

JONATHAN AITKEN
FOREIGN OFFICE CAROL SERVICE SERMON

**Grand Locarno Room, King Charles St, Westminster,
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It is a joy to be with you because I have great respect for the Foreign Office and many strong connections with it.

So I was startled after telling a friend that I would be preaching at this service today, when he replied:

"Poor you! You'll have a terrible time! Ninety per cent of those clever diplomatic service people will be cynical non-believers!"

His comment reminded me of the story of a visiting preacher being warned by the church verger:

"You'll have to speak loud and clear sir. In this place the agnostics are something terrible!"

I don't suppose my friend's opinion poll was entirely scientific. Indeed I know several of you here today who would prove it wrong.

Moreover in my own early life I was greatly influenced by Three Wise Men – 20th century ones – from the Foreign Office who were far from agnostic.

One was my maternal Grandfather, Permanent Secretary here in the 1930s. He was hauled out of retirement during the war to head Britain's most difficult diplomatic posting in Europe- guess where it was? – Dublin- at the height of Anglo-Irish tensions over De Valera's pro German neutrality.

I was actually born in my Grandfather's official residence so perhaps I can claim to be almost a son of the FCO.

The second wise man who had a great influence on me was my Godfather, Selwyn Lloyd. He was a Methodist lay preacher, serving as Foreign Secretary from 1955-60. Selwyn brought me up politically after the death of my father who had been his best friend and I owe him a great debt of Christian as well as political gratitude.

The third wise man was Sir Alec Douglas-Home who was such an encourager of my early political career that he took the risk of employing me as a junior political speechwriter from Conservative Central Office. During his second term as Foreign Secretary in the early 1970s I once was in attendance on Sir Alec at a Blackpool Conference when he was ambushed by an ardent Christian lady.

Sir Alec had a deep faith and he was on the evangelical wing of the church. The lady had got wind of this so she cornered The Foreign Secretary with a most intrusive question:

"I hear you've been saved Sir Alec. Is this true? Have you been saved?"

The Foreign Secretary looked like a rabbit caught in the beam of a searchlight. But being a truthful man he took the lady aside and said to her sotto voce:

"Well, yes, I believe I have been saved".

This sent the lady into orbit. Halleluiah! She shouted raising her arms above her head. Then she asked:

"But Sir Alec- why are you not proclaiming your salvation from the rooftops? The Foreign Secretary nervously replied:

"Madam in my case it was such a close-run thing that I thought I had better keep quiet about it".

Now I will take as my text today as old fashioned preachers used to say those nine words:

"I thought I had better keep quiet about it"

And I'd like to pose this question. Does the Foreign Office keep too quiet about issues relating to faith?

Has this Whitehall Department, like other great Departments of State, gone so far with the fashionable flow of secular political correctness that it marginalizes issues related to our Christian roots as a nation?

These questions are not easy to answer succinctly with hard facts.

But we can learn something about them from the first Advent when the political and spiritual landscape was influenced by nuances, signs, rumours, portents and an atmosphere of expectation.

The prevailing themes, then and perhaps now, were a paradoxical mixture of fear and hope.

Twenty centuries ago fear loomed large in Israel. The fear was created by insecure and autocratic rulers, political uncertainties, horrifying abuses of human rights and lack of national confidence.

The Roman occupation was brutal, made worse by the puppet King Herod, described by the Roman historian Josephus as "deluded, vicious and violent". Among his many violations of human rights Herod executed his uncomfortable critic John the Baptist and slaughtered half the babies of Bethlehem.

On a personal level fear must have entered the heart of Mary, in an age when unmarried mothers were often stoned to death in the hill villages of Judea, on receiving the astounding news of her pregnancy.

Yet there was hope too. The child who was about to be born in a manger proclaimed his values with such power and authority that he changed the world and gave it new hope.

Are there any lessons here for our contemporary scene on the question of how should we project our national beliefs and values - with greater hope?

The Foreign Office that I grew up with was confident in proclaiming British values around the world.

Whether it was Anthony Eden facing the dictators

or my Grandfather as the British Ambassador in Dublin having stand up rows with Éamon de Valera,

or Alec Douglas-Home expelling 105 Soviet Embassy KGB agents in one weekend,

the old Lions of King Charles Street knew how to roar.

Too often today we merely murmur.

If our ancestral Christian values still count here, why have we been so mealy mouthed about the Asia Bibi blasphemy case? Or the Jamal Khashoggi outrage? Or the violence against Christians in the Middle Belt of Nigeria.

Why do we so often seem to champion the views and faiths of our minorities while marginalising or patronising the majority faith tradition of Britain.

In the spiritual realm there is something called "the examination of conscience".

If the elites of Whitehall and Westminster were ever to engage in such an exercise, I wonder what they would say in the confessional box about how they have handled Brexit?

With fear or with hope?

One of the saddest aspects of the present Brexit imbroglio is that the arguments about it have too often been conducted in the Mammon centred language of fear, negativity and divisiveness.

Surely we could have done better?

Perhaps we would have done better if the confident old FCO has been in charge of the negotiations. That's probably the one thing I've said this morning with which you would all agree!

Like millions of television viewers who enjoyed the recent very successful BBC television series *Inside the Foreign Office* it is obvious that you are extremely good at self-presentation.

But how good would you be at presenting Britain's core values, ideals and national character?

If the series had been titled "Inside the Soul of the Foreign Office" I suspect that the trumpet would have given a far less certain sound.

At Christmas time we should think about our souls as well as our stomachs, particularly when we contemplate the theme of this service "Bringing light into darkness".

That baby born in his Bethlehem manger brought light into the world. Indeed he turned the world upside down with new values, new teachings, revolutionary ethics and a shining example of faith, hope, courage, sacrifice and strength.

We marginalise such values at our personal and national peril.

Let us pray this Christmas that we may ponder anew on the birth, life and message of Jesus Christ

connecting it more deeply to our personal lives and our national values.

AMEN