

Read the transcript of the Archbishop of Canterbury's tribute to the Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu, at General Synod on 13 February 2020:

It is only right that the final words from me today in considering saying farewell and thank you to people is for Archbishop John Mugabe Sentamu.

Sadly, he is not with us in person nor could we manage to get him to appear on a big screen electronically all the way from Fiji (or wherever he is at this moment). He has gone to visit parts of the world which are suffering the effects of climate change right now, he has gone typically to respond to an invite for him to go and preach and be alongside those who are suffering.

So, I am talking about him without him being here. He won't like it but then I am reminded of the words of the prophet Ezekiel "We are a rebellious house" (Words remember which were the title of a report written about us by a partner in mission report to the Church of England which Sentamu himself quoted in his 2018 presidential address).

Of course speaking about Sentamu when he is not here is both dangerous and liberating for it does mean that I cannot see him as I embarrass it him and it does mean that we can all show our gratitude thanks and love for him without him being able to stop us.

From 2005 he has been Archbishop of York and I simply do not have time to recount the so very many ways in which he has had an impact on the life of this church. He has shown his love for us by both making us laugh and annoying us, by encouraging us and challenging us and always he has done all he has done because of his love of Jesus Christ. He is a disciple who daily has to turn again and follow Him.

Of course, his time in General Synod did not start when he became Archbishop nor when he became Bishop of Birmingham. He first appeared in this chamber in 1985. His legal mind and his passion for the gospel show through in all he has done and said. We know that his Ugandan experience was as a judge, as imprisoned, beaten, persecuted, as fleeing for his life, and as an exile. Which other recent Archbishop has so shared in the ecumenism of suffering? Which other can thus speak with such authority? Which other has purchased that authority with bruises and blood?

We all know of his interests and the priorities he sets for himself and for other people. He is always keen to listen to people and specially to spend time with those beyond the walls of the church. We bishops were privileged to hear him reflect on his pilgrimage around the diocese of York at one of our meetings. The mission he did walking all over the diocese of York and everywhere sharing the gospel and saying the Lord's Prayer was truly remarkable and has had such a profound impact. I cannot find another ABY who did this since before the Norman Conquest. He is an Archbishop in the mould of the Saxon saints. His leadership of the bishops in the northern province in recent years has stirred us all into thinking again about our priority to mission. His leadership like all good prophetic leadership leaves many feeling uncomfortable and asking questions. We need more.

Of course, the whole country has been helped by his focus on the dignity and worth of all people and his work on the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry has been very significant. He has said that he himself was stopped at least eight times by the police and that he is the only bishop to have been stopped by the police in that way, which I suspect is still true. During this series of sessions, we have spoken of Windrush, we have spoken of racism, we have recognised our failures. With the loss of Sentamu, we lose a visible reminder of what we need to do. We become as Bishops more monochrome. We risk being complacent. We look less like our country. To honour his memory, his life long, bitter, cruel and wicked experience of institutional racism which has existed and does exist within the C of E, we must be dedicated to action not just words.

He is passionate about many things, his commitment to young people and to education is clear, his concern for the poor and the marginalised and his strong sense of justice and the need to speak out on many occasions is evident in all he does and says.

We have gained so much from him in so many ways. We will miss him, and I will miss him personally. I am so grateful to him and to Margaret for their friendship and for their support and work with me since I became Archbishop.

Most of you will know that he was made Yorkshire Man of the Year and on that occasion as I suspect on many others pointed out that it was only right he became Yorkshire Man of the Year after all he is John Mugabe Sentamu and Mugabe is e – ba – gum backwards.

There are still several months to go before he retires and there will be a great big party in York in June at which love will be poured out and many people will rightly say many things to him and about him.

He does not want anything said about him. He was insistent that I should not say anything today. He will be very cross with me for saying what I have said so please don't tell him! But my view is that you and I want to say thank you Sentamu, God bless you Sentamu and the Church of England will miss you Sentamu and the wider country will miss you Sentamu. It has not always been an easy time that you have given us but that is because we did not deserve to be given an easy time. We are a rebellious people as the prophet Ezekiel says over and over again and there is a real prophetic element to all that Sentamu has done and said. Your prophetic action springs from the reality of suffering, which to our shame we have often inflicted. Now we can do no better than humbly thank you and seek to do better.

We are a rebellious house and I am being a rebel by speaking out now to say to Sentamu all those many thousands of miles away – thank you and thank you for being obedient to your call and to the voice of the Lord calling you to speak out and to speak up.

Thank you for being you. Thank you to you and to Margaret for your example of love and service, dedication and sacrifice in so very many ways. We hope and pray that you have a good time in the next phase of your life and ministry – it won't be retirement as anyone else has known it of that we can be sure. We can also be sure we will continue to hear his voice, prophetically speaking out as he knows he is called to do.

So please join with me in saying thank you to the Archbishop of York John Mugabe Sentamu, he is physically far away so we will have to make a
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lot of noise but as he is not here let us not be inhibited in showing our love and thanks for him and Margaret our love and affection for their witness and his words and presence among us. And let us try to show not only in our appreciation but also in our actions, that we will let his prophetic ministry bear its full fruit in our church.

6 min read

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