

A truth universally acknowledged ... too many dictators



Advent Editorial by the Editor

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To plagiarise Jane Austen's opening remark in her *Pride & Prejudice*: "It is a truth universally acknowledged ..." ⁱ and again to plagiarise Austen's own possible semi-plagiarism of the American Constitution "We hold these truths to be self-evident, ..." ⁱⁱ

It is then a fact, reluctantly acknowledged by the Church, that the Christmas Season nowadays starts somewhere around the Feast of the Transfiguration 6th August and is over just after Christmas dinner. ⁱⁱⁱ

However, near universal popular sentiment does not necessarily equate to any outcome that might reflect the views of the people. The slow march of democracy (not least in the Churches) as Winston Churchill's turn of phrase has it, as the 'worst form of government except all the others that have been tried from time to time' ^{iv} - seems to be grinding to a halt?

Indeed, almost perversely, the rise and rise in Western democracies of 'populism' largely but not exclusively, to the right of politics seems to equate to the will of the people. On closer examination and in practice we are nearer than ever to elected autocracies

This coming Christmas will see the current iteration of the Ukraine war reaching almost into its fourth year. Assuming that is to say we count the war from 24th February 2022 and ignore the previous years of fighting in the Donbas region that actually began in February 2014 with the seizure of Crimea. This is indisputably at the behest and under the control of Valdimir Putin, who is walking in the footsteps of previous absolutist Tsars, not least the brutal seventeenth and eighteenth century, Peter the Great, who Putin so admires.

Added to this list comes the invasion (after a shocking terrorist attack on innocent Israelis) of Gaza under the oversight, backed by minority parties, of Benjamin Netanyahu. This has degenerated into what many, including the United Nations Commission of Inquiry^v have described as genocide. The Archbishop of York on his recent visit to Israel and the occupied territories has also described the situation, rather more coyly, as “genocidal acts”^{vi}

The largely forgotten war in Sudan can be added to the list of wars for completeness. It has dictatorship at its heart and it is the people who are suffering^{vii}

There are no agreed figures but about a third of all countries in the world have a ‘not free’ category ascribed them by organisations like Freedom House; with dictatorships probably exceeding full democracies in number.

Perhaps it was ever thus? To the various tyrant monarchs described in the Old Testament down to Herod the Great that despot extraordinaire who features in our own Christmas story. Indeed cynics might remark that the God of the Old Testament, where seemingly arbitrary genocidal acts are recorded, himself might today find he is portrayed as a potential candidate for the International Courts variously of Human Rights, Justice and Criminality!

Lastly, in this catalogue of woes amongst the big-name leaders of the world the, never far from the headlines, President Donald Trump was subject to the June 2025 ‘No Kings’ movement, also known internationally as the ‘No Dictators’ or ‘No Tyrants’ protests, in a series of demonstrations, largely in the United States, against what the organisers describe as authoritarian policies and corruption in the Trumpian administration. Speculatively, this respect the British King George III, the butt of the American Revolution, would very likely have been envious of the executive powers bestowed on and used by today’s American Presidents.

What a contrast to the yearly universal Christmas message of ‘Peace on Earth goodwill to all.’ In churches everywhere we will be and have been praying earnestly for peace, at home, among the nations and in our own lives – without much success it seems.

Are we not praying hard enough, is God not listening, or is it humankind and its fractious disposition to fight the problem? That is for wise men perhaps like the ones in the Christmas story to resolve.

Whichever way we are clearly drifting into a world with too many dictators and we are right to be apprehensive. I wonder what Jane Austen would have made of it; after all she knew the Church of England well in an age when it was hardly democratic?

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ⁱ “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.” *Pride & Prejudice* 1813

ⁱⁱ While the U.S. Constitution does not contain Austen’s specific phrasing, the American founding documents do include universally acknowledged ideals, such as the statement in the Declaration of Independence 1787

ⁱⁱⁱ See this author’s Editorial of December 2012 <https://anglicanism.org/a-curious-case-of-inculturation>

^{iv} Churchill in a speech made to the British House of Commons on November 11th, 1947.

^v <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/hrcouncil/sessions-regular/session60/advance-version/a-hrc-60-crp-3.pdf>

^{vi} <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2025/21-november/news/uk/archbishop-of-york-describes-israeli-action-against-palestinians-in-gaza-as-genocidal-acts>

^{vii} Sudan’s nightmarish war erupted in April 2023 amid a power struggle within the junta that had seized power in 2019 amid a popular uprising against the 30-year dictatorship of Omar al-Bashir. At that time, the Sudanese army and the RSF, headed by General Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo “Hemedti”, jointly overthrew Bashir