

Column – worst of times

Outside a church in Leicester, England, can be found an inscription with the words:

“In the year 1654 when all things were, throughout this nation, either demolished or profaned, Sir Robert Shirley, Baronet, founded and built this church. He it is whose singular praise it is to have done the best things in the worst times, and to have hoped [helped] them in the most calamitous.”

The ‘worst times’ in this inscription refers to the period following the execution of King Charles I in 1649. The Commonwealth, as it is known, was a time of political instability. The Church likewise felt the shockwaves of this upheaval. Stained glass windows were smashed, Christmas banned and worship altered.

It was during this tumultuous period that Sir Robert Shirley determined to carry on and build his church. Might we not learn a life lesson from Sir Robert?

I don’t want to say we live in ‘worst times’, but we do live in troubled times. People continue to contract the coronavirus, some of whom will die. Early on, the response to this crisis became politicised causing a number of our citizens to distrust government agencies and officials.

In other matters, charges of voter fraud have cast a pall over the recent Presidential election. To the outside world, the United States must be looking more like a ‘banana republic’ rather than a bastion of liberty and stability.

More recent still, there has been chaos in our nation’s capital. Some label those who came to Washington ‘patriots’, heirs to the tradition of the Boston Tea Party; others, ‘terrorists. Regardless, this disruption demonstrates the lack of consensus that now exists among the citizens of this country.

“How much longer can this divided house stand?” thoughtful men and women are asking. “Will the once proud United States go the way of the Roman Empire?”

Most alarming of all, has been the loss of the ability to have honest debate. Sound bites and name calling has replaced thoughtful, in-depth discussion. No doubt, today’s news media where careful reporting has replaced been by entertainment is partly to blame.

In such times, where should those who call themselves followers of Jesus Christ be standing and doing? It seems to me Sir Robert points us in the right direction. It is to carry on doing those things that are good, honourable and within our reach.

Our calling today may not be to build a church (a building), but *to be* the Church. What might that look like? Here are a few suggestions:

Where there is confusion in society over moral issues, we stand firm and model a better way. Where there is rancour and falsehoods, we hold civil and grace-filled discourse. Where there is a vacuum of leadership, we seek to fill that vacuum. Where there are people who have fallen prey to that great lie of modernity – ‘be true to yourself and no one else’ – and as a result are broken and suffering, we lift these souls up and bring them to Jesus.

No time for heads drooped down. Dare to do the best things regardless of the times or who is in the White House.

*ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who dost govern all things in heaven and earth; Mercifully hear the supplications of thy people, and grant us thy peace all the days of our life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect, Second Sunday after Epiphany, Book of Common Prayer).*

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