

Dear Friends,

'The Will of the People'

Democracy is one of the key 'British' values which children are taught in our schools. There are good reasons why this is so. Historical records are laden with self-serving tyrants who have abused their power and exploited their subjects. In the Bible the prophet Samuel warned of the dangers of handing over too much power to a king (1 Sam.8). He understood all too well the corrupting effect that power can have. When Rehoboam succeeded Solomon as king, the northern tribes rebelled against his cruel imposition of forced labour (1 Kings 12) and established their own independent state of Israel. Unfortunately they made their rebel leader Jeroboam king, naively assuming that he was a champion of justice. The latter proved to be just as bad, if not worse, than those against whom they had initially rebelled.

Power can corrupt, and democracy has become in this country as an important way to keep rulers in check. It enables us, by peaceful means (political campaigning and elections), either to persuade unpopular governments to modify their policies, or else to remove them from office and replace them.

It should be a matter of considerable concern therefore that democracy in the West (and our country especially) is in such a poor state of health. The number of people voting in UK elections, for example, has fallen from an average two generations ago of over 80% to nearer 70% (lower still in the USA). Even in the 2017 General Election, when the Brexit debate prompted a much higher than usual level of interest, turnout was below 70%, lower than every post-war 20th century election. A significant proportion of the population has become disengaged and disillusioned, and no longer feels that the main political parties speak for them.

We need to find ways to rekindle trust, to bring together the general public and their elected leaders, and to create a genuine sense of being part of a society committed to the pursuit of the common good.

At the same time, however, we must also be realistic about the level of democratic involvement we can hope for. When populist leaders claim that they speak for 'the People' and that through their policies they are enacting 'the Will of the People', their claims are often misleading. 'The People' rarely, if ever, speak with a single mind and one voice. An announcement, for example, that 'the People have spoken', may only mean that a slim majority has voted in favour of a particular decision for a wide variety of (possibly contradictory) reasons. Even if 'the Will of the People' could be expressed clearly and simply, it would be impractical for it to be heard on every subject, and to have every single citizen involved in every single discussion. Even the most participatory forms of democracy require elected representatives to act on the behalf of others.

There is a tendency sometimes to treat the 'Will of the People' as if it were tantamount to the Will of God – to regard it as supremely authoritative. This of course is idolatrous. We humans can never determine what is good or right simply by means of a vote. We can only discern and respond to it. God is the Source of Goodness, and that is why we should pray constantly that He will bless the community in which we live (Jer.29:7) and guide those who govern (1 Tim.2:1-4).

HB