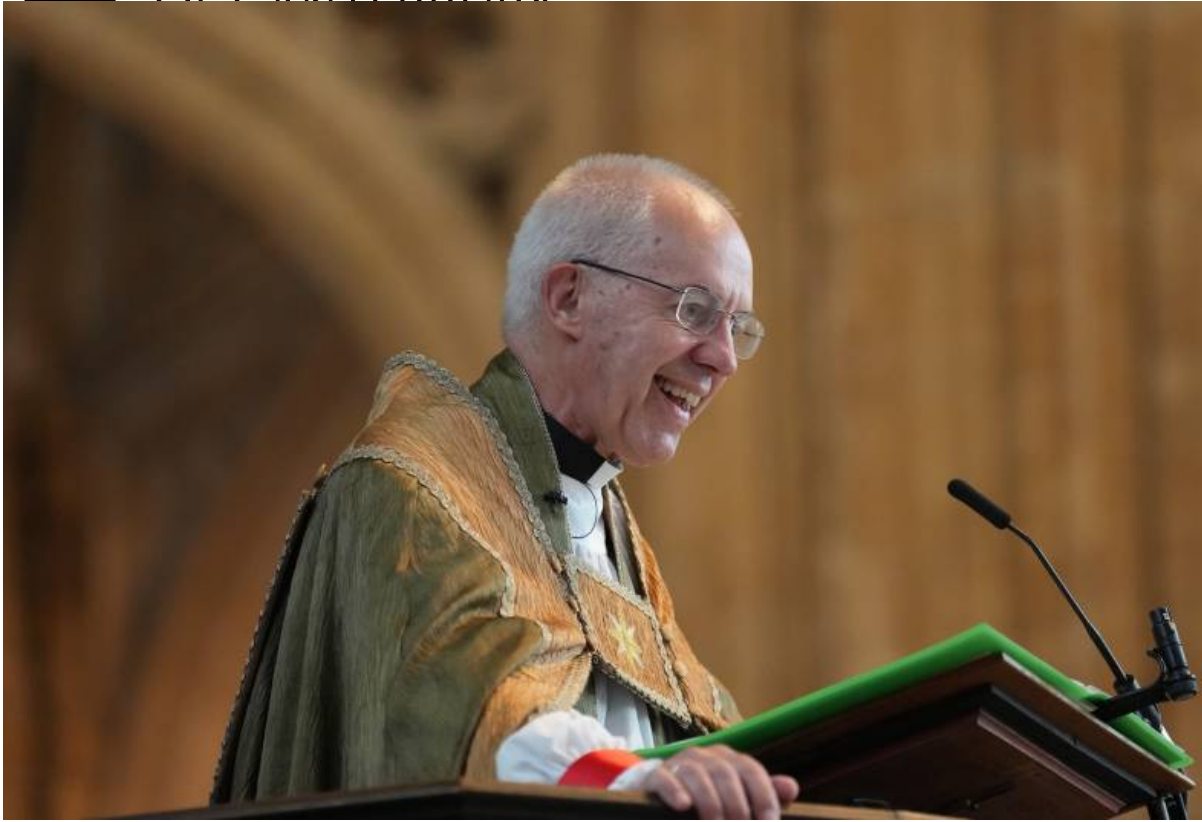




THE ARCHBISHOP
OF CANTERBURY



...e, held at Canterbury Cathedral, today.

‘Do not be afraid, little flock’.

‘Do not be afraid Abram. The word of the Lord endureth forever’

When we fear we cling to what we know. We clutch at what makes us feel in control. Be that the things we own, the possessions we have stored up for ourselves, the story we tell ourselves about who we are, what our power is, what our importance is and what is possible. We want, when we are afraid, to be comfortable with the familiar and familiar with the comfortable.

And these things - our assumptions, our possessions - become a comfort blanket which ultimately smothers us. For they forbid us to engage with each other and with Christ.

We make our worlds and our ambitions smaller because it feels safer, and they come to define and to constrain us.

So the institutions, the power, the status, positions that we hold onto out of fear – personal fear for ourselves, fear for the future of the church – end up fulfilling our fears.

Let’s be clear though about the fact that in this broken world, there are very real reasons to fear. The roar of the lions is real. And the reality is there is so much suffering. We moaned collectively when we heard of the earthquake this morning. There is so much uncertainty. There are people here who will know the uncertainty of food supplies, the precarious nature of poverty, the insecurity of life in places of conflict and flux and natural disaster. People around the world live with the reality of these fears every day. For so many, it is very real indeed.

How can God tell us ‘do not fear’?

We don’t like being told what to do. We think commands limit us.

Not God’s commands though. God’s commands set us free. They liberate us to step into a new world that he makes visible and known to us.

And so we are continually being invited to begin a journey from fear to faith. And when we slip from faith to fear, then Christ comes to us as he did to the fearful disciples in the upper room. He appears to us and says ‘do not fear’. He comes to us, he does not call us to find him. We are liberated to look outwards. To imagine a new way of relating to the world around us, as well as among us. To imagine what it means to be given the kingdom in his world.

As Jesus said, the Kingdom of God is near us, the Kingdom of God is within us. It is found, as we heard so movingly yesterday, in a boy hugging a t shirt under his pillow, signed by a bishop who made him remember that he had a father in God and an eternal father.

Some years ago in 2016 it was found, to my surprise, by me, when a major daily newspaper in this country discovered and published the fact that

the man I thought was my father was not my father. Someone else was. I am told it was the only point at the head legal advisor of the Church of England at that time was seen to run. The Secretary General had said to him 'the Archbishop's just rung up to say he's illegitimate and he said 'that's no problem we changed the canon that said you could not be a bishop if you were illegitimate some years ago. At least I'm sure we changed the canon. Excuse me, I'm going to check!' It had been changed in 1952, but he said to me later on that, as he ran down the corridor, he thought 'if we haven't changed it he's not a bishop. And if he's not a bishop the priests he ordained aren't priests. And if they aren't priests then the people they've married aren't married.'

But I found within me, to my surprise, an unbreakable certainty that the God who knew me knows my true identity at the deepest level, at a far deeper level than just a DNA test. It was found in a story I will tell you about Cardinal van Thuan, the former Archbishop of Saigon, held for nine years in solitary and a further four year in prison. He was eventually let out, but kept in an area far from his home. He was out one day and near the forest. Three people came out of the forest and, meeting him, asked if he was a pastor. He said yes, and they requested he come three days' journey to baptise their village. They were a mountainous people. He went, and found a village that had converted to Christ by listening to a Pentecostal radio station. So he baptised them, some thousands, as Christians, certainly, Catholic Christians he said, with a smile. But the Kingdom breaks down our denominational barriers and overrules our frontiers and our theological border guards.

The Kingdom is seen in how we set out as the revolutionary movement that is God's church in Christ, for it leads us from tightly clutching, to freely receiving the grace of God, from zero-sum scarcity to abundance, hospitality and generosity – because God dares us to join a whole new way of being, and the Holy Spirit gives us the power to take up the dare.

What we gain is not what the world tells us we should want. What the world values is not what God values. So following God may not get us wealth or power. But it does guide us to riches beyond treasure - treasure in heaven, and a world that looks just a bit more like the Kingdom.

A world where people do not suffer because of where they were born, where the scandal of poverty and huge inequality does not exist, where people are not persecuted for their faith, gender, sexuality. Where we do not allow our brothers and sisters to be told that they matter by the wealthy and then to be ignored materially.

Because in this command, 'do not fear', our eyes are opened to God's promise. We are called again to conversion to life, a conversion that daily says to us that we should pray to God: 'I trust you. To hear my prayers, my protests, my praises, my laments, to hear my heart crying out to you in anger' that says, whatever happens I trust that in some wonderful and mysterious way you feed me for eternity, with a wafer and wine over which a prayer has been said. That in the host I see a crucified God.

This conversion expands our world.

We have met, over the past weeks and days, with people from all the corners of the globe, from contexts and experiences that are totally alien to us. And in these meetings we have found the antidote to fear. We find in John: perfect love casts out fear.

God's promises will be fulfilled. He will draw abundance out of barrenness and riches out of our poverty. That is his promise to us. And that releases us to be radical, bold, courageous, revolutionary *today*.

To have the courage to have faith in God. To be brave enough to defy the world, even to defy other Christians, by loving one another without ceasing.

To have the courage shown by bishops and spouses here, clergy and laity around the Anglican Communion who make the Good News known to those who live in fear. Who go to church in greater numbers the week after a suicide bomb attack has killed 160 of them. Who fly with the Missionary Aviation Fellowship to a remote part of Papua New Guinea, and then work for a week across mountains to do confirmations. Who protest against civil rights abuses, against gerrymandering of votes, against shooting unarmed people of colour in a routine traffic stop.

As we grow in love, our fear shrinks and the Kingdom of God finds space, finds its rule in our hearts and in our lives as God's people.

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ – no mere greeting, that – dear sisters and brothers in Christ, who to each other and to me have become dearer and dearer over the last ten days. As you, as I, go home:, do not fear, take heart, take courage – because it is the Father's good pleasure to give you His kingdom!

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