



Justin Welby spoke of the need for "massive cultural change" within the church to help it better address deep-seated differences.

A trip to the South Sudan, Burundi, Rwanda and Goma in the Eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) brings home some pretty tough realities. Two of those areas are post conflict and two are current conflict. In them the issues which mesmerise me day by day vanish, and the extraordinary courage of the Church is brought afresh in front of my eyes. By the Church I don't only mean the Bishops and the Archbishops, extraordinary as they are, but the whole Church, in the small villages where they have been raided, where sexual violence has been the norm, where unspeakable atrocities have been carried out and yet they still trust in God.

These are churches of courage, Anglican, Catholic, Pentecostal, other Protestant and many others. Of course of they are flawed, we are all, but it is their courage and faith that lives with me.

However, like all churches, including ourselves, they are part of the society in which they live. Societies in conflict are societies in fear. It is on that subject of fear that I want to reflect for a few minutes, not with reference so much to the international situation but to ourselves and the way we deal with ourselves and between ourselves.

We all know that perfect love casts out fear. We know it although we don't often apply it. We mostly know that perfect fear casts out love. In any institution or organisation, the moment that suspicion reigns and the assumption that everything is zero sum becomes dominant (that is to say that some else's gain must be my loss, we can't both flourish) that institution will be increasingly dominated by fear. It is an old problem in game theory. The moment at which something is zero sum, players stop looking so much at their objectives and increasingly look at each other. The more they look at each other, the more they are dominated by fear and the less they are able to focus on their objectives.

The Church of England is not a closed system, nor is the Anglican Communion and most certainly nor is the Church catholic and universal. It is not a closed system because God is involved and where he is involved there is no limit to what can happen, and no limit to human flourishing. His abundant love overwhelms us when we make space to flood into our own lives, into institutions and systems.

At the other end of the spectrum, closed systems, full of fear eventually implode under the weight of their own contradictions and conflicts.

Assumptions grow about what is happening. I notice many of them.

For example, as those who were in the chamber for 'questions' know I recently commented that where a growing church is there is usually a good incumbent. A number of people took that to mean as well that where a church is not growing it must be because there's a bad vicar. But I didn't say that, and neither did I mean it. I have to confess that the moment I said it I knew I had expressed myself badly, and do apologise to those hurt by the comment. But, the underlying point remains, fear leads to the assumption of denigration.

Take another example. Yesterday this Synod by an overwhelming majority supported at its latest stage the legislation that could lead to the ordination of women to the episcopate. We all know in this place that is only a first stage, that we have some way to go. In the middle of all the

paper we have in Annex a of GS1932 the five principles agreed by the House of Bishops. They are short and to the point, and to work they depend on love and trust. The love has to be demonstrated and the trust has to be earned. But the love cannot be demonstrated if it is refused and the trust cannot be earned without the iterative process of it being received and reinforced in the reception. That is how love and trust work.

So, for example, if we are to live out a commitment to the flourishing of every tradition of the church there is going to have to be a massive cultural change that accepts that people with whom I differ deeply are also deeply loved by Christ and therefore must be deeply loved by me and love means seeking their flourishing. We cannot make any sense of Philippians chapter 2 and the hymn to the Servant unless we adopt that approach. The gift that Christ gives us, of loving us to the end, to the ultimate degree is meaningless unless that love is both given and received, and then passed on.

Culture change is always threatening, and when we talk about implementing the five principles, including the one that seeks the flourishing of every part of the Church, and thus of appointments of people who disagree with us most profoundly all sorts of objections can be raised. "What would a church flourish if it appointed men who do not ordain women to senior posts, simply because in other respects those appointing sense the call and purpose of God?" What would the world think? The Church's answer has to be "the world may think what it likes, we are seeking mutual flourishing". Even as I say it my heart beats faster with concern about the consequences and with fear of the difficulty of climbing such a steep slope. And "how can those who are deeply and theologically committed to the idea that women should not be ordained as Bishops, how can they flourish?" I can see the answer only in the grace and love of God in a church that risks living out its call. It is a hard course to steer. Yet I know it is right that we set such a course and hold to it through thick and thin, with integrity, transparency and honesty.

Yet what lies on that journey? Well, it is certainly an untidy church. It has incoherence, inconsistency between dioceses and between different places. It's not a church that says we do this and we don't do that. It's a church that says we do this and we do that and actually quite a lot of us don't like that but we are still going to do it because of love. It's a church that speaks to the world and says that consistency and coherence is not the ultimate virtue, that is found in holy grace.

A church that loves those with whom the majority deeply disagree is a church that will be unpleasantly challenging to a world where disagreement is either banned within a given group or removed and expelled. The absolute of holy grace challenges the absolutism of a world that says there are no absolutes except the statement that there are no absolutes.

The Church of England is not tidy, nor efficiently hierarchical. There are no popes, but there is a College of Bishops and there are Synods and collections and lobbies and groups and pressure and struggle. When it works well it works because love overcomes fear. When it works badly it is because fear overcomes love. The resources for more fear lie within us and the resources for more love lie within God and are readily available

to all those who in repentance and humility stretch out and seek them. With Jesus every imperative rests on an indicative, every command springs from a promise. Do not fear.

Already I can hear the arguments being pushed back at me, about compromise, about the wishy-washiness of reconciliation, to quote something I read recently. But this sort of love, and the reconciliation between differing groups that it demands and implies, is not comfortable and soft and wishy-washy. Facilitated conversations may be a clumsy phrase, but it has at its heart a search for good disagreement. It is exceptionally hard edged, extraordinarily demanding and likely to lead in parts of the world around us to profound unpopularity or dismissal.

This sort of gracious reconciliation means that we have to create safe space within ourselves to disagree, as we began to do last summer at the Synod in York, and as we need to do over the issues arising out of our discussions on sexuality, not because the outcome is predetermined to be a wishy-washy one, but because the very process is a proclamation of the Gospel of unconditionally loving God who gives Himself for our sin and failure. It is incarnational in the best sense and leads to the need to bear our cross in the way we are commanded.

Let's bring this down to some basics. We have agreed that we will ordain women as Bishops. At the same time we have agreed that while doing that we want all parts of the church to flourish. If we are to challenge fear we have to find a cultural change in the life of the church, in the way our groups and parties work, sufficient to build love and trust. That will mean different ways of working at every level of the church in practice in the way our meetings are structured, presented and lived out and in every form of appointment. It will, dare I say, mean a lot of careful training and development in our working methods, because the challenge for all institutions today, and us above all, is not merely the making of policy but how we then make things happen.

We have received a report with disagreement in it on sexuality, through the group led by Sir Joseph Pilling. There is great fear among some, here and round the world, that that will lead to the betrayal of our traditions, to the denial of the authority of scripture, to apostasy, not to use too strong a word. And there is also a great fear that our decisions will lead us to the rejection of LGBT people, to irrelevance in a changing society, to behaviour that many see akin to racism. Both those fears are alive and well in this room today.

We have to find a way forward that is one of holiness and obedience to the call of God and enables us to fulfil our purposes. This cannot be done through fear. How we go forward matters deeply, as does where we arrive.

Where we work to overcome fear, and to bring society closer together we can make a real difference. Over the last few years the 'Near Neighbours' programme has, in extraordinary and creative ways, helped to create a stronger fabric of relationships and joint working across different faith communities. Largely funded by the Department of Communities and Local Government through the Church Urban Fund, the Church of England with its network of parishes and the four Presence and Engagement centres has partnered with people and organisations

from a range of churches and different faiths to produce real, local change that has been acknowledged in two independent reports. I am delighted that it looks as though this fruitful partnership between government and faith communities led by the church can continue at least over the next two years, and we look forward to a formal announcement soon. This is recognition that the church is part of the glue that holds our society together, which casts out fear of difference and works practically for the common good.

So I come back to where I started. We live in a world of courageous churches, not only the ones I saw last week but churches like the Church of Nigeria and the Church of Kenya and the Church of Uganda and many, many others, South Africa, I could go on and on who live out the reality of a costly discipleship and somehow managed to find love in the midst of it. They are not sinless but they are heroic. We are called to be a heroic church: before us the great demons of poverty, ignorance, need, human suffering. Filling us the grace and love of Christ who leads us in mission. The churches I saw in the last 10 days are certainly heroic. That heroism should challenge us not simply to follow what they say but to be those whose heroic faith is truly holy and gracious.

Thank you.

10 min read

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