

'The Power of the Spoken Word'

Following the referendum vote to leave the European Union, there have been some disturbing incidents of racist abuse and violence. In Hammersmith, for example, racist graffiti was daubed on a Polish cultural centre, and in Birmingham angry demonstrators shouted slogans outside a mosque. When one woman, Shahesta Shaitly, asked a cabbie why he had voted to leave, he replied, "To get you lot out of here." I myself was particularly shocked to meet at the Carnival people who have lived in Snodland for a number of years talking about selling their home and moving to the continent because they feel no longer welcome. The number of incidents has been so marked that even the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad al-Hussein, felt the need to urge our government "to act to stop these xenophobic attacks and to ensure that all those suspected of racist and anti-foreigner attacks and abuses are prosecuted."

When St James in his letter described the power of the spoken word and compared its destructive potential to that of a spark which ignites a forest fire (James Ch.3:5), he was uttering a warning which all leaders and politicians would do well to heed. Whatever our views on immigration, the emotive language which some campaigners used during the referendum debate, appears to have had the effect of encouraging extremist behaviour – of making closet xenophobes believe that their ideas are legitimate and mainstream. It is dangerous and worryingly reminiscent of how Nazi anti-Semitism first took root in Germany in the 1930s.

We must nip it in the bud, and more than that, acknowledge the deeper and wider spiritual malaise which it has exposed. Just as a spark cannot ignite a forest fire unless the ground is dry and the conditions right, so the words of politicians cannot arouse darker passions and attitudes within society unless they are already there lying dormant. Jesus rightly points us to the human heart or mind (both individual and corporate) as the root of the problem:

"Nothing outside a person," he said, "can defile him by going into him...What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For it is from within, from a person's heart, that evil thoughts come..." (Mark 7:15,20-21)

The Christian vision of God's Kingdom is a global one. It should never be narrowly nationalistic or xenophobic. If in the referendum we voted to remain, it may, for example, have been because we remembered the divisions which led to two world wars and wanted to work together with other European countries for the common good. If we voted to leave, it may have been out of a conviction that the EU is too narrow a forum (a rich man's club, for instance), that the common good extended beyond the confines of Europe, and that our contribution could be more effective if we left the EU. But whatever view we now take, we cannot from a Christian perspective be driven by purely selfish considerations or by negative hostility towards those who are not 'one of us'. All are precious in God's sight. The good news we proclaim is for everyone without distinction.

"God so loved *the world*..." (John 3:16).