

## Views from the Pews: Statues

Christians are understandably uneasy about tearing anything down. We are tasked with building, and St Peter was appointed the foundation on which God – and the Church – build up both tangible and intangible structures. So the destruction of public statues is very challenging. But when we reflect on these challenges, we need to bear in mind a number of things.

First, ‘graven images’ get a very bad press in the Bible. Exodus 20. 4-6 appears certain on the point, and the message that three-dimensional representations divert our attention from God is repeated in both Old and New Testaments.

Secondly, even ‘traditional’ Anglicans are reticent in their use of three-dimensional images. Protestantism has often branded itself as “anti-statue’ to the point where images were deliberately destroyed.

Thirdly, we can move into the secular world and recall our approval when the statue of Saddam Hussein was pulled down. Many of us will have been relieved at the removal of Lenin’s and Stalin’s statues as Eastern European states broke away from the Soviet Bloc.

But how do we feel if Marx’s grave in North London is desecrated? And what do we think of Captain Hamilton’s removal from our city? We will have mixed emotions. Probably the best response is one of prayerful reflection, based on enquiry into the facts, and respect for other points of view.

In reflecting on statues, it may help to separate the person -say Captain Cook – standing on his plinth, from those who erected the image. Erecting statues can be – and often is – an attempt to enshrine a particular narrative, as well as a subconscious move to downgrade other narratives. The statue of Cook in Gisborne is controversial precisely because it promotes a particular narrative, popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but coming under increasing challenge in a more diverse 21<sup>st</sup> century.

There are other statues though that are at one and the same time ‘comfortable’ and ‘uncomfortable’. Outside Liverpool Street Station in London stands a statue of a small group of children. It commemorates the belated and at times half-hearted effort to evacuate Jewish children from Nazi-dominated Europe. “Did we do enough?” asks the statue.

Each graven image speaks of different ideas, different times. We need to reflect, and pray, before reaching for rope or hammer.

*Richard Swarbrick*