



THE ARCHBISHOP  
OF CANTERBURY



It's very good to see you in such a full Minster, and to be back in this wonderful church. I'm grateful to the Archbishop and the Dean for the invitation to speak to you together – I hope you won't be disappointed. I was speaking in a church a couple of weeks back and someone came to see me afterwards and said, "I wasn't going to come to listen to you, but I listened to you and you were a lot better than I thought you would be!" Well, set your expectations...

We read Isaiah, hear Isaiah, a profound and beautiful passage from Isaiah 66 and we hear of comfort and the overflowing goodness and grace of God. We listened to the Psalm so beautifully sung, "How wonderful art thou in thy works... O praise our God ye people. And we come to the Gospel and Jesus sends out his disciples as lambs among wolves – what a contrast! And yet they go out with the song of the Lord in their hearts, with the confidence of the Lord and with the power of the Lord in their hearts. With the peace of the Lord, with the healing of the Lord and the grace of the Lord in their presence. They are to go out in innocence, knowing that the way they go, and their lack of protection gives them vulnerability, yes, but also immense strength because in stripping them of their worldly baggage, Jesus forces them to depend entirely on God.

It is when we are fragile and weak that God is most able to use us. Jesus welcomes the disciples back to the news that Satan has fallen before them. Fallen before who? Pairs of unimportant people in an occupied country beset with violence, with no understanding, little force and no communications strategy – I'm not criticising communications strategy, just in case I'm misunderstood! No, Satan has fallen not before them but before their master, who they are the icon of. The Gospel reading says again and again, Christ is all, Christ alone is our foundation for our actions.

Through Christ alone, strength and power is not found in the 'normal' places anymore. Satan does not fall before kings in battle, but before a few dozen unnamed disciples – unnamed, unimportant except to God, disciples bring the good news of the gospel.

As we continue to mourn Jean Vanier of the L'Arche Communities, we take inspiration from his understanding that those we often consider weak have much to contribute – the most to contribute – to those of us who think we are strong. It was at the heart of Jean's understanding of the person of Jesus Christ. In weakness is power, and in fragility, when helped with obedience and faith, in fragility is hope of healing and certainty of meeting with Christ. Jean understood that, beneath the many masks we wear, we thirst for friendship and belonging, to be accepted just as we are with our many different weaknesses and wounds.

In Luke's Gospel, the disciples are sent out into the land, a tense country, to speak into people's lives that they may know the hope of the Kingdom of Heaven, the hope of Isaiah, the hope of the Psalmist. Christ sends us into the world not as we would like it to be, but as it is. If we want to change that world in our age, we must be willing to engage with the realities of our country, with all its flaws and messiness.

Lambs among wolves may sound unfamiliar. Yet it was not about the social situation of the times that Jesus was speaking, nor yet was it an

oblique reference to Herod – Jesus was very direct when he talked about the rulers and leaders of Israel. It was primarily a reference to the opposition that the news of the Kingdom of God always provokes, as well as the news of the salvation from Christ. It provokes opposition to this very day. We too are lambs among wolves – perhaps slightly sharp-toothed lambs, occasionally – we are going to meet wolves if we challenge sin, evil structures, and are faithful in proclaiming the claims of Christ. His authority over all that diminishes human beings.

A couple of weeks ago a very senior politician came to see me, asking for Church of England involvement in issues around mediation and reconciliation. After an hour's discussion, with some puzzlement, I said to them "but why come to the Church? So far as I know you don't believe what we believe, what I believe".

Their reply has echoed in my mind ever since, especially as it has been independently and unwittingly reinforced by others. They said, "You're right, I am an atheist, but the Church does healing; and we need healing in this country".

We may well be tempted to say "physician, 'heal yourself'" to ourselves when we look at ourselves! We may properly feel a sense of inadequacy, incompetency, at least I did, but then I remembered we feel those things only when we leave God out of the equation, when we leave the power of the Spirit out of the equation. But the historic role of the Church of England is to work for all, in that slightly tired cliché, for all of any faith and none. When people ask us – 'Will you work for the common good? Will you help us within the long process of healing?' We are not only called, we are commissioned to act.

The crisis we know we face, the crisis of which I am speaking, is not the decision to leave the European Union, this is not about Brexit – that is a political decision on which I am not commenting at all, genuinely. Nor am I referring implicitly or obliquely, indirectly, in code, in any other way, to any person or any party. But I am speaking of divisions such as we have not seen in peace time for so many years, on so great a scale. A recent article in The Economist pointed out that whilst just under two-thirds of us feels attachment to a political party, 87% of us identify as Remain or Leaver.

These opinions are not worn casually or lightly, they're held strongly, not moderately, with a passion that arises from facing what feels to some like the injustice of a vote ignored; or to others perhaps bewilderment at the direction a country that now feels alien. These issues are rooted deeper, beyond Brexit, in a wider sense of malaise – in concerns about social care, in anger at inequality and injustice, the climate crisis; and in so much more that we could list and list, issues that impact on our humanity and human dignity and our values as a country. This is a crisis of the spirit of the nation. We appear to be stuck in our divisions, in Parliament, in the country as a whole. The passion of different positions is good, to express it is the privilege of democracy, a hard won, wonderful privilege that we enjoy, but the hatred we have seen is not good, especially directed at minorities, other faiths, at a couple of women who love each other on a bus, at a bus driver who looks Muslim, and wasn't, at people walking in the streets, at synagogues, at foreigners and people who even 'look like foreigners'. From such hatreds we have seen a result of ever

deeper wounds.

A great crisis of the spirit, of national morale, of objectives of ambition, of aspiration, and of capacity to be reconciled and move forward, challenges us in the Church of England to justify our privileges by our self-giving actions as lambs among wolves, not the wolves of people, but the wolves of iniquity and injustice, the structures, not parties, not particular politicians, but actions in service to our whole country. We are called to answer the question “but what will you, who have such a privileged place in our nation, what will the Church of England do?”

To be healers needs us to recognise the depth of the wounds in our society. It requires us to listen to pain, share in it, to be vulnerable, as Jesus’ disciples. It requires action-in-love, not mere words. We have to go like the disciples, as Jesus commanded them, discarding baggage, to journey, to proclaim, to take risks. It requires us to see that our enemies are never people but are the forces and structures that divide us and damage our society. It requires us to recognise that we must work in widespread partnerships across faith groups and non-faith groups, with politicians and others, for we cannot act alone – we are the Church for the whole country. There is a wonderful generosity in Luke’s account, particularly in verse 5, a willingness to share peace and pursue it, with all who themselves seek the same, and who work with us.

As the disciples travelled, they did Jesus’ work, as must we. They were not special, nor are we, for we are part of our wounded society.

Pope Francis has said that a ‘wounded Church is able to understand and be moved by the wounds of today’s world, to make them its own, suffer them, accompany them and move to heal them. A wounded Church does not put itself at the centre, does not think it is perfect, does not seek to cover up and dissimulate its evil, but places there the only one who can heal the wounds ... He has a name: Jesus Christ’. End of quote.

We do not have the luxury of being pietistic, looking inwards, concerned only with our own needs and unwilling to discard those weights that hold us back. We must be focused – unburdened – on the proclamation of the kingdom of God, whether we are listened to or not. And we mustn’t be concerned – we must not be concerned – with our individual successes, whether of groups, parts of the church or individuals, as Jesus tells the pairs of disciples, but He says rejoice that we are playing a part in building the kingdom of Heaven.

Paul, in a letter that is chiefly occupied by arguments within the church, still calls for us to be outward looking.

He warns us that if we sow to the flesh, to our own needs and wants, to our own desires – for power, for prestige, for possession – we will reap what we sow. If we retreat from the world we betray our calling and our Lord. Paul reminds us; ‘Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.’

He says in verse 10 that the result is that we should “work for the good of all” and in doing so live as a people of hope; hope of salvation, hope of a better future, hope in Christ who has conquered death and sin themselves. We must go out and proclaim the kingdom in our words and



actions, so people look at us and say 'this is what Jesus is like' – not just as individuals, but as a Church.

To be witnesses to this kingdom, we must be those whose own spiritual lives, in this Synod, in the House of Bishops, amongst each and every Christian, demonstrate that God in Christ makes sense of whole problematic algebra of life in this world, including this current crisis.

Even when our politics is beset by division, by a paradoxically dynamic stagnation, God's kingdom is among us. Faithful discipleship challenges us to go out into the world as it is, in anticipation of the kingdom but rooted in our reality.

The question for us this July is do we hold to our institutional preconceptions, our own objectives and desires, or do we obey the call of the Spirit, humbly proclaim the Good News, and offer our weakness to God to reveal His strength and His glory for the healing of our nation? Do we let our words be matched by action, with others, in love and humility. This is a moment of calling, a time for renewed vocation, to which we contribute, to which we've always contributed by the grace of God, a moment which offers us both the challenge and the opportunity to live generously in the Spirit of God who sings the song of Isaiah. We may be wounded healers in a wounded country but we bring the hope of our healing and our country's healing, we bring the message of reconciliation. Amen.



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