

Thought for the Day 3rd June - John Reed

Read 2 Samuel 1:1-27

“Fire and fury.” That was Donald Trump’s threat three years ago to North Korea if it endangered the United States.¹ Yet North Korea has continued on its merry way, and today it is America that is experiencing fire and fury.

Why? Peter Hartcher in the Sydney Morning Herald this week argued that the US is tearing itself apart because its political system is broken.² Life expectancy is in the decline, there is deep-rooted inequality, and a ramshackle health system. I won’t try to go further, and I certainly can’t claim to be an expert. But it gives one pause for thought when a great nation begins to tear itself apart as we are seeing at the moment.

It made me reflect on other great empires that have run into difficulty. Some have recovered, some have not. I have always had a particular interest in the Roman Empire. It thrived across much of the known world for several centuries, then collapsed. Why? Well, partly due to the invasion of a barbaric horde. But the conditions that weakened Rome and made it vulnerable to invasion had been festering for a long time. According to one article, the problems included “a decaying city (both physically and morally), little to no tax revenue, overpopulation, poor leadership, and, most importantly, inadequate defense ...”³

It brings to mind the phrase “How the mighty have fallen!” Which, like so many well-known phrases in the English language, originates in the Bible. 2 Samuel 1verses 19 and 27 to be precise. They come from the mouth of David, as he mourned over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. But it’s not just his former king and friend that David mourns over. It’s the house of Israel (verse 12). The fall of Saul and his house also marks a moment of crisis for the nation of Israel.

Fortunately for Israel, David was waiting in the wings to lead the nation into a new golden era. But even he had his shortcomings. And most of the kings that came after him led the nation further and further away from God and down the road to failure.

George Santayan said in 1905: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” In a 1948 speech to the House of Commons, Winston Churchill changed the quote slightly when he said: “Those who fail to learn from history are condemned to repeat it.”

We must look back and learn the lessons of the past. In particular, the history of Israel in the Old Testament should teach valuable lessons to God’s people today. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:11: “Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come,” and in Romans 15:4: “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction ...” Far from being outdated and irrelevant (as, sadly, some Christians seem to view it), the Old Testament serves many useful functions for us – not least to help us learn lessons from the past.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/08/world/asia/north-korea-un-sanctions-nuclear-missile-united-nations.html>

² <https://www.smh.com.au/national/the-us-is-tearing-itself-apart-because-its-political-system-has-failed-20200531-p54y6a.html>

³ <https://www.ancient.eu/article/835/fall-of-the-western-roman-empire/>