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I came home from South Africa on Tuesday night – back from a country which against all the odds didn’t go over the edge into a racial bloodbath. More than twenty years on, South Africa is of course still a ‘work in progress’ - seeking a stable and prosperous future free of corruption and violence

The racial divisions of South Africa have some relevance to the religious divisions of Northern Ireland where I spent much of my life. Now again in the midst of this week’s Brexit turmoil, I find my mind turning to the Irish poet WB Yeats’ poem ‘The Second Coming’

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold*

*Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world*

*………*

*The best lack all conviction, while the worst*

*Are full of passionate intensity*

We paused north of Durban to visit the site of Nelson Mandela’s capture in 1962. He spent 27 years in prison. On his release, it became clear that he had not become a victim of the demons of bitterness and anger. He emerged to preside with grace over one of the most remarkable transitions which the world has ever seen.

We are living through times of exceptional difficulty. Yeats’ lines haunt me with the fear that there are limits to the stresses and strains which political systems and structures can withstand. And Brexit is surely bringing us close to those.

What I have learned is that our lives and our politics are more than a series of transactions. What is also in play is spirituality – not religion but spirituality. Spirituality is about generosity, forgiveness, tolerance and sacrifice. For it is those gifts which can transcend anger, fear and division.

Mandela’s spiritual genius was to offer those things precisely when they were least expected or deserved. That unlocked an apparently hopeless situation.

In these coming days, I pray for the same gifts in those who carry the difficult burdens of leadership.