

A Broken Triangle - Week 66

Britain is unusual in having no written constitution, yet over the centuries there has developed here a careful balance of power which has served the country well. This balance of power is based on a simple triangle. At the top of the triangle is the Crown - a "constitutional monarchy" nowadays, in which resides both supreme power and yet very little power, all at the same time!

Parliament, representing the People, is the second point of the triangle, on the bottom right. The People elect their MPs, and the monarch then invites the leader of the political party with the best chance of commanding a majority in the House of Commons to form a Government.

So far, so good. We now come to the third point of the triangle, on the bottom left, which in relation to England is the Established Church, the Church of England. The monarch is Supreme Head of this Church, yet, as with her relationship to Parliament, in practice has limited powers. It is the monarch who appoints senior clerics, but again, this is only done on the "advice" of other people. The monarch is a lay person, and hence has no authority to preside at Holy Communion or to preach.

Again, so far, so good. The two sides of the triangle involving the Crown, from the monarch down to both Parliament and to the Established Church, continue to function largely as intended. It is the third side of the triangle, along its base, between the Established Church and Parliament, which is in trouble.

This Church-Parliament relationship gradually developed as the political powers of the monarchy grew less. Putting it briefly, the Church was seen as the source of spiritual and moral guidance for the nation, from which the politicians took their lead when enacting laws in Parliament. For its part, the Church was to support and respect the role of the politicians, by prayer and advice. Thus the three points of the triangle, the Crown, the Church and Parliament worked in tandem, giving the nation both stability and a robust "Christian backbone".

Until recently this generally worked as it should, but things have now radically changed. Governments from across the political spectrum have increasingly

distanced themselves from any specifically Christian allegiance. This began in the 1950s and 1960s, with a succession of liberal laws that sat very uncomfortably with the Christian Faith. The "Thatcher years" saw the Church speaking out vociferously against various government policies, leading to a barely-concealed contempt on both sides. This general drift of parliamentary legislation further and further away from Christian teaching has continued over the past 25 years. The latest example of such legislation is the so-called Same-Sex Marriage Act, forced through Parliament in the face of many warnings from the Christian denominations and other Faiths. (We will hope to examine the implications of this new law in next week's Weekly Reflection).

No doubt there are many reasons for this breaking of the link, in practice, between the Church and the Government. In particular we can mention the arrival of significant numbers of people of non-Christian Faiths into the country, making most politicians less willing than ever to acknowledge Christian teaching, for fear of giving offence or of losing votes.

The general rise of secularism and liberalism in our society has also played its part, thus removing from the scene any tiresome God to whom we are answerable. The ugly fruits of these two "-isms" are all too apparent.

This all means that life for Christians in Britain is becoming more challenging by the day. This is not necessarily a bad thing - and across the world today, and down the centuries, this situation is far more the norm for Christians than we might think.

But it does mean we need to "buck up"! - to know what the Christian Faith is all about, and, crucially, why it can be trusted. We are today in a real bear-pit of beliefs, views and opinions, with few favours given to Christians, despite the old triangle of Crown, Parliament and Church still at the heart of the nation's affairs.

Yet thanks be to God, the grounds for Christian belief remain as solid as ever, and "in a league of their own" when compared to all competitors. Christ remains the Way, the Truth and the Life, for all of us - and that includes the Crown, the People, Parliament and the Church.