

EDITORIAL

CELEBRATION AND WAR – INBRED AND IRRECONCILABLE HUMAN TRAITS?

Chi la pace non vuo, la guerra s'abbia.
(Who wills not peace, let war his portion be.)

Torquato Tasso: *Gerusalemme Liberata*; 1580–1.

Two unique traits have specifically characterised the human species from the very dawn of civilisation; they are the desire to celebrate and the desire to wage war. None of the other species in the animal kingdom appears to have evolved these characteristics to any significant degree, although it is often the case (at least in literature) that these anthropomorphic characteristics are attributed to animals and even to plants and, in the religious setting, to supernatural beings. Milton's *Paradise Lost* is a superlative example in verse of the latter.

Celebration in a community serves to extend congratulations and good wishes, and thus to highlight some momentous act or event in the lifetime of a member of the race or tribe not necessarily distinguished or important – a birth, a wedding, a death, a windfall or a promotion are all good and worthwhile reasons to celebrate. And in the context of the nation or country at large, a chronological event that comes by regularly is recalled by celebration and festivities: a national achievement to be lastingly proud of; a moment from the past to be re-savoured and re-pondered; an anniversary. All are as good an excuse as any for a splashout party, and a general get together of friends and acquaintances. The wellbeing and emotional stability of individuals as persons and of a community as a coherent and functional entity necessitate these outbursts, both impromptu and organised, almost on a circadian regularity.

Wherever and whenever celebration takes place, it involves a congregation of family and a getting together of friends, the boisterous and uninhibited expression of conviviality in song, music and dance, the gregarious sharing of joy, a communal breaking of good food together, a general bonhomie – in other words, a festival of backslapping, raucous conversation, laughter and jollity.

This sharing of the good times and of the better things in life can be further stoked up by the use of substances which are mind altering, disinhibiting and socially facilitating. On a worldwide basis, alcohol is perhaps the most prevalent socialising lubricant, but in many ethnic groups, naturally occurring hallucinogens and other sensory altering agents that stimulate the higher cerebral

centres have functioned as the leavening agents frothing up and livening up the party. The epithet 'recreational' is now loosely attributed to those stimulant drugs whose use has become prevalent and without which, apparently, celebration cannot be achieved to an appropriate level and enjoyed to the fullest in many facets of the population. Many, including those in the medical profession, have been lulled into accepting this concept with its unpleasant side-effects and all as an essential *nouvelle vogue*, and the lessons that should have been learnt from the use of excess of ethanol have gone unheeded.

These secular festivities often replace, restyle or commemorate religious or ceremonial occasions, with 'holy' days thus transmuted into holidays. In this particular vein, the annual midwinter festive season has just passed by; the winter solstice has come and gone, and the hours of daylight are very gradually increasing again, with the prospect of light, warmth and harvest dispelling the rigours and darkness of winter. The universal desire is that the spring return with new life, fresh buds and renewed hopes, and this is indeed scope for celebration. It is thus perhaps no coincidence that so many of the recurring annual foci of communal celebration are scheduled for this time of the year: Diwali for Hindus; the end of Ramadan – the Eid al-Addha – for Muslims; Hanukkah – the festival of lights – for Jews; the St. Lucia festival in Sweden; Christmas and the whole Yuletide, almost fortnight-long, festive season throughout the world where commercialism has ensured that most cities and nations, even in the Far East, metamorphose into pseudo-Christians for this period; Hogmanay for the Scots; the beginning of the Chinese New Year and many others, all fall within a short time of each other. Good wishes have been exchanged far and wide; presents have been wrapped with care, opened in haste and discarded; the supermarket cash tills have stopped their incessant monotone ringing out of the purchases; the waistline has broadened measurably; visiting relations have departed; and debts amassed on the plastic cards have further escalated. Good, indeed excellent, improving and sobering resolutions have been carefully cogitated about, and somehow much more easily rescinded.

One universal cause for celebration is the anniversary of battles and armistices. Very often the verve and meticulous preparation for celebration is never more pronounced. Undoubtedly, once hostilities are declared, just as heartfelt and pernicious is the commitment and preparation by a nation for war: the waging of battles, army against army,

race against race, nation against nation, and one part of the world against another part is strategically planned for. Almost paradoxically, the killing and maiming of one's declared enemies and destruction of their property become a glorious and worthwhile event; supremacy in warfare has no limits and has to be achieved at all costs. Great campaigns are held to be amongst the nation's proudest moments, and in turn these are celebrated.

As one reflects on this today, the echoes of the carpet bombing in Afghanistan still reverberate; the Turks and the Greeks still menacingly face each other across the 'green line' on the island of Cyprus; a bloody civil war still rages in the island of Sri Lanka; India and Pakistan square up to each other and flex their military power and arsenal across the 'control line' on the borders of Kashmir; Israeli soldiers still train the gun-turrets of their tanks and the missile-launchers of their helicopter gunships on the Palestinians on the West Bank, who in turn feel it is their sacrosanct duty to strap explosives around their persons and detonate these as close to their sworn enemies as they can possibly manage; and so on and on. There is no sacrifice too high to make; there are no bounds to the acquisition of victory and the vanquishing of the foe.

The altogether malignant term 'benign terrorism' was recently coined to provide a sanitised label for the retaliation against the absolute escalation in terrorism, the war in peacetime that was perpetrated by fanatics on 11 September last year. The basic bedrock of the world's confidence, its very economic foundations and stability, its serenity and intellectual complacency have been shattered by the erstwhile unimaginable act of two hijacked planes intentionally and directly steered into the twin high rise towers of New York, one of the major cities of this globe's most powerful and richest nation: all this, in broad daylight, with the entire world having a television-mediated front seat, enabling it to witness first hand the apocalyptic tragedy as it unfolded. As the cloud of mayhem and destruction gathered over New York, the world felt impotent and trembled, and it has as yet to recover its composure.

These two human traits of celebration and war-waging are diametrically opposite and almost mutually exclusive; yet many a nation passes imperceptibly from one mode to the other. Those seen co-celebrating on one day will be bitterly and resolutely squaring up to each other across a battlefield merely a few months later. Military hardware has to be acquired at whatever cost, supremacy in conflict has to be guaranteed whatever the pecuniary demands and social sacrifices.

The aftermath of conflict is well known. In no time, hard-earned property is destroyed; families are bereaved; suffering and mayhem rule the day. Displaced persons and refugees continue to crowd into makeshift tents in

communal camps, where little protection is afforded from the inclemency of the elements; running water is non-existent and sanitary facilities so primitive that disease becomes rampant; the 'daily bread' becomes a rare commodity to be begged and fought for. With heart-rending regularity, the expressions of bewilderment, malnutrition and suffering in the pale and dirty faces of young children and young mothers in refugee camps most poignantly demand explanations from those of us who are not immediately and directly involved in such events. Those who have taken it upon themselves to lead nations, and even those elected to lead nations, squander the lives of many as well as much hard cash that could be spent in famine relief, education and communal improvements. The 'civilised' world then attempts to absolve itself of its wrongdoings and salve its collective conscience by furiously collecting for aid relief. What could well have been prevented in the first place by lingering longer at the negotiating table and indulging in a little less posturing, emotionally-laden rhetoric is thus later patched up by charitable donations and a flurry of 'good works'.

When will the world learn? An edifice that features in every village and hamlet in Britain – no matter how remote or small – is the war memorial, remembering the many millions of young lives sacrificed on the battlefields of the last two world wars. This is perhaps unique to Britain, and it should serve as a daily poignant reminder of the folly and barrenness that hostilities bring in their wake.

This antithesis of war and celebration was pressed home to me recently in partially constructed cathedral of the *Sagrada Familia* in Barcelona; the brainchild of the Catalan Antonio Gaudi was conceived as a glorious and non-conventional permanent celebration of art, religion, sculpture and architecture. It gradually and laboriously took shape in the beginning of the twentieth century, only to be partially demolished, seriously damaged and burnt down during the course of the Spanish Civil War, blueprints and all – probably by the relatives and descendants of the same persons who had so proudly formed part of the national celebrations which had marvelled at the boldness, genius and sheer inventiveness that marked the initiation of the project. Ironically, the sugar candy façade of the church – already showing the ravages of acid rain and age – depicts and gloriously celebrates the New Testament family who, two millennia ago, first as refugees in poverty, and later in a country oppressed by tax-demanding and oppressive invaders and harbouring terrorist factions, eked out a menial existence.

In Scotland, a further celebration comes around in January; a man of humble origins who wrote songs and poetry, who thoroughly enjoyed good food, wine and the company of ladies, who was not afraid to question the

establishment, sometimes in a very direct head-to-head confrontation, is revered as an eminent Scottish hero. The birthday on 25 January of Robert Burns, the 'Heaven-taught Ploughman', the satirical poet, the great ironical and often irreverent observer of man and manners, the philosopher and ethicist who had no time for the hypocritical morals of his time, is celebrated year-in, year-out since his death in 1796. Burns lived in an age of change in which the mantra of 'liberty, fraternity, equality' was bandied around and vehemently enforced by rule of arms and public executions. Barely a year after Burns' death, Maximilien Robespierre, the very heart and soul of the French Revolution, died as he had lived and, together with 21 of his colleagues, went to the scaffold. Meanwhile the 'Corsican corporal' was dismantling and systematically conquering Europe in a frenzy of death,

pillage and destruction. Burns appreciated the precious nature of life and the bounty of nature and lived a simple country life unencumbered by wealth and authority. He could celebrate in style, and had no time for war and suffering imposed by others. No wonder, then, that he is such a revered hero. Would that his attitude to both celebration and war be emulated. The lasting 'peace in our time', which so far continues to elude the world, has to be sought more avidly and unstintingly.

O wad some Power the giftie gie us
 To see oursels as ithers see us!
 It wad frae mony a blunder free us,
 An' foolish notion:
 What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us,
 An' ev'n devotion!

Robert Burns: *To a Louse*; 1786