

Thought for the Day 16th January 2017

Good Morning,

My plane landed at an un-named airport. I was met by a charming middle ranking officer from the local embassy. He drove through the back streets of the city to his flat where his equally charming partner served us a sausage goulash before we then talked through the programme of my visit. A few months later at a reception in Whitehall a stranger sidled up to me and asked if I'd enjoyed the said goulash. On a subsequent visit I found myself apprehended at the check-in desk and told I was on the 'watch list'! It was enough to make any lover of spy stories think that he had a walk on part in a John Le Carre novel!

And it's stories of spying that cloud the Inauguration of the new President this week with allegations of surveillance and espionage and counter claims of disinformation and fake news. All of it leaving the public scratching our heads unable to figure out what is fact or fiction.

But the truth is we do live in a parallel universe in which ordinary people live their lives and others inhabit a realm of intelligence and counter-intelligence and murkier things than that. There's no shortage of ethical issues that they have to wrestle with – loyalty, betrayal, duplicity and double duplicity.

It's also true that we live daily with threats to our safety and by all accounts our intelligence services have prevented more than a few catastrophes. It's a challenge to Government to get right the balance between freedom and security. If the two stood at either end of a spirit level a modern democracy has to get the bubble in the centre.

A further challenge lies in how to keep the security services accountable without compromising their effectiveness.

This is doubly difficult in an age that makes such a virtue out of being transparent as if transparency were the new moral absolute.

It may seem strange to draw a comparison from the world of the New Testament but it's in these pages you'll find secrecy defined as a virtue, and it's here too that you'll find acknowledgement that we do in deed live in a parallel universe.

St Paul described the Christmas event of the birth of Christ in terms of God sharing a secret, a mystery, from one track of the parallel universe, the divine, to the other, the human.

But according to the Bible the thing about true secrets is that not only is there a time to share them but there's also a time to keep them!

The Right Reverend James Jones KBE