



Neil Turner

Come, Holy Spirit, and set our hearts on fire with the flames of your love. Amen.

It is wonderful to see this meeting of IARCUMM (the International Anglican-Roman Catholic Commission for Unity and Mission), this gathering of God's people from around the world. Many in places of immense suffering and difficulty, persecuted, hunted, and yet here you are.

I come to you today, and I wonder what you were thinking about in the readings when often our thoughts may wander a little bit, I was thinking, in this place, I am the least among you. For I come with the responsibilities of living amongst the troubles that Anglicanism has suffered the last few years, and being conscious that to you I must be as one who serves.

I come as the least. And so, what I will say today, is in that Benedictine tradition, in the rule of Saint Benedict, that when there are things to be decided, that the abbot, so called, should listen, to all, to the least, to the newest, to the youngest. And I come, as with all of us, a sinner, conscious of the judgment I will face.

And it is in that spirit that I say to you that on the feast of the conversion of St. Paul and above all, in a meeting of IARCCUM, we must look outwards. We cannot continue as the Church to be those who are obsessed with what is going on amongst us. We must look out at the world. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, in 2013, paragraph two, the Holy Father wrote this:

'The great danger in today's world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life', he wrote, 'becomes caught up in its own interests and concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor. God's voice is no longer heard. The quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades. This is a very real danger for believers too', said the Holy Father. 'Many fall prey to it and end up resentful, angry and listless. That is no way to live a dignified and fulfilled life. It is not God's will for us, nor is it the life in the Spirit which has its source in the heart of the risen Christ'.

He wrote that eleven years ago. And yet today, the hope of joy, which we carry, joy, and the cry for justice, which is our cry, rises even more now than then, amidst conflict and terror.

The children torn from their families, traumatized by bombing, with nightmares that may haunt them for all their life. In Gaza, the sound of war is ever present. The women, who know in so many parts of the world, in Asia, Africa and Europe, that the seizing of their towns and villages by some militia or another, will not mean only the violation of their lands, their homes and their families, but also of their own bodies.

The men who seek to provide security for their homes, for their families, for their towns, for their country, and discover that climate, conflict and cruelty, turn them into the playthings of nature, of invader, and of tyrant.

There are the cries for relief from pain and suffering and poverty, and perhaps the loudest cry, not high pitched, but a deep rumble in the background, as they know, greatly in Brazil, is the cry of the planet, tortured by human economics. It's green spaces, deserts, it's atmosphere lashing out in cyclone, storm, hurricane and tornado, as Tanzania has discovered, as Madagascar knows, as the islands of the South Pacific, live with day in and day out.

The planet screams in rage at the rapid warming, and like a wounded and blinded giant, tramples on those around. For too many people in our world, the words of Psalm 67, so beautifully sung, thank you, the words of Psalm 67 seem far away.

The earth has yielded its increase. God, our God, has blessed us.

And to these screams and cries, and pleas for help, God's answer seemed so unlikely that few believed it. Even St. Paul, whose conversion we celebrate, could not see how God could do anything so strange and so contrary as to send a baby in a manger to be the answer to the cry for help of the world. And so Paul persecuted those who proclaimed that God had revealed himself in Jesus of Nazareth, and the very same Jesus was raised from the dead.

We are all at one level affronted, confused, challenged by the simplicity, the service, and the generosity of God. The church itself is so often affronted by God's simplicity. Yesterday was the feast of Saint Francis de Sales, recognized as a saint for his simplicity. In a time of war and persecution, one Christian of another, service is the image of Christ.

At the coronation of King Charles III, a little service last year, which I remember a little about, a child began the liturgy. An eleven year-old said to the King, 'What is your purpose?'. And he replied, 'After the manner of Christ, I come not to be served, but to serve.' But as Paul says in his first chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians, such simplicity is an affront to both Gentiles and Jews.

And if you looked, which I hope you don't, on Anglican social media, you will have seen that people were affronted by that question from the child. Simplicity. They were also affronted, one day someone will explain why, by the fact that when I crowned the king, I was wearing a wristwatch. Where in the Bible does it say, no wristwatches? For many, that was the most important part of the coronation.

But we long to be those who are admitted to heaven. Not by the simple grace of God. But by the great things we have done. God makes space for St. Paul to do evil, and he makes space for St. Paul to hear the gospel, and he makes space for St. Paul converted to preach all over the then known world of Europe.

The church always has the same choices, to be converted, to hear the gospel day by day, to choose between doing well and doing evil.

If you know them in the Narnia books of C. S. Lewis, one of the greatest Christian English writers, and in the Harry Potter books of J. K. Rowling,

there are mirrors in both those books at one place to another, which show the onlooker, the person looking into the mirror, not their face, but their greatest desire. In both books, the onlookers normally seek something for themselves.

The church, were it to look into that mirror, would too often seek power, privilege, recognition, control. To achieve that, we fight one another. We divide. We have done so for centuries. Peter, in the Gospel, protests at the lack of reward in this world. Jesus answers, everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my name's sake will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. But to receive, we must first leave. And he goes on, many are first who will be last, and the last will be first.

And when we receive that answer, and it becomes part of our hearts, then we are full of joy, and we proclaim good news. And it is good news for all the earth. Because God is revealed, the world may rejoice. And because God is revealed in Jesus, the harvest can be blessed, and justice can be done. Indeed, the entire creation, we are told by St. Paul in the letter to the Colossians chapter one, will find redemption and salvation through Jesus.

History now has a new destination. It is joy, fruitfulness, justice, equality. It is obtained not by compulsion and power, but by the simplicity of love for the sheep. It is the task of the Church, and above all of its shepherd, by our manner of life, collective, we often forget that, and individual, to make that destination of history known, and to worship God, whose perfect love made it possible.

And that is why we must find ways of being joyful in our disagreement, generous in our disputes, hospitable in our differences with one another. In character, in appearance, in temperament, and in culture, around this world we are all deeply different.

As I said in another place, we come from the mountains of Papua New Guinea and the oceans of Melanesia, to the canyons of Wall Street, to the swamps of West Africa. We come from war and peace, from prosperity and poverty. We are all different. The Church is the miracle of unity amidst enormous, inhuman, unimaginable difference, which for the world has always been a reason to conquer and fight one another, not to love and value one another.

Demonstrating that love amongst each other is the key that opens human hearts to the good news of Christ. And that means suffering. God says to Ananias, go and seek Paul. Go! For he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and Kings and before the people of Israel. I myself will show him how much he must succeed. No. Win? No. Gain? No. Suffer. For the sake of my name.

Jesus tells the disciples that he must suffer, and therefore they must suffer. He tells Ananias that Paul must suffer, thus we must suffer. It follows. I am an instrument, sinner as I am. You are each instruments, and because of that, all of us here must suffer.

We suffer in our powerlessness, in our weakness. Last September, just at the beginning of the Synod on Synodality, I went to the South Caucasus

after the Azerbaijani conquest of Nagorno Karabakh. I said to a colleague at the end of that week, that my word of the week was powerlessness.

You know better than me in many cases that when we meet refugees who long to go home, we feel so weak.

When we meet the hungry and the poor, we feel so weak. When we see the forests cut down, we feel so weak.

And two weeks later, I was with Archbishop Hossam in Jerusalem and in the DRC before that and in South Sudan and in England's poorest towns amidst gangs and knife culture in London, we feel we can do nothing. And in our church in the global north, we have just had a meeting of bishops in England. We face decline, loss of the Christian culture that has been there for a thousand years.

Our suffering is the pain of historic sins, such as the slave trade. It is the pain of our changing culture, our struggle to love sinners in the same way as Christ does. Our pain in failing to love one another and even to love ourselves. We inflict in the church great suffering on one another. As bishops and archbishops, you know that.

Where are the deepest wounds in our backs from those who are meant to be with us? They wound more deeply because we love them.

We have the remedy from Jesus himself. It is to love one another. But suffering is also from outside, from the tyrants who want control not only of our actions but our emotions and our thoughts. It is from politicians, who in election campaigns, and 40 percent of the world will have an election this year, and they will say, put your trust in me.

And God says, put not your trust in princes or political candidates. Put your trust in God.

And our external suffering, and our internal sufferings, goes from being painful to being unbearable when we lose sight of Christ's call in those gospel words, to seek Him alone, to leave all things, and to seek Christ.

We have just seen the martyrs. What did they gain from their martyrdom? A memorial in a church in Rome? It's very nice.

But many people in the world would say, an old stone in an old church. No, what they gained was Christ. Because they sought nothing in this life.

When we fail to believe what Jesus says to Peter, everyone who has left, diocese, pride, position, pomposity, self importance, and lots of other things, for his namesake, will receive a hundredfold, will inherit eternal life. And when that happens, we become God's people of joy. God's people of joy. The Holy Father says later in *Evangelii Gaudium*, and I don't need it in my notes because it's always stuck in my mind, he says, 'I often wonder why people who are going to preach the gospel so frequently look as though they're going to a funeral'.

Lack of joy. Psalm 67 speaks of joy. It is God's gift to us. In order that it may be God's gift to the world through us. Let us learn in love to carry that joy. In joy. For we are each and all collectively loved by God.

Amen.

10 min read

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