

Thought for the Day 9th January 2017

Good Morning

News in the New Year is often full of forecasts. I used to think that prophecy belonged to the world of the Old Testament. But prophets and pundits abound in the 21st Century. Pundit's the Sanskrit word for 'the owner of knowledge' and like the biblical prophets the Pandits counselled their leaders on the consequences of their actions and held them to account.

Pre-Brexit and Post-Brexit there's been no end of prophecies. Last week the Chief Economist of the Bank of England, Andrew Haldane, compared the recent performance of economic forecasters to the weatherman, Michael Fish, who famously got the hurricane forecast wrong in 1987.

Mr Haldane's comments revive memories of the Queen visiting the London School of Economics and asking the assembled academics why nobody saw the banking crisis coming.

Yet still we put our faith in forecasters. But with the failure of these secular astrologists to make accurate predictions perhaps there's more of a case for studying the past than speculating about the future.

2017 sees the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation that came to a head in Germany with Martin Luther's defiance of the Church authorities.

As with all social upheavals there were many forces and personalities at work in the Reformation. Just like today there were issues of sovereignty, powerful elites, international structures, and freedom. And all these fermented with a new yeast – a media revolution – the advent of the printing press.

Writing some twenty years ago in a book called 'The English' Jeremy Paxman reflected on the role of the Reformation in the making of the English people and on the way the Bible empowered the populace.

Printing the Bible in English, he said, offered ordinary people 'a direct relationship with God, unmediated by popes or bishops' and 'gave the individual all sorts of rights he might never have otherwise thought he had'. The Bible was key to our democratic development.

The present upheaval across Europe has of course different personalities and structures, but the issues of sovereignty and power remain the same. The yeast in the mix is still the media – this time the internet.

But if the Bible is no longer so explicit in our public discourse, the question arises: where today do we find the foundation for our values and the prophets to hold to account all power and authority.

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