveness; that he alone makes people new; and that he alone will take us to heaven. These are great claims. Can we be sure they are true? Yes we can.

Jesus Christ did many miracles. They show he was different to ordinary people.

Crucially he predicted he would be put to death and on the third day rise. That is exactly what happened. On the third day (Friday, Saturday, Sunday as the days are called and go) he was seen alive. His sealed and guarded tomb was open and empty. It was not opened for him to get out but so that people could look

in. Nor was it opened by people. God opened it.

His resurrection shows his claims are true. He is from God; he is God in human form; he is the only way to God; and he is the one appointed by God to judge the living and the dead on the last day. Jesus Christ is Lord.

It is from Jesus Christ we learn the difference between right and wrong. He defines wickedness and vice. In him we discover what godliness and virtue are.

Should matters of belief and faith be kept private? Should political ideas alone dominate the public sphere? The answer to both questions is No.

It is true that politicians are not to rule the church (*Erastianism*). Nor are the church or clerics to rule the state (*Clerocracy*). Rather the two spheres of church and state are to co-exist alongside each other. The church is to allow politicians to do their job. The reverse is also to be done.

This means the church needs to remind politicians of the difference between right and wrong. It is to

hold the state to account. When it exceeds its power it must be told. When it confuses things it needs to hear words of advice, correction or rebuke.

So what is needed today? What is the church to do in the face of the vote to the next steps toward redefining marriage? It has three duties.

*First we are to pray.* Parliament is in the process of making a monumental mistake. We must pray that our political leaders see the seriousness of the course they have chosen to pursue. We must pray they see the error of their way. We must pray they see it is their duty to restrain wickedness and not promote it.

*Secondly, we must join in the debate.* The matter will now be debated further. It will go into the committee stage and then to the House of Lords. We must do all we can to show through reasoned debate the serious consequences of defying the will of God and of tampering with that which he ordained when he created mankind.

*Thirdly we must warn.* The church has a prophetic role. God's people are here to show people the ways of and the way to God. This means we must call people to change their thinking and the way they live. In particular we must tell the Prime Minister that he and his government are promoting wickedness. We must warn that God will not be mocked.

Oliver Cromwell was a great Parliamentarian. He believed in government by parliament. However, he did not accept the false division between public and private, secular and religious some demand today. He rightly saw that the people must be ruled by those who truly represent them.

He saw something else. He saw that the people must also be the people of God (*Oliver Cromwell, John Buchan, p 246*). That is our first duty.

The first commandment is explicit. We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul and all our strength. It applies to us all - politicians included.

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