

5 November

Today we remember the Gunpowder plot. This planned terrorist attack on the British establishment 413 years ago was fortunately thwarted, unlike the one in 1984 which I lived through. It is curious that we still commemorate the former.

What was it about 1605 that causes it still to resonate today? I suppose it is because the outrage was planned on such a huge scale, aiming to blow up the King, his government, and all other people of whatever opinion in Lords and Commons. It left the establishment shaken, but also relieved that their intelligence networks picked up the mistakes of the terrorist group in time. The country had just got through the potentially difficult business of passing government from Queen Elizabeth to King James, when there was no clear single heir with uncontested title. Elizabeth died with no son or daughter, brother or sister to take over. It was a reminder that there was a strong minority in the kingdom that could not accept a Protestant succession and would murder on a mass scale to overturn it.

The other reason is probably that the combination of a bonfire and fireworks makes a great evening out for many. It is seasonal, with colder dark evenings a suitable backdrop for a great warming fire and for a colourful display. Some now find the idea of burning a Guy in effigy distasteful, as we remember the best known criminal of the plot. Others worry about the noise of fireworks affecting animals, or fret about the safety risks of so much modern gunpowder. The trend to more large displays makes sense. You can pool the costs to get better fireworks, and more care can be taken in setting up the show and letting it off. You can hold them away from homes, with strong emphasis on avoiding fire hazard.

I think it is a tradition that fulfils a need for a November event. We can all come together to be glad that different strands of Christianity now live in tolerance of each other, and to celebrate that on this occasion in 1605 terrorism was thwarted. It is a good reminder that settling political difference by arguments and votes is a much better approach.