

Archbishop Justin Welby gave the keynote address at a pre-election interfaith conference in Abuja on Saturday. The conference, *“Religious Harmony in Nigeria: Towards the 2019 General Elections”*, was organised by the Interfaith Initiative for Peace (IIP).



*Read the text of the speech:*

I am honoured to have been invited to participate in this very important conference at this time in the history of Nigeria. I thank and appreciate the co-conveners, His Eminence the Cardinal and His Eminence the Sultan.

It is a great privilege to speak to you, especially in front of the Fathers of the Nation, two former heads of state. They are soldiers, and there are many soldiers here. My grandmother, married to a soldier, repeated his advice about speaking: “Stand up, speak up and shut up.” But I am an Archbishop so I may not be so concise.

I have been coming to Nigeria for 40 years in two months. In that time I have had the pleasure of travelling from Calabar, Port Harcourt, Bayelsa and the coast and swamps, to Jos, Kaduna, Kano, Maiduguri, Damaturu and other parts of northern Nigeria, urban and rural, to support reconciliation during the crises of the early part of this millennium.

I learnt much during those years: above all that the desire for peace is universal but not unconditional.

Peace requires justice. Attacks cannot be treated with impunity. Truth needs telling and arriving at the truth that is to be told is a complex process.

In conflict, every person’s so-called truth is their own. And it is only in a place of security and hope that they can adjust their perception of truth, see their own faults and sins as well as those of the other, and learn to seek peace. To accept diversity, or disagreement – in other words, reconciliation.

I learned that reconciliation is a matter of generations. It is not completed by declarations but by practical action. It faces opposition by those who seek advantage from disorder and disruption.

And there are advantages for those with evil intentions. That is one of the challenges of political leadership.

In Europe in the 1930s, and in some places today, we saw and see the capacity of the ruthless leader to sow disorder in the cause of reaping power. Morally that is one of the great questions for politicians.

As a Christian I remember that the devil tempted Jesus (Matthew 4:1-11) with different ways of seizing power. They all involved grand public gestures, high profile activity, to turn stones into bread, to demonstrate supernatural protection, to worship evil for the sake of power.

Jesus chose the paths of obscurity, of humility and service, and as Paul's letter to the Philippians reminds us in chapter 2 was as a result raised to the right hand of God.

Now, I come from a political family on one side, and to a campaign manager the word obscurity is a swear word. I have yet to see a successful campaign which involved hiding the candidate rather than, at least economically, promising prosperity (bread from stones), resilience (throwing yourself from the top of the temple), and international acclaim (power over the kingdoms of this world).

So do not fear, I am not suggesting that the realities of moral and ethical political life be set aside. My mother worked for Churchill, my great uncle was a cabinet minister, my godfather a junior minister, my stepfather a professional politician.

I know a little of what it takes to do the honourable, essential and demanding work of politics. Too many people criticise from the side-lines but refuse to come on the pitch and kick the ball. The Super Eagles may be criticised at times by spectators, but none of the spectators can do better!

Anything that touches Nigeria touches me deeply. Nigeria has been my teacher, my friend and my passion.

When I hear of Nigeria's difficulties and problems, whether it be terrorism, or economic hardship or the deaths of farmers too often Christian farmers I am deeply distressed. I mourn as for a member of my family.

When I hear of gloom and pessimism, such an un-Nigerian emotion, I pray and long for a change of heart and the birth of a greater hope. For this is a very great country indeed.

As a foreigner to my fingertips, with no right to speak to you, I feel an immense sense of privilege and responsibility to be here today. It is also a duty.

As a Christian, I am called to the Ministry of Reconciliation. God reconciled us to Himself through the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross and assigned us the task of reconciling people to one another and to God.

That call to reconciliation requires leadership, and there is a great need of leadership in Africa.

Nigeria is the giant of the continent and is becoming a giant of the world. By 2050 she may have as many as 500 million citizens. There is an energy in this country which can transform not only this nation but the whole continent, and far beyond.

There is an economic talent, an entrepreneurial spirit, a courage and willingness to take risks which is in desperately short supply in our world.

So, come with me to the future, 50 years hence, in 2068, and let us eavesdrop on the conversation between a man and his young son, whom at the end of the day he has just picked up from school.

They are walking through a town, the weather is good, and as children sometimes do, and grandchildren, the boy is talking about the day at school.

“So, what did you do today?”

“History, dad. Modern Nigerian history. It was very interesting.”

“What did you learn?”

“Well, I got a bit confused. The teacher told us that in the old days not everyone went to school, and if they were ill they could not always see a doctor. And there were things called *maralia* and there was something called corruption. And people often stole money.”

“Ah,” says the dad, “son, not *maralia*. My father, your grandfather, can remember some of that, but it all ended years ago. He remembers that election time was often one for fear of violence. He remembers the introduction of better and better schools, and people saying that at last Nigeria would prove its capacity in the world.”

“Then the teacher said that everyone who needed light and power had to have something called *generator*.”

“Generator, boy, you really are going to have trouble with your spelling test. Extra homework this evening. But I heard those stories, yet today Nigeria is a world leader in clean power, using the sunshine and hydro and other sources God has given us. And life is so different.

“When your uncle gets back from New York, where he is part of the team that Nigeria has had for so long at the UN as a permanent member of the Security Council, he can tell you how Nigerian troops are all over the world well known for reconciliation skills. And how Nigeria is now an example of what can change, rather than a worry about what needs to change.

“And your mother’s sister is just finishing her studies of the impact of the 2020s clean up of the Delta, and how it has meant that the fisheries are strong, the tourism brings jobs and that historic rivalries and enmities are largely healed.”

Well, I will end our eavesdropping there. It is part in fun, but the serious point is this: Nigeria’s vocation is to greatness. Its geographical position, population, potential wealth, gifted people and ancient history all point to that call.

It should emerge as a regional and then world leader in the multi-polar world of the 21st century and do it by its virtues, its overcoming of its vices, its generosity and its hope.

### **This 2018 Conference**

But the hope that we have from God comes with a responsibility to act, and the responsibility to act means not only to proclaim a future golden age, but to take the first steps towards it.

As Mao said, the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. And that brings me to this conference, to the elections, and some current events.

This public 2018 conference mirrors the distinguished role of many people before 2015. There was a small role to which I was led to contribute in private before, during and after the 2015 Nigerian general elections.

Along with many others, I contacted both the then sitting President, Dr Goodluck Jonathan, and his leading opponent, HE Muhammadu Buhari. Although I am one of the least important of their distinguished interlocutors, they graciously took my calls. I pleaded with them:

- to call on their followers to conduct the elections without violence,
- to accept the results of the elections, and
- to treat each other honourably, no matter the outcome of the elections.

The landmark outcome of the 2015 election and reactions to it reverberated across the world. "Nigeria has moved on," many people rejoiced.

Yet there is no complete moving on in politics. Almost no problems can be examined, dealt with and filed away.

When injustice and violence are perpetrated, especially in the name of religion, it is the responsibility of political and religious leaders to speak out and condemn that injustice and violence.

Across all our religious traditions, the reputation of what we hold dearest is at stake if we do not speak on behalf of the good of those who believe and practice a different faith.

This nation has a long history of faiths and traditions living well together. The world is watching, and within our faith traditions we have the potential to model communities that may disagree on matters of religion but will be utterly committed to standing together for the good of all.

Thirdly: insecurity, poverty and the economy, corruption and ethnic division, together with interfaith suspicions.

You know far better than I that there are no easy answers to these great questions, and that they interact with each other. The next leader of this mighty nation, like all his predecessors, faces mountains to climb.

The conduct of elections is the ultimate test as to whether any candidate, while desiring and straining with all their power to be elected, would nevertheless be content to serve their country, or whether they consider that no cost to the country is too great if it will get them elected.

To put it simply, are you prepared to serve in the great building that is Nigeria, or do you insist on ruling, even if only over the ruins?

Let me speak bluntly as an Archbishop. God knows our true deeds, and we will all face the judgement of God, Muslim and Christian, African Traditional Religion or even atheist.

Before God there are no deceptions, no excuses.

Jesus taught in Matthew chapter 25 that those who neglect the weak, the poor and helpless will be condemned. In all our decisions we must first consider the judgement not of the electorate, but of God.

Within the church I remember that. Being an Archbishop gives me no rights, no privileges, except perhaps to be judged to a tougher standard. How much more a President, a Senator, a Governor?

In the words of the Bible, you are called to be good shepherds, who feed the flock (Psalm 23). Not evil shepherds who eat the flock (Ezekiel).

Therefore, as Nigeria approaches the 2019 election date, I implore the electorate and aspirants at all levels of politics to set a standard for themselves that is even much higher than what happened here in 2015.

Religious leaders should encourage their congregations to discharge their civic duties according to each person's conscience; politicians should give this nation a chance to achieve its potential by resolving to make every effort to serve with integrity.

Where politicians fail the people in the performance of their elected duties, religious leaders should advise the politicians privately. If their advice is not heeded, they must exercise their public prophetic role and speak truth to power.

We must not condone the wrong deeds of public officials just because they belong to our Churches or Mosques. Neither can we just sound off. A former senior politician of many years ago used to say about Bishops in the House of Lords (the upper house of the UK Parliament), "The trouble is Bishops blow in, blow off and blow out."

Religious leaders should be united in applauding the good, suggesting improvements, and calling out wrong doings.

All Nigerians have in your hands a golden future. You are the ones who take steps towards it, as did your predecessors.

Let us go back to the boy and his father. For in 2068, we may legitimately dream of a Nigeria that is a great power, and a power for good in a tough world, where climate change will need good on a great scale.

We may dream that the conversation continues with the father saying, "You know, my father says that 2019 was a great step, and that everything which was good and had been doubted became sure, and that everything that was bad and had been feared began its long decline to irrelevance."

May God bless you in His power; may He bless this wonderful nation.

Thank you.

10 min read

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