

Changing times – concern or opportunity?

(Faith in business Quarterly – January 2017)

2016 has been designated as the year of the unexpected. Whether we are talking about Trump's election as U.S. president or Leicester City's Premier League success – things happened that no-one ever imagined would or could happen. Perhaps the biggest question with which many people are now grappling is whether these unanticipated realities are simply blips in an otherwise ongoing normality, or the first-fruits of a movement of change that will continue to challenge and dismantle established orders and institutions.

Business, we are told, does not like uncertainty, and so we might reasonably expect there to be an air of nervousness in the boardrooms of our land. But is this the only way of scanning the current horizon? In posing this question, I am reminded of an oft-told story of two shoemakers who ventured to a nearby island to see what potential markets might be there. One returned utterly despondent, declaring his venture to be futile as no-one on the island wore any shoes. The other returned to gleefully announce that this presented a great new opportunity because everybody needed a pair.

So if our world is at the dawn of some great new order, faith groups and businesses alike might begin to ask what role they are likely to play in it. Is this riven with new opportunity or the sign of their demise? It is intriguing to recognise that in the wake of banking crises and boardroom scandals, many on this side of the Atlantic are likely to cite big business as part of that which needs to be overthrown. Yet it seems to be Donald Trump's willingness

to sweep aside political protocols in favour of the boardroom tactics that made him famous in the American version of the *Apprentice*, that have fuelled his popularity.

One of the features of the old order was that it did seem to be one in which the world of business managed to regularly disgrace itself. This has opened up some interesting channels of communication around the area of boardroom ethics, in which the faith community has at times been a partner who is neither unwelcome nor uninformed. Yet might we also ask whether the very movements that have been fuelled by the perceived failures of the established order, are responsible, at least in part, for its moral demise?

Historians have asked some interesting questions about the role that the British Company played in shaping the "Anglicised" culture of its colonies. In short, they suggest that they were not simply the means by which economic activity and commerce was generated, but through which people learned to act in particular ways. Employment in these companies not only offered financial stability to Indigenous people (albeit in an often exploitative context) but conditioned them to participate in a workplace culture which in turn shaped the local communities that emerged.

Might the reverse also be true? Has the British workplace traditionally been organised in a way that anticipates a certain raft of cultural norms, morals and values that prevailed, pretty much uncontested, across society as a whole? With time, we have developed a far more diverse identity, accelerated by the advent of social media, whereby a whole raft of sub-cultures co-exist within the communities from which the workforce is drawn. It is not so much that business has lost its moral compass – perhaps it never had one, for shared morality was the domain of wider society.

As the reality of a set of mono-cultural, moral norms has increasingly diminished, might this have simply created a vacuum in which financial return has become the only remaining communal indicator of achievement? If society's tectonic plates are now shifting, is this an opportunity for a new shared moral framework to emerge?

If so, what common values and principles will define us? Does business have a role in helping to discern and disseminate those values, just as it did in the days of Empire, or is it now forever condemned to be a pariah whose influence and potential must be constrained and regulated. If faith communities are to influence the defining of new moral norms, is the world of business a natural partner through which to model and commend those norms to wider society?

The season of Advent is riven with narratives of crumbling orders and normality being turned upside down. This marks the beginning of the Christian year and provides a foundation for how we understand our world. An Advent people should not be phased by signals of change and upheaval but rather explore these as potential signs of God's presence, and opportunities to re-define our world to more align with the values of God's Kingdom.

Business will not survive by simply clinging on. The reference to Leicester City is more than an amusing aside. From a business perspective, they are not simply the heroic underdogs who managed in one short season to go from almost certain relegation to being Champions. They did so with a fraction of the expenditure that larger clubs see as a necessary pre-requisite for success. They undermined the accepted order that big money signings and big name internationals are the only way to win trophies. They proved the success of a very different business philosophy.

The signs are that we will all have to learn to live in a new world. This not only means

grasping new opportunities, but also perhaps leaving behind existing assumptions and prejudices about the possibilities that faith and business communities might offer one another. Is this more than a time for both to just "wait and see" but rather take the initiative in shaping this emerging world?