

Read the third of Archbishop Justin's Holy Week lectures: The Challenge of Witness. It was delivered at Canterbury Cathedral on 1 April 2015.

Warning: I'm going to talk about evangelism. That's the 'e' word. Anyone who wishes to leave now may do so. I will remember...[laughter]. When I was working in London, a long time ago, 25 years ago, at a big London church which every year had a sort of mission week where you invited your friends along, by some strange and unforeseeable coincidence, I always found that I had to be on the other side of the world looking at an oil company that week. And by some strange and unforeseeable coincidence, so did an awful lot of other people [laughter]. And it's only recently, the last few years, that I've begun to look aright at this, or perhaps less wrongly; you will decide at the end of this evening whether I'm looking at it rightly.

Over the last two evenings we've focused some of our thinking on the issues around identity. In speaking and thinking of prayer, I suggested that we find our root identity, both individually and collectively, as the church in our engagement with God in Christ. In other words, our true identity is the identity we have before Christ. And that becomes more and more the reality and the source of all the other forms of identity with which we live. As we pray, that's how we find it. Or, to quote a 19th century Scottish minister – I won't do the accent, but imagine a strong Highlands accent: "We are what we are on our knees before God and nothing more." Just to put us in our place.

Last night, in speaking of reconciliation, I was seeking to suggest that we have a responsibility as guardians and stewards, not only of our own identities, something that our modern world hardly needs persuading of, but also of the identity of others. The nature of destructive conflict, from the level of the household or family through to the level of international armed struggle, is the twisting, tearing and shattering of the identity of other people, especially the weakest and most marginalised and vulnerable.

If true identity is in Christ, then the greatest act of reconciliation that we could possibly find is to enable people to find that true identity. And in finding it, to flourish as human beings in the freedom and love to which we are all called by the death of Jesus on the cross. To put it another way, rather better, in someone else's words, from 2 Corinthians 5:14: "The love of Christ urges us on." We are compelled by the love of Christ, who is the root and core and foundation of our own identity, to enable others to find their identity in him. We are to be those who draw others to meet him.

A week tomorrow is the 70th anniversary of the execution of Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was 39-years-old when he died. Most of you will know about him. He was born in a middle class family, academic, and rapidly demonstrated himself to be an extraordinary and exceptional scholar and theologian. A wonderful musician and superb poet in addition, he seemed destined for academic life and huge distinction. He was a patriotic German, and saw in the rise of national socialism, when it first began, a renewal of German spirit, but was also one of the earliest to see its immense dangers and the perversion of everything that is human that was at the heart of the Nazi regime. As the war went on he became drawn more and more closely into the Prussian aristocratic resistance against Hitler, and was on the fringes of the von Stauffenberg plot of 1944, in which Hitler very narrowly evaded death. As a result he was arrested, held at Tegel Prison in Berlin, where he wrote his last collection of works, which we now call *Letters and Papers from Prison*. On April 9th 1945, having by then been transferred to a concentration camp, he was hanged. The only account by a witness of his death has been given by the prison doctor, who wrote that, after the sentence had been read out to Bonhoeffer and those to be hanged with him, he saw Pastor Bonhoeffer, before taking off his prison garb, kneeling on the floor praying fervently to his God. The doctor wrote: "I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed. So devout and so certain that God heard his prayer, at the place of execution he again said a short prayer, and then climbed the steps of the gallows, brave and composed. In the almost 50 years that I worked as a doctor I have hardly ever seen a man to have died so entirely submissive to the will of God." And the day before, Bonhoeffer said: "This is the end for me, the beginning of life."

He has been called a martyr, and rightly so. For 'martyr' is same Greek word as 'witness'. He paid the ultimate price for his faithful witness. And one of his most memorable sentences (please excuse the gender-specific language): "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

Witness is at the heart of authentic identity. If we are truly anything at all, it will be evident what we are to those who listen to us and see us and accompany us and walk with us, who love us or hate us – all those with whom we come into contact. One of the most uncomfortable features of coming into this particular role, office (I get into trouble when I call it a job, people write me rude letters – they write me rude letters anyway, actually, so I'm not sure why I bother) [laughter]. But one of the features of being this thing that is uncomfortable is that I hear what people thought of me 20 years ago, 25 years ago, particularly when I was in the oil industry. Nobody's ever yet said that they saw me as a future Archbishop of Canterbury [laughter]. They said a lot of other things, which we'll skip over that wouldn't be appropriate in a church. But to go to the other extreme, saints like Bonhoeffer, or even Thomas of Canterbury, a complicated man, are those who are most truly witnesses to the light and life of God within them. There will always be the same normal mix of emotions and conflicting desires that are true of all of us. In the Catholic Church, canonisation – making someone a saint – is not for being exceptionally good but for what they call 'heroic virtue': the conquest of those things that draw us away from witnessing to the light of Christ. Therefore witness is a sign of authentic discipleship.

This week, above all weeks, we recognise that we are witnesses to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is the earth-shattering, life-changing, cosmos-overturning news that should be on the lips of every Christian. We witness because of the identity that Christ is shaping in us. We witness to what it is that our life is based on, however much we feel fragile, surprised or even compelled. We'll hear about Simon of Cyrene on Friday, someone whose encounter with Jesus was fleeting and painful. He was simply passing by when soldiers, fed up with Jesus's slow progress towards the place of execution, laid the cross that Jesus himself was meant to carry on Simon's back and told him to carry it as far as Golgotha. He's taken up in an event of which he had no prior knowledge, helping someone with whom he had no prior relationship to get killed quicker. He becomes a participant.

That action of Simon is true of many of us. We come across Jesus in all kinds of strange ways. But from the moment we encounter him and take up his cross, we become witnesses. It's an inexplicable thing. I came across the reality of Christian faith living in a small house in a place called Kiburu, not far from Karatina, in Kenya, when I was 18. And I shared that house with a Christian friend. There were two books in the house. One was a copy of the Bible and the other was Bagehot on the British constitution. Why, in central Kenya, I have no idea but there it was. So obviously I read Bagehot, twice [laughter]. If you want to know anything about the 19th-century British constitution, I'm your man [laughter]. It's one of those things I can't forget. Then eventually I gave up and started reading the Bible. So I did what you do with books, I started at the beginning. At first it was quite fun, and then we hit Leviticus [laughter]. But to cut a long story short, those seven months in very rough conditions in Kiburu began the process by which God called me to face him. I tried to get away and did quite well in my first year at university, and then got caught up with. And so I became a witness, in October 1975. And I remember having prayed a prayer of commitment to Christ late one evening in October, I walked out of the person's room where I'd been, and was walking back to where I was staying and I bumped into a friend. And we chatted for a couple of minutes; I'd said to the person who I'd been talking to, please don't tell anyone I've become a Christian, I don't want them to know, and he said, 'fine'. Anyhow, the chap I bumped into – who wasn't then and still is not a Christian, he says himself, he has not Christian faith – after two minutes he said to me: "Have you just become a Christian?" We'd been talking about rowing or something like that, I said: "Er, yes. Don't tell anyone, will you?"

I was not a very committed witness. Nor was Simon. We don't have to be skilled, trained, practised, to be witnesses. We just are witnesses if we know Jesus Christ. We are witnesses from the moment we take up the cross of Christ. And that's why I've called this lecture 'The Challenge of Witness'. We are witnesses accidentally or deliberately, but either way we are witnesses at all times and all events. There is no such thing as a moment when we are not bearing witness to Christ; it may simply be a negative witness. The abuse scandals affecting many churches are a witness. And it's no use saying that many institutions other than the Church of England were as bad or even worse: they are not called to be witnesses to Jesus Christ. The same applies to our arguments and our divisions. Some years ago *The Sunday Times* headlined a leading article: "How these Christians hate one another." That was witness, just not the kind we really want. The challenge of witness is not just to be good witnesses, because so long as we are human we will never always be good witnesses, we'll fail, sin, do the wrong thing; but the challenge is to be witness to a genuine core identity within ourselves, within our churches, that is rooted in Jesus.

So our encounter with Christ in prayer, our reconciliation with God through Christ, and our spreading of reconciliation urges us on to be witnesses. So what is it that we witness to? How do we witness? Well, we see plenty of that in Holy Week. Witnesses to the crucifixion came in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Some were hostile, priests and rulers mocked. Many were indifferent, passers-by – as prophesied in the Lamentations of Jeremiah. The soldiers threw dice to try and pass the time on yet another boring day. They witnessed clearly to the absolute humanity of Jesus, by their total lack of interest. But Mary and her friends, the Beloved Disciple, the other disciples, watching at a distance, turned into witnesses of a death but also a resurrection, and turned from fear and horror to confidence and love. Mary Magdalene became the witness to the apostles, the one who announced the resurrection: “I have seen the Lord.” What we witness to is conditioned by what we have seen and experienced. They saw the most about the reality of Jesus so there their witness was different, those women. This is why for witness to be effective it must be something we know – which is why it links in to prayer and reconciliation. It has to come out of that encounter.

Some years ago I was involved in the baptism of a man who came from a country in the Middle East. He was a doctor, and lived then in a country where Christians were persecuted. Although he was born a Muslim, he actually paid almost no attention to faith, like many other people in his country. One evening he was called out very late to visit a family whose mother was seriously ill, in the last stages of cancer. It was in a Christian quarter of the town. She was in pain and he wanted to give pain relief and was trying to find a vein in the arm and couldn't do so. The family, on the other side of the room, began to pray. He told me he heard them in the background praying to Jesus. And as they prayed he saw a vein appear on her arm and was able to use it to relieve her pain. She died a few days later. That experience, of seeing that hand of God at work in an unimportant woman in a poor area of the town, changed his life. He began to seek this Christ of whom they spoke, or to whom they prayed. And like Simon of Cyrene, having taken up the cross, more or less by accident and circumstance, he became a Christian. He came to me, where I was working at the time, seeking baptism. His position would be so dangerous in his home country that we were reluctant to baptise him until we were absolutely certain that he knew exactly what he was taking on. And so, in the end, just before he went home, we baptised him very early one morning when there was no one around. He went back to his own country and I've heard nothing of him since. But he went back, as he had come to me, witnessing to the love and presence of Christ through a casual encounter. It sounds, in one sense, dramatic. But I am sure that those of you who are medical could find a dozen good reasons why the vein did appear at that moment. That's not the point. The point is that, for him, it was a moment in which God grabbed his attention, in which his mind was opened to new possibilities of the presence and reality of God. The family witnessed to him, not out of strength or confidence or some scheme, but simply out of their relationship with Christ. To the extent I did, I witnessed to him by answering his questions. None of us had any formulae or tricks or manipulation, but each of us in our own way spoke of what we knew or prayed what we knew, and the Holy Spirit did the rest.

We see, all of us who are part of the church of Christ, Jesus at work around us in the church. In the faithful witness of the martyrs, the witnesses who are more prolific in these years than ever, and who follow in the footsteps of Bonhoeffer. We see it in the faithful actions of those of other people in the church; we see it in those who care; we see it in people who seem to just stick with Jesus through thick and thin to the ends of their lives. We have only to look to see Christ and thus to find those things of which we can be witnesses.

Two weeks ago, I rang the Bishop of Lahore, to speak to him about our sorrow and sympathy for the situation in which he found himself, after the bomb at Christ Church. I caught him in the middle of the funeral. Without hesitation he answered the phone, in the middle of the funeral (I believe there are some ordinands here: that is not normal practice in the Church of England [laughter]). And he said to me: "I'm taking the funeral, Archbishop. I'm so pleased to hear you. I'll hold the phone by the microphone and you can speak to the people." There were about 6,000 people. "Say something to them, encourage them, pray for them." Well, I had plenty of time, roughly half a second, to think about what I was going to say. And I spoke to them thinking, as I did, that it was their witness to me that was important. They were witnessing to me that they trusted Christ with their very lives, because several thousand of them had come to a funeral of those who just two days earlier had been blown up for being Christians. Is that not witness? It tells you something about the reality of Jesus for them.

And witness is not only what we see but what we hear. Jesus cries out, in Mark 15:34: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Witness is not about people with white shirts and dark ties smiling broadly at us and telling us that if we become Christians everything is going to work out just fine. The Bishop of London, who is unique as a bishop, started one confirmation sermon by saying: "I am told that many of you had a lot of problems before you became disciples of Jesus Christ. Well now you will have more." [laughter] It's not about what we used to call a 'sweg'. When I was first converted in traditional conservative evangelicalism, and we called it that: a sweet, wet, evangelical grin. It's not about that at all. The witness of Jesus at the pivotal moment of his crucifixion corresponds with the witness of so many people through history who feel forsaken, who feel deserted, and feel abandoned. You and I both know of such people. We know of those who are bereft and have lost those on whom they could rely. It's the most desperate of situations to be in, utterly alone, with no sense of God's presence and a crushing sense of God's loss. There are those in such a situation here tonight. Yet, you witness even in calling on God, as Jesus does.

Christian identity is something we find in Christ and develop through prayer, and it is an identity that is lived out in the reality of the world. It's the root of our identities but not the sole evidence of our identity. We're still going to be those who stay at home or go to work and have a particular personality and particular circumstances, who live with our families or households or partners, and again, behave in a different way. We'll still be those who have our interests in which our friends know us with a particular identity. But each of those identities will be rooted in Christ. And in each of those identities, that root of our true and deepest identity is the one to which we witness, which gives the DNA for the rest.

We are witnesses, like those around the cross, at the moments of deepest despair. We're witnesses when we're compelled to admit to that root identity, like Simon of Cyrene. We're witnesses when we acknowledge our lostness and yet still cry out to God in faith of some kind. We are witnesses who, above all, must witness with integrity, acknowledging our own failures and sins, but with a sincere and gentle faith. Peter, in his first Epistle, chapter 3, verse 15: "Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you. Yet do it with gentleness and reverence."

Most of all, we are witnesses together. We cannot be those who simply stand alone and witness to our own personal experience, because when we belong to Jesus we are bound into the greatest community and family on earth. We become those whose witness is interpreted in the world by the actions of the community to which we belong. Lesslie Newbigin wrote beautifully on this, and I'll quote him at some length. He says:

"I've come to feel that the primary reality of which we have to take account in seeking for a Christian impact on public life is the Christian congregation. How is it possible that the gospel should be credible, that people should come to believe that the power which has the last word in human affairs is represented by a man hanging on a cross? I am suggesting that the only answer, the only hermeneutic of the gospel, is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it. I am, of course, not denying the importance of the many activities by which we seek to challenge public life with the gospel: evangelistic campaigns, distribution of Bibles and Christian literature, conferences and even books such as this one. But I am saying that these are all secondary, and that they have power to accomplish their purpose only as they are rooted in and lead back to a believing community."

It's a wonderful quotation. We witness by existing.

The church is inevitably full of sinners, because you need to be one, or at least know you are one, to get in. That's the qualification; it's not being good: it's knowing that you aren't good. We bring with us into the church, as we find our true identity in Christ, the whole complexity and muddle and confusion of the journey which we follow in life that leads that identity to become stronger and stronger within us. And for everything else to be rooted more and more firmly in it. But it's a messy process. It takes time and confusion and patience, and the church is therefore a messy place. And we must accept that reality, and not somehow think that we can become part of a church and find something perfect, because by our very act of becoming part of the church we bring into it our own sin and messiness. The famous 19th-century Baptist pastor Spurgeon was once greeted by someone at the end of a service who said: "Mr Spurgeon, I am leaving this church and going to look for a perfect one." Spurgeon replied: "Sir, if you find it, don't join it, because you will spoil it." [laughter] They really did pastoral in those days! [laughter]

But that does not mean that we should be tolerant within ourselves of what the sports commentators call 'unforced errors'. There's enough sin to be going around in the church without us adding to it unthinkingly. This is what much of Paul is saying in his letters to the churches. It's also what Jesus is dealing with at the Last Supper in Gethsemane. Peter has to recognise his own sinfulness, and to reduce his tendency towards the unforced errors that are his greatest characteristic in the gospels, and which are so noticeably absent in the Acts of the Apostles and in his own Epistles. This is what the combination of betrayal and restoration are describing. Restored by Jesus, he finds his true identity, and it is from that that he witnesses to Cornelius and to the crowds at Pentecost. The other disciples need to recognise their own weakness, so that they are open to the work of the Spirit in them who will give them the material and the courage for witness. They will find this together as they pray between the Ascension and Pentecost for the coming of the Holy Spirit. The church as a whole will need to acquire the habit of dealing with conflict and disagreement in a way that does not compromise the love of Christ. And we need, also, to expose the falsity of that apparent dichotomy between truth and love, that says we can be loving without being truthful or that we can be truly truthful without being loving. In other words, the church collectively needs to find its identity in Jesus, and to encourage one another to go on doing that at a deeper and deeper level, if it is truly to be a church of witnesses.

The journey of Holy Week, Good Friday through to Pentecost itself, is not one that we undertake alone, but one that we undertake each year in company with one another, seeking to grow closer to Christ, to be more what he calls us to be. Someone said to me the other day: "Have you had a good Lent?" Well, yes, as it happens, I have. But I've been thinking about the question and thinking, perhaps we should be saying to the church: have you had a good Lent? Has this been a good Lent for the church? A good Lent is something we enjoy together in a party, not solitarily and selfishly. When that happens, we become effective witnesses because we demonstrate that common identity. Think of the witness found in communities like L'Arche, where Jean Vanier has pointed out the way the strong need the weak in order to become what God calls them to be. Christian community nurtures identity; identity witnesses to the world. If to be in Christ is as good as we claim, no witness is too costly to declare that truth. It is for each of us to ask how, and for each church to seek to be that witness. It is the benchmark of all our activities.

So witness is something we are, not something choose to be. Of course we can be better, less tongue-tied, less fearful, but we're always witnesses. Witness and evangelism are not survival tools for the church, delegated exclusively to professionals, to clergy or lay evangelists, while we watch admiringly or embarrassingly from the side lines. They are not about ensuring the future, but they spring from what God has done and who he is, and what we've experienced of that, and thus to which in one way or another we bear witness. They are the overflow of love and joy from the love we have found.

In these three lectures I've focused on the issue of identity, something we find with Jesus and develop as our rootedness through prayer, that leads us to reconciliation with God, which overflows into reconciliation with each other, and something to which we witness as it grows within us. I've sought to draw out some of what is happening in Holy Week, a mere fraction of it, and to touch, ever so briefly, on each of these subjects, with the aim that we, too, individually and collectively, may be renewed in our prayers, developed in our reconciliation, and witnesses to what we know of Jesus, unhesitatingly and courageously.

We are the people of God. That identity is a given to those who are in Christ. But it is to be realised visibly. And the realisation means living in relationship with God in prayer, being reconciled reconcilers, and out of joyful celebration sharing in witness, gently and in love, the good news that a true and eternal identity is offered to every human being by the only one true and eternal God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Source URL: <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/speaking-writing/speeches/archbishop-justins-3rd-holy-week-lecture-challenge-witness>