

## National Prayer Breakfast – Justin Welby

It is a great privilege to speak here. I have travelled to all 37 provinces of the Anglican Communion this year so I am more qualified to talk about global airports than about the global church! By the way do remember the work of the diplomatic service around the world – they are unbelievably good and they get no credit for the extraordinary work they do – do pray for them.

The author of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire – Edward Gibbons wrote that ‘the religions of the Roman empire were to the Roman people all equally true, to the philosophers all equally false, and to the magistrates all equally useful.’ He was wrong. The role of the church is never just to be useful!!

This always happens when we lose sight of the fact that at the heart of being a Christian is knowing Jesus Christ, so that together as we meet with Him and share in worship we find ourselves renewed and strengthened for the call in carrying the cross and following him.

The state of the world in which we find the global church – an uncertain world with uncertain forces – Iraq, Nigeria, Syria, the Holy Land. The global church today is in some ways the same as it has always been – a blessing for the world and a call to know Christ. It is a place of renewal and human flourishing, an overflowing of the abundance of God in which all benefit. The Acts of the Apostles demonstrate a new society created in which generosity is the watchword, confidence in Christ the foundation, and love for one another the way of living.

The church this century however is a suffering church. It is growing, and suffering and it carries a cross.

In Lahore, in Pakistan a couple of weeks ago, I met the bishop of Peshawar and some of the clergy where an Anglican church was bombed and 200 people killed. We asked them: “How are things recovering? Are people still going to church?” “Oh,” they said. “The congregation has tripled!” It is a suffering church and a church of courage.

I know the bishop in north-east Nigeria. The people of that diocese have been scattered to the four winds by Boko Haram. Its bishop is in hiding and danger is all around for those few Christians who remain. The girls of Chibok who were kidnapped, and are still being held, were from a Christian part. The global Church is a profoundly suffering church.

The Church is cross shaped - and it boasts in the cross of Christ. It finds its strength in prayer, sings to Him in prayer and prays together with all who will pray. Communities of prayer -- like the 24/7 movement – are springing up all around the world, full of young people who are passionate to worship Jesus who died for us, and prepared to serve the poor and even live in hardship themselves.

The Church serves a faithful God who loves and suffers on the cross and who is with us at every moment in the darkest times as well as the brightest.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century church is a united church which prays and worships and has its ultimate values in the faithfulness of God. It holds together, it belongs to one another. All Christians belong to one another not as a club but as sisters and brothers. God has made us to belong to each other.

This is crucial to understand how the Church must act. We do not have the option to ditch one another just because we disagree with each other. You don't chuck out family. You love and seek their wellbeing even when you argue.

In the Church of England we are seeking to start a radical new way of being the Church: good and loving disagreement – a potential gift to a world of bitter and divisive conflict. What can be more radical as God's people than to disagree well? Not by abandoning principle and truth but affirming it, agreeing what is right, acting on it and yet continuing to love those who hold different views.

We don't abandon Scriptural truths but apply them afresh in every generation. We can't decide that there are bits of the body of Christ that are excluded. To put those two statements together is hard and controversial. The Anglican Communion (one small part of the global church) operates in 165 countries, one of which, Nigeria, has over four hundred language groups. We have to work with

thousands of cultures. The struggle the achievement of holding together in good disagreement sets a pattern in which truth is not a rod to strike others with, but a light freely offered for a path of joy and flourishing. The poor are not served by a divided church obsessed with inward issues.

Pope Francis' slogan is 'listen to God and hear the poor.'

A 21<sup>st</sup> century global church in which all Christians belong irrevocably to each other and seek to discern truth in many thousands of cultures is a church with fuzzy edges because in a world in which cultures overlap constantly and are communicated instantly, (often not without some frictions) you need space to adapt and to meet with one another, and you have to trust the sovereign grace of God to deal with the consequences.

What used to take months to become known is now known instantaneously. Instant reaction has replaced reflective comment. That is the reality of politics, and it demands a new reality of ways in which we accept and love one another and pray for each other. The best answer to complex issues is often not best given in a short soundbite of 140 characters.

The church must be a generous church that loves truth and loves people with God's love. Because we are face to face with people in entirely new ways. We believe God reaches out unconditionally and we are to do the same for others. God has no preferences except a preference for the poor the weak and the vulnerable, the widow and the orphan, the alien and the stranger. The church is at its most effective when it demonstrates that love. And with that comes the obligation of holiness –living holy lives that draw people to the blessing of God.

The Speaker spoke eloquently of poverty. And the church around the world tackles poverty. We are amongst the biggest educators on earth. In the UK we educate nearly a million people in the C of E and the Roman catholic schools half a million. No recent problems occurred in the church schools. These schools stand for tolerance, acceptance, reception, generosity, open handedness. Education is something which the Church has done for centuries –in its monasteries when the rest of world gave up on it in western Europe.

International aid – the Church is one of the best and most efficient deliverers of help for the poor that exists on the face of the earth.

Let's celebrate what is good and not be cynical. With cross party support we have maintained international aid at 0.7% of our GDP.

We have also introduced the modern Slavery Bill leading the world in tackling trafficking. There was also cross party support for the greatest conference on sexual violence and conflict that has ever taken place.

These aren't cynical vote winners; they arise from a spirit of generosity that is right and proper.

Love and outward looking should be the characteristic of the Church. Holiness, radical difference in lifestyle – and truth and love driving our attitudes and our actions.

The church in the Democratic Republic of Congo has loved and aided the victims of conflict driven sexual violence for many years.

I was there not long ago in a place where the light that shone was the light of Christ in a tent full of handicapped children, who were dying hungry and alone – apart from the church people who went to sit with them. It was overwhelming.

In South Sudan I was called by the archbishop – Daniel Deng – to come to a town in the middle of the fighting zone with him. We found that the town had been taken and retaken four times. There were bodies on the streets, the smell of death everywhere, and mass graves to consecrate. And Daniel goes on National TV in the south Sudan and calls for reconciliation!

Extraordinary. Doesn't that speak of what the church should be?

The Church in Sudan is also speaking heroically for an imprisoned woman for whom truth matters enough to die. [Meriam Yehya– you will have heard the devastating news that Meriam and her family were rearrested at the airport as they were seeking to leave the country. Update – they have now been released again.] A 21<sup>st</sup> century Church loves the poor and the victim and stands for human

dignity, challenges oppressors and supports victims. It speaks for women killed in lynchings called “honour” killings or for those imprisoned under blasphemy laws. It does all that despite its own suffering. Truth and love embrace.

It is a forgiven church because it is a failing church. The church is full of failure and that is because it is full of people. Without wishing to be controversial – you are all sinners – and so am I. (Someone said they would never have come and listened to me if they had known I was a sinner!)

The church is forgiven and knows the forgiveness of God and if it knows its stuff and shares it with others. It knows its failures and it recognises the need for renewal. The Pope said to me, “Remember the three ps: prayer peace and poverty.”

At its best such a church is diversity established and accepted, forgiveness abundant, people listened to with love, prisoners set free, the poor served, Jesus loved and worshipped passionately, and that love for Jesus meaning that we recognise in the stranger the call of Christ to love; the good news of that shared with confidence, and people invited to join with us to become His disciples and feast on His love, and a community that challenges radically all the assumptions of what makes for success through the reversal of the importance and the holding together of weak and strong and a million more things as well.

Lastly we are a hospitable church if we follow Christ, utterly at home in a world of numerous faith traditions. Open about the hope we have while listening to others. In Lent I spent some time with Ibrahim Mogra the remarkable Muslim leader from Leicester and we shared together our scriptures. I read bits of John’s gospel with him and he read bits of the Koran with me. Hospitable.

That belonging to one another, being different diverse and yet authentic to oneself and one’s tradition and the truth is a gift this world needs. It’s the opposite of all this Trojan horse process. It’s a generosity of spirit and openness to listen. The 21<sup>st</sup> century church knows that the good news of Jesus Christ is a gift that is to be shared in witness. Making new disciples now is as important as it was in the first century. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century when Augustine came to Canterbury,

in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> during the dark ages and learning and civilisation were brought back. The reformation when the rights of the individual to know God themselves and to be free began to be established through the work of the churches. In the 18<sup>th</sup> when knowledge was developed and treasured by the clergy. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the campaign against slavery began and continues.

The call to discipleship is always offered without manipulation as hospitality, respecting the freedom of others to say no, without aggression and always in love. But it is offered.

The Church is not an NGO with lots of old buildings. It is the church of God, rejoicing in the realities of cultural diversity in a way never known before, global, cross-bearing, confident and welcoming. The Church holds out to the world the treasure of reconciliation and offers it as a gift freely given out of its own experience of struggling with the reality of it, of being reconciled ourselves through the sovereign love of God in Jesus. The global church is above all God's Church, despite all its failings; and in passionate devotion to Him we offer the treasure He puts in our hands, unconditionally always pointing to Jesus Christ in worship, deed and word.