

PRESS WATCH - Hallelujah! There's a Christian in No 10



Theresa May as a child with her mother and father, the Reverend Hubert Brasier

How refreshing to hear a prime minister talk about their Christian faith, and sound like they mean it. Even I've been conditioned by political correctness to find it strange. At a Downing Street reception for religious leaders yesterday, Theresa May said that

people must feel able “to speak about their faith, and that absolutely includes their faith in Christ”, writes Tim Stanley in the Daily Telegraph.

“Faith in Christ?” I took an involuntary breath. Did you mean to say that Prime Minister? It sounds so, well, faithy.

She does mean it, and if Mrs May finds some way to put those words into action then it’ll do all of us good. She is not, of course, the first person of faith to occupy Number 10. As you climb the staircase in the yellow hall, you come face to face with the photos of PMs who believed intensely: William Gladstone, Harold Macmillan, Margaret Thatcher. It’s only recently that British politicians have played down their faith. “We don’t do God,” said Alastair Campbell – meaning, I think, not just New Labour but the whole country. We’ve grown out of that nonsense, he might as well have said.

In fact, his boss, Tony Blair, was privately on the way to converting to Catholicism. Gordon Brown reminded us that he was a son of the manse; David Cameron talked about believing in something or other that came and went like Magic FM in the Chilterns. But even under Brown and Cameron, Christianity was either a

memory of British identity – a curiosity, like Morris dancing – or shorthand for doing good. For a generation, the one thing political Christianity has not been is Christianity. It's not been theological.

Until now. Those of us who believe recognise the cues. They lie not in the obvious stuff – “people must feel free to say what they feel”, “keep volunteering chaps!” etc – but in a phrase like “faith in Christ” that is delivered as comfortably as slipping a foot into a shoe. Gosh, she means it. She actually means it. I spoke to a fellow Catholic guest after the reception and he was excited. The age of political correctness is over, we agreed. A mighty wind is rushing over the political landscape.

Of course, there will be turbulent times ahead. If a PM declares herself a Christian then she shall be judged as one. The Left will ask how she squares gospel teachings on charity with squeezing social spending. There's a clever answer to that question that relates to free will, but even Margaret Thatcher failed to convince voters that she was anything other than trying to wriggle her way out of gospel truths. She was accused of hypocrisy; Anglican bishops became some of her most eloquent opponents.

The Right, meanwhile, will ask what Mrs May is doing to address a culture in decline. What's her plan on abortion? Will Christian institutions be free to dissent on sex education and gay marriage? Again, there's an answer: no prime minister has the right to inflict their theology on the nation. But if that's the case, why tell us that you're a Christian in the first place?

Because a Christian politician can no more disguise the faith that defines them than they can the colour of their skin. And the sweep of British history shows how Christianity has defined all of us, whether we acknowledge it or not.

Christians banned slavery, eradicated child labour and established the welfare state. The language you use, the shape of your year, the ethics you live by – all are informed by the faith. Politicians struggling to find something to connect the nation in the Brexit era would do well to try the universal, timeless search for meaning through religion. Jews, Muslims, Christians, whatever. We're all trying to decipher what on earth it is God wants us to do.

The Prime Minister cannot go too heavy on the Jesus talk or she'll alienate those left cold by such things. And if she is going to make

promises about defending Christian minorities overseas – something vital and criminally neglected – then she must deliver on those promises.

But if she only succeeds in changing the language a little, that's almost enough for me. For far too long, admitting you're a Christian has been treated like a declaration of lunacy. Time to stop. Time for Christians to come out of the closet.

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