

8th August 2023

Conciliation

“To stretch out the hand of forbearance and conciliation.”

King George V, *speech at the opening of the Northern Ireland parliament (1921)*

The legendary Bob Woodward is a US journalist, known mostly for his work on the *Washington Post* with Carl Bernstein in helping uncover the Watergate scandal that led to President Nixon’s resignation. His 2020 book, *Rage*, is an insightful critique of the Presidency of Donald Trump. In an analysis of Trump’s response to the Coronavirus pandemic, for example, Bob Woodward criticises the President for his lack of clarity when decisive leadership was required. He writes:

Trump's presidency ... was riddled with ambivalence, set on an uncertain course, swinging from combativeness to conciliation, and whipsawing from one statement or action to the opposite.”

I’m not going to explore the validity of that analysis here, but I do want to reflect on the phrase that jumped out at me from this piece: “swinging from combativeness to conciliation”. While this is clearly a dig at Trump’s vacillation – and Woodward goes on to criticise Trump for his readiness to swing the other way when it suited him – I do believe that “from combativeness to conciliation” has much to commend it.

Years ago, when I was being criticised for the “direction of travel” I was taking in my ministry, I became combative, complaining regularly about what was happening. I was also guilty of *finding* things to complain about, sometimes with little justification. We Scots have a phrase for this: “Everyone’s oot o’ step but oor Jock.” Everyone is wrong except me. It’s an unhealthy place to be. Of course, there were times when I needed to defend my position, and when disagreeing was constructive. But when the approach was *always* negative and combative, no one benefitted.

What I needed to learn back then, and what is more the way I approach things now, is to move from “combativeness to conciliation”, working together, in an open, honest and constructive fashion. Not with indecisiveness or because it suits us, but as a decisive approach for the greater good. Is that not possible for all of us, and not just in ministry?

Conciliation is *always* better than combat – as long as we don’t swing back the other way just when it suits us to do so.

A prayer for today

Living God, when you call me to work for the common good, let me rejoice. Amen

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