

Views from the Pews – The Balfour Declaration

It behoves us as Christians to understand the forces that drive geopolitical events. World War One was an industrial war. It would be won in factories and laboratories as much as at the front itself. The emerging petrochemical industries were at the forefront, many of which were led by British Jews, most (but not all) being Zionists. David Lloyd George was Munitions Minister at that crucial time. He was old-school Welsh Chapel. He knew his Bible, and he and his most able lieutenant, a certain Winston Churchill, were sympathetic to Zionism as it was then understood. It seemed the correct thing to do. Although Arthur Balfour signed as Foreign Secretary, Lloyd George was the architect of this statement of British policy relating to Palestine. At worst it was another piece of political payback but at best it was a genuine attempt to cement relationships with a part of British society.

Lloyd George lived just long enough to derive some satisfaction; the case for a Jewish homeland was clear by 1945, the year he died. But what had begun as an internal British communication of course took on a life of its own. It became one of the drivers of the Israeli state, something that its authors perhaps never intended. It certainly left successive British governments – and probably the UN as well – in a bind.

But what was done is done; little can be gained by blaming politicians who, were they available for questioning today might well say “we were only doing what we thought was an act of Christian charity”.

The only way is forward into the future, a future informed by this fascinating history. One lesson that might be learned is that decisions about the Middle East have too long been taken in Paris, London or Washington. Another might be that any permanent solution must be a multi-faith one, constructed by those on the ground. The society liberated by Commonwealth forces in 1918 was a mix of Muslim Jew and Christian.

And to end, let us remind ourselves of the concluding caveat in the Declaration; “it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine”.

The Declaration could be the foundation of something new. A ceasefire came into effect while these words were being written. Now is the time for renewal and reconstruction.

Richard Swarbrick