

I didn't know much about politics when the Soviet Union fell, but I did know that the Soviets were scary and evil and fascinating. When the Olympics rolled around, every time a former Soviet athlete was on screen, we were reminded of how evil they were so much they might as well've played Darth Vader's "Imperial March." But also, every time a former Soviet athlete was on screen, we got a glimpse of something intriguing, dangerous, and unknown hidden behind the curtain. If we just watched that one gymnast, say, closely enough, we'd learn just what made them so formidable. Now, I'm not old enough to remember the boycotts or the clandestine defectors, but I am old enough to remember how much of a parody of itself the Soviet Union appeared on this side of the Iron Curtain. Full disclosure: my impressions may not've been totally accurate; most of what I knew about the Soviets came from the movie *Rocky IV*.

With the Olympics now underway, I wonder how the world'll watch. The Olympics are supposed to promote unity and friendly competition. They're supposed to highlight the best of us. As exciting as the events are, the glimpses of humanity in the heat of a race, the kindness, the sacrifices, the recognition of mutual greatness all remind us that the real beauties of the Olympics are the stories of humanity's triumphs. That said, the Olympics also provide a glimpse into how the nations of the world perceive each other. Remember that twin feeling of fascination and fear watching the Soviet athletes? I never imagined I'd see my country watched with fascination and fear. Perhaps through these games we'll get a sense of just how concerned our global neighbors are about us. It's heartbreaking to see my homeland become the bad guys on a global stage. But it's also, I don't know, vindicating? We're peeking out from behind the curtain, and what we're seeing is the rest of the world bewildered by what we've become in the short time since the last Games. Now, of course, the opinions of other nations are not inherently correct, but with so much of the world worried about us, we oughta pay attention. At the very least, their worries provide a glimpse of what the rest of the world sees without the filter of our propaganda. What the world sees of America's always been complicated. Some may discount the international community's views of the US as unreasonable or biased; certainly some nations' are. But our closest allies point to recent betrayals and lament the treatment of our own people with an especially cruel focus on those who've chosen to build a life here.

Y'all know we've got an enormous pile of problems of our own, but there's a revelation of internationally shared depravity that cannot be ignored unfolding alongside both the entertainment of the Olympics and the tragedy of American decline. I don't use the word "depravity" often, but I can think of little else to describe the stories emerging from the infamous Epstein Files. I don't want to dwell on their contents, but suffice it to say that the evil perpetrated is so great that simply learning what was done can damage the soul. I'll put it to you this way. When I was a camp counselor, one of my campers got sick. Without getting too graphic, I'll just say that he made it to the bathroom, but he missed his target. So, I had to go in there and clean it up. I wasn't surprised when I saw what needed cleaning, but it still turned my stomach. That's what these files are like. I'm not surprised, but the revelations still make me sick.

When Jesus brings up salt and light and prophets, he's talking about stuff with specific purposes. Salt flavors, light reveals, prophets correct. That's what they do; that's what they're for. He also tells us what he does, what he's for: "I have come to fulfill the law and the prophets," he says. And that's great, assuming you know what the law and the prophets do and are for. Well, it's a lot as it turns out, a whole Testament's worth, but it's not complicated. Jesus said the most important parts of that Testament are "Love God, and love your neighbor." Everything else is gravy. Now, the prophets get specific about what loving God and loving neighbor entail, especially justice, mercy, peace, and the downfall of the financial and political systems that allow the

unimaginably wealthy to abuse everyone else. If only the Bible was relevant. Isaiah tells us what we're supposed do, what we're for: "Shout out," he says, "lift up your voice like a trumpet," announce the sins of the nation, "don't serve yourself," "don't oppress your workers," "loose the bonds of injustice," "let the oppressed go free," "share your bread with the hungry," "bring the homeless into your house," shine your light like the dawn! That's what we do. That's what we're for.

There're some using Christ's name who wanna try to justify why the wealthy shouldn't face justice, why it's okay to threaten our neighbors, why it's okay to apply the name of God to cruelty masquerading as law. If anything is at odds with the teaching of Christ, it's the darkness revealed on nearly every one of those pages. And for what it's worth, there's still around 3 million additional pages that haven't seen the light. What remains'll almost certainly turn our stomachs even more.

The implications for our global society, the way we've structured power, the aspects of humankind we've rewarded with riches and the aspects we've scapegoated as undesirable -- surely, after all of this has come to light, surely, the world as it has been cannot continue. So strange as it is to say, I'm grateful. Gratitude hasn't exactly been my knee-jerk reaction lately. But as I'm seeing all this darkness in a new light, I've got hope. What's hidden in the dark's abhorrent, and learning about what the darkness cloaked's disturbing. But people *are* learning. People are seeing what's broken. And people are pushing for change, the kind of change that rids the world of at least some of its brutal shadows. I'm horrified by what we've learned, but I remain grateful. I'm grateful that the process for change has begun, and I'm grateful that I'm still capable of being horrified because our horror indicates our humanity, and our humanity connects us to the universal conscience of the rest of the world. And with all the world's light, I'm grateful to say that darkness doesn't stand a chance.

I want to end with something a little unusual. Friday, the head of the Anglican Church of Canada sent a letter to the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church. This letter's yet another extraordinary glimpse reinforcing the reality of our situation. If the letter were only confirmation, it'd be powerful enough, but it's more. It's also beautifully, encouragingly, stubbornly hopeful. Which is a gift 'cause as the light of the world reveals more, you better believe we're gonna need all that beautiful, encouraging, stubborn hope we can get. The letter reads:

Dear Bishop Sean and friends in Christ in The Episcopal Church,

It has been heartbreak for us, your northern neighbours, to watch the growing unrest that has arisen and persists in so many of your communities in the United States. We have seen and heard alarming stories of aggression, intimidation and harassment toward targeted communities and individuals, and the dehumanization of those perceived to not belong. We have seen images of violence, brutality and even death for those willing to challenge these actions and call out for justice.

We have also seen the ways your church has acted with faith and resilience in response to the call of the Gospel to serve those in need, welcome those who seek hospitality, feed the hungry and challenge those who abuse power. You remind all who seek to follow the way of Jesus that high cost and risks are sometimes required.

Jesus taught that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are blessed. We want you to know that your courageous words and actions in the face of disturbing and dangerous challenges are themselves a blessing, and we want you to know that you are not alone.

Be assured that my prayers join with those offered across the Anglican Church of Canada—prayers for protection, courage and peace. We are upholding you. We also uphold our full communion partners ... as they serve the Gospel in this time of distress for your country.

I am sharing this letter publicly to encourage Canadian Anglicans to continue holding in prayer all of you in this intense, unpredictable season in the life of the United States of America.

We remain steadfast with you in our shared belief in the indestructible hope of the Resurrection, that love and peace will prevail, that healing can happen, and that God will make all things new.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.anglican.ca/news/primate-writes-to-presiding-bishop-of-the-episcopal-church/>