

Today at the Church of England's General Synod, the Archbishop of Canterbury moved a motion by the Presidents on 'The State of the Nation'. Read the motion and the Archbishop's speech as delivered.



The Archbishop of Canterbury to move:

That this Synod, knowing through the experiences of parishes across the country that social divisions feel more entrenched and intractable than for many years, and concerned at the divisions within the major political parties which are stifling the emergence of a hopeful and viable vision for the common good in our communities:

- (a) call upon every diocese and parish regularly to hold in prayer their local MPs and politicians and the members of Her Majesty's Government and civil servants, seeking God's strength and wisdom for the responsibilities they bear;
- (b) reaffirm the Christian commitment to putting the voices of the poor and marginalised at the heart of the nation's concerns; and
- (c) call upon the nation's leaders, drawing on Christian hope and reconciliation, to work together for that common good at this time of division.

Read the Archbishop's speech:

We remain a nation of great stability compared to many, world influence, generosity in overseas aid, skilled in the exercise of soft power, with a robust and effective democracy, judiciary, and many other aspects which are envied around the world.

Governments often listen; look at the recent, welcome response by the Department for Work and Pensions over Universal Credit.

Many of us are among the most privileged people alive in the world today.

But not all. Today we see signs of division, perhaps more clearly than for generations in peace time. They concern inequality, injustice and they obscure hope for many.

There is exclusion from a sense of common purpose and of equal rights in our society, politically, economically and socially.

Brexit is not the subject of this debate. It is crucially important, a historic moment, and views here will be as divided as across the nation. But one way or another, better or worse, life will go on – and God’s mission is not stopped by such events.

Rather we are called to rise to the challenge, here and across Europe – in the Diocese in Europe, which is particularly effective – loving and caring in ways that show, whatever the shocks, we remain confident and active serving the risen Christ in the power of the Spirit.

But Brexit has revealed how our politics and society have, for many decades, not paid sufficient attention to the common good: that shared life of a society in which everyone is able to flourish.

That pain and exclusion continues in this country. If we do not as a nation pay attention, it will cause greater division and, as the Archbishop of York said recently, ultimately strife.

More than that, for this is not politics and pragmatism – we’re not a substitute for parliament – it is discipleship and obedience to God in Christ.

More than that is the command of scripture. Jesus’ sermon on the plain in Luke, chapter 6:

“Blessed are you who are poor,

for yours is the kingdom of God.

“Blessed are you who are hungry now,

for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now,

for you will laugh.

“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

“But woe to you who are rich,

for you have received your consolation.

“Woe to you who are full now,

for you will be hungry.

“Woe to you who are laughing now,

for you will mourn and weep.” (Luke 6:20-25)

Funny it's much less popular than the Sermon on the Mount.

We hear the prophets tell us that, “Justice must roll down like rivers and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.”

The bible does not do trickle-down economics (a theory long discredited, not least implicitly by Keynes in his General Theory) but it does rolling rivers of justice: the scriptures call us to solidarity with the poor, and to the common good.

We spent yesterday evening talking about estates evangelism, and what we say now echoes the truth that was so eloquently put to us by (Bishop) Philip (North) and others then.

In most of this Synod our attention has been outward-looking, and when we look round today we see challenges to the nation which must shape our mission – and must define what the nation thinks about us over the next generation. For that is the challenge.

If we pray for our leaders; put the poor and marginalised at the heart of the church and of the consciousness of the nation; exert every effort in being with them; build reconciliation in our country, then there is a future made bright not necessarily by human success, but by being at the centre of the activity of the Spirit of Jesus.

The reality of exclusion and division is seen in the difficulty of our political system to build a consensus and find a common path forward.

How we recover from and heal these divisions may be the biggest challenge that lies of ahead of us – to unify as a country, to have a healthy and functioning democracy, and to have a strong, ethically and morally-based economy that works for all.

Those who bear the grievous burdens of political leadership, on all sides, by definition are faced with resolving the current crisis. We must not forget that the burdens on them are enormous.

We must pray, as Paul tells Timothy, for “all who are in high positions” (I Tim 2:2). It is easy to stand on the sidelines and judge; we do not have to make the decisions. But we must commit to pray for them. For those who are close to them, for their wisdom, and their blessing. That does not mean agreeing; it means loving, as we have been loved by Christ.

As Christians, we pray not because we are fearful, but because we seek to be faithful to St Paul's encouragement to “pray without ceasing”, as our MPs say each day in Parliament, “Your kingdom come and Your name be hallowed.”

The Five Marks of Mission of the Anglican Communion call us to speak for justice. Supremely the scriptures authoritatively demand advocacy for and support of the most vulnerable.

The churches are doing much heavy lifting. The Church of England through 33,000 social projects, 4,700 schools, occasional offices, and our plans for renewed presence on estates and many other places.

But action and advocacy go together. They also put us in the place of reconciliation, and that is a core part of our vocation and mission. For reconciliation with God through Christ, and then among humans, is the gospel.

Now is the time for every part of the church in every place to be a peacemaker. To play our part in uniting our country, and to put the most vulnerable at the centre of national life.

We cannot ignore the warnings that have been proffered about the possible profound impact that the next months may possibly have on the poorest of our society.

We must be ready for any difficulties and uncertainties, and not allow any destructive forces to create further divisions in society.

It is true that no predictions on the economy are certain. That is not project fear. It is saying that where there are risks it is the strongest, not the weakest, who must take the weight of the risk.

And in many ways, that is not currently the way we are heading.

That, Synod, brings me to the third point of the motion: to our leaders.

Jesus tells us that whoever wishes to be a leader must be a servant. Edmund Burke, in a speech in the House of Commons, spoke of the church,

“which says that their God is love, that the very vital spirit of their institution is a charity; a religion which so much hates oppression that when the God, whom we adore, appeared in human form, he did not appear in a form of greatness and majesty, but in sympathy with the lowest of the people – and thereby made it a firm and ruling principle that their welfare was the object of all government.”

His words still hold true from the 18th century.

Since the arrival of Christianity on these shores, the Christian narrative has responded to the issues and injustices of the age – seen in the stories of Elizabeth Fry and Florence Nightingale, Wilberforce and Wesley, William Booth and William Temple.

We need now to reimagine those values to respond to modern problems, a narrative captures the imagination, which gives rise to new and exciting possibilities, and is capable of bringing out the best in us and giving hope to all.

We can help to create a vision for a country that is inspired, abundant with hope and brimming with promise, so that our evenings in this country – this wonderful country – are not passed gazing nostalgically into the dying embers of meagre memories; but are imbued with a new global aspiration of a country united in strength and working out of its Christian heritage to lift the poor and vulnerable; and finding its own purpose under God.

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