

Archbishop Justin Welby preached this sermon tonight at the service of thanksgiving for the new Anglican Province of Alexandria at All Saints' Cathedral, Cairo, Egypt.



Acts 8:26-40, Matthew 28:16-20

Thanks to Archbishop Samy, to the Diocese of Egypt, to the Dean, to Archbishop Mouneer.

Alexandria, the ancient centre of learning, is a wonderful name for the Province. The Province covers a huge area, from the waves of the Atlantic to the beaches of the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. It has a history of learning, looks south into Africa and east to the Holy Lands, north to Europe.

A thousand years ago this area preserved medicine and learning. Today Egypt has again found its historic place as a place of meeting, of refuge. It has a been so from before Jacob and Joseph, it rescued the Holy family. It is a cross roads of world trade, a cradle of urban civilisation when Europeans were still fighting with sticks and clubs, painting themselves blue.

To speak here is a gift to me and I am so grateful.

But what will this Province be? The Anglican Communion will not direct it, for we are all equal. Canterbury and the Church of England will not give orders, because that is against the whole understanding of being Anglican. Anglican Provinces are autonomous, they run themselves, there is no global authority, but they are interdependent. We are linked by love, not by law.

No Archbishop of Canterbury comes here by right, but only by invitation. No instructions come from Lambeth palace; the Archbishop of Canterbury is only first among equals. We reach agreements by consensus, and even then they are not binding on any Province.

So the decisions as to the future are those of the Province of Alexandria, growing out of the Diocese of Egypt, founded in 1839, and for many decades entirely Egyptian, an indigenous church both catholic and reformed, both catholic and Protestant, but distinct from both.

Yet although no person may give you instructions, God's word is our infallible guide. And here it speaks to all of us, in all our circumstance, wherever and however we find ourselves.

A Church attuned to the Spirit of surprise:

In human terms, Philip took the wrong road – and there he was met by the Spirit of God, who showed him why he was in the middle of the desert. And he found himself speaking to someone who was the wrong person, in human eyes. It was the wrong recipient of God's message; Luke always points us to the Gospel for the excluded. The Ethiopian was a foreigner so could not enter the temple, a eunuch so wrongly considered by the people of his time to be outside God's purpose. He was doubly outside

Luke's stories in Gospel and Acts are of refugees, the poor, those of no honour. Seen in hospitals, schools, prisons, rubbish dumps and food centres. Seen here in the past and now.

Yet in God's eyes there was nothing wrong. This was the right time, right road, right scripture, right person, right opportunity for baptism.

The Bible tells us to be where the Spirit sends us, not by human wisdom, and the Gospel reading shows us the foundation of what Philip was doing.

Christians are to be part of a Church that is told to conquer with love and peace: never, never with a sword, a bomb or a plot. Either Christians demonstrate the truth of God or they demonstrate nothing by the quality of their lives.

And I say to our dear friends from the Islamic community: how often Christians have got this wrong. Our history is one of the tragic sin of force. Let us be people of peace together.

For when people become Christians through love and peace, then the Church communicates what Jesus told them: "All that I have told you."

And we are to be a Church that is outward looking and on the move, not self-protective. (Jesus says go to all nations!) A Church that does what it can, and does not become anxious about what it cannot do. Philip speaks to one person: he was used to crowds, but God took him to one person.

And lastly we are to be a Church that is full of difference. In this Province you are to be united from the villages of Gambella, to the apartments and towns of Cairo and Egypt, to the luxurious hotels on the Mediterranean coast. We are to be one, with our differences.

So my first point is that we are to be a Church in tune with the Spirit of God. And my last point is that we are to be the Church of a faithful God, not a beautiful people.

Not all Christians – even archbishops – are beautiful. A monk yesterday at the monastery I visited said: "Every church has its Judas." Inside each of us is a part that will want to betray God. So when we come as God's people, we come with all our sin and failure, but with honesty to a God who is faithful in love.

So when we come together as God's people, we allow the Church of the Spirit of God to change us. The Church is Word and Sacraments. Holiness shared. The presence of God known. We should never leave the Church the same as when we arrived.

The more we love God and the more we love each other, with all our faults and failings, the more we find the faithfulness of God who rescues us from the depths into which we had fallen, and brings us at the end of all things to the unimaginable heights of heaven.

My dear brother in Christ, in this new Province let us be honest with one another, and, hand in hand with Christ, journey together towards His love.

5 min read

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