

For our Pewsheet Extra (12), John Lambert has kindly agreed to share with us his response to the “Brexit” vote which he was asked to present to the Deanery Synod.

## That Referendum... (Psalm 46)



When the acting Area Dean asked me to lead Synod in a biblical response to the outcome to referendum on Britain’s future relationship with the European Union, I have to be honest; my heart sank.

I feel real trepidation doing this. In fact, I would prefer to address you tonight on almost any other possible subject – computer programming, Korean hairdressing, the sexual behaviour of squid, beekeeping in Kazakhstan, advanced trigonometry, architecture in Inverness, the history of the paperclip...

I am not really excited by politics and I have never once sought to bring party politics into the pulpit. I always try to remain absolutely neutral during election campaigns because, frankly, my calling and commission is to preach the gospel, proclaim Jesus Christ, build community and look after the health of the church, not politicise it.

But with the referendum behind us now, let me put my cards on table. I felt that there were good arguments and bad arguments on both sides of the debate. It was not one of those black and white issues that I felt I could publicly take sides on.

Speaking as a Christian, two of the most persuasive arguments for ‘leave’ were 1) the unease I felt about millions of euros spent feathering the luxurious lifestyles of a governing elite in Brussels while youth unemployment in Spain and Greece approaches 50%. And 2) the effects of the Common Agricultural Policy which shells out vast subsidies to EU farmers for leaving fields idle whilst undermining Africans who live off the land, keeping them in permanent poverty. What does the God of the poor think of such protectionism for the rich?

And two of the best arguments for ‘remain’ were 1) that the single market has delivered shared prosperity and peaceful partnerships between formerly bitterly hostile nations, and 2) a large zone with relaxed borders is the best possible environment for the spread of the gospel. The *pax*

*romana* which afforded free movement all over Europe and the Middle East in the first century was the context in which the gospel first advanced so rapidly and successfully. And God wants all people to be saved.

I finally made up my mind where I was going to put my cross only a few days before voting.

### **Where to start?**

The biggest problem I had when asked to speak from the Bible tonight on our response to the vote was which passage to choose.

I am sure there are 'leave' voters who would find great edification in studying the early chapters of Exodus, where God's disenfranchised people heroically leave an oppressive and undemocratic regime for a new future in the Promised Land.

On the other hand, 'remain' voters might point to remarkable parallels between the EU project and Isaiah's vision of a golden era brought in by God's anointed one: "They will rebuild on the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated... Strangers will shepherd your flocks, foreigners will work your fields and vineyards, you will feed on the wealth of nations and in their riches you will boast" (Isaiah 61.4-5).

### **Where Are We?**

Let's survey the landscape in the aftermath of the vote. There is no doubt that we are now facing a much less clear future, at least in the short term, than would have been the case had the vote produced a different outcome.

- There has been early volatility in the markets; the pound immediately fell precipitously against all other currencies and shares took a battering. This means prices are going to rise for us all pretty soon.
- There is turbulence in political leadership; the governing party has elected a new Prime Minister amidst talk of treachery, and the largest opposition party is in disarray, unable to cobble together enough MPs willing to serve in a shadow cabinet, over a crisis of confidence in its leader.
- There are big unanswered questions over our future relationship with the EU and the wider world; no one knows what kind of trade deal will be negotiated between the UK and the EU, or when it will happen. President Obama has said that the UK will be at the back of the queue in trade talks with the USA. It is impossible to predict how all this will pan out and how long it will take.
- There are new concerns about inward investment and jobs; some companies have threatened to relocate their operations to other EU states and it is as yet unclear what effect this will have on employment and economic growth going forward.
- There is new uncertainty about the integrity of the United Kingdom with voices in Scotland and Northern Ireland (whose people voted by a majority to remain) raising the prospect of new votes on their relationship with the rest of the UK.
- There have been many other divisions highlighted by the referendum; divisions between younger and older, more educated and ordinary working people, cosmopolitan city dwellers and provincial middle England.

- The result has provoked instability in some neighbouring countries; there is now talk of calls for referenda in the Netherlands ('nexit'), Denmark ('dexit') and Greece ('grexit'). One wit wondered if San Marino would secede from the EU, but only because it allowed him to call it 'sexit mexit'!
- There has been an alarming spike in hateful, racist incidents; the Police have reported a fivefold increase in the first ten days since the referendum and they are worried that this may be but the tip of the iceberg.

Amidst some of my friends, most of whom seem to have voted to remain, there is a mood of shock, dismay, anger and fear. Some seem to be in denial, campaigning for a second vote.

On a personal level, we have two sons, both British nationals, living in France and we have always imagined retiring there. Those plans may now have to change. There are about a dozen different nationalities represented in one of my two churches; what will this mean for them and their families?

Unquestionably, this is a political, economic, financial and societal shakeup of seismic proportions and its aftershocks may well be felt for years to come.

### **What has the church got to say?**

I am a bit uneasy about Christians making a big noise about this. On an individual level, I have some Christian friends on Facebook who, over the last few months, have posted messages about nothing else but the referendum. Nothing about Jesus at all. Of course we are entitled to express opinions on politics like everyone else, but hang on a minute! Is this really *all* we have to say to the world?

Look, our message to the world is not some kind of political utopia, it's the *gospel of grace*, and our focus has surely got to be Jesus. Yes, we may hold UK passports but are we not also strangers and misfits in the world with no abiding city on earth? Is not our citizenship first of all of the kingdom of God?

On an official level, the church does not swell with expertise on politics, and when church leaders make statements on political issues they are often made to look naïve and out of their depth.

In any case, with the current anti-establishment mood in which all the main party leaders, the IMF, the IFS, the OECD, the President of the USA, the Bank of England, most business leaders, the majority of academia and - wait for it - David Beckham all urged a 'remain' vote - and were all cheerfully ignored - let's not kid ourselves. Who is listening to anyone anyway? Is anyone seriously going to want to hear what the clergy think?

Hebrews 12.26-29 speaks of God shaking the earth, whilst the kingdom of God is unshakeable. Let's just wind back the tape a moment and listen to that bit again... God shakes the earth, but the kingdom of God is unshakeable. The British electorate *did not* shake the earth on 26<sup>th</sup> June 2016. *Almighty God did*. And his kingdom, his reign, his sovereignty, his rule, his authority, his purposes are unshakeable. Of the increase of *his* government and peace there will be no end.

So when I looked for a Bible reading to hang my thoughts on, I went to Psalm 46 because it's a song that contrasts geopolitical turmoil with the accompanying assurance and peace of God's people. It's like the spiritual equivalent of Rudyard Kipling's "If."

*God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.*

It begins in v1 with a statement about God as a refuge. We do well to start, not by yelling out our emotional reactions to the vote, but by reaffirming our vision of him; sovereign, mighty, immovable, a source of strength, never taken by surprise.

<sup>2</sup> *Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,*  
<sup>3</sup> *though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging.*

<sup>6</sup> *Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts.*

In v2-3 and 6 there is a description of some kind of international cataclysm. This is Old Testament language for what we would call 'an earth shattering event'. Projectile faeces is arriving at speed on the rotary air ventilator. There is uproar, there is volatility. But, it says, *we will not fear*. We are not fazed at all. We have no business running around like headless chickens. No worries, God has got this.

<sup>4</sup> *There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,*  
*the holy place where the Most High dwells.*

<sup>5</sup> *God is within her, she will not fall;*  
*God will help her at break of day.*

Then in v4-5 there is a reference to the river whose streams make glad the city of God. There was, and still is, a hidden underground source under Jerusalem that supplies the city with the stuff of life even when surrounding armies are laying the city to siege. That's what the verse is referring to. But so often what is physically true in the Old Testament is spiritually true in the New. Jesus is the source of *living water*; "if anyone is thirsty, let them come to me and drink" he said. His presence in our midst gives life and health and peace to the church. It makes us glad. It helps us say "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

<sup>8</sup> *Come and see what the Lord has done, the desolations he has brought on the earth.*

<sup>9</sup> *He makes wars cease to the ends of the earth.*

*He breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire.*

Verses 8-9 affirm once again God's unchallengeable sovereignty. In a referendum so notable for talk of 'taking control' and 'asserting national sovereignty', we want to say, "Hang on a minute! The Lord reigns. God is king. Jesus is Lord!" In fact, if we believe that Jesus is indeed on the throne of world history and that he rules the nations, then we must affirm that he has the casting vote in this, and every, election. (This does not necessarily mean that the result is an expression of his favour designed to bring us blessing; it could just as well be an expression of his justice, disciplining us as a nation so that we turn back to him). The Bible teaches that he does both.

<sup>10</sup> *He says, 'Be still, and know that I am God;*

*I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.'*

Verse 10 is all about the poise and peace we find only in God's presence. It is the peace that the world cannot give. It is the peace that passes understanding. While the world is all at sea in a frenzy of reaction, we must choose to settle down and centre our trust in his good and wise supervision of history.

<sup>7, 11</sup> *The Lord Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.*

Finally, v7 and 11 are repeated, because they express the most important truth of all. Emmanuel - *God is with us*. This is the God who loved and showed grace to a scheming rascal who made some shockingly bad decisions in his life, and some inspired ones too (Jacob). He is the God of Jacob. Whether our nation has chosen wisely or foolishly in this referendum, this God will be our mighty fortress too if we look to him and not just to human wisdom for strength and a secure future.