



Come Holy Spirit, and set our hearts on fire with the flame of your love. Amen.

First of all, may I say thank you to His Grace, the Archbishop, for inviting me to preach today, for lending me his staff and for innumerable acts of kindness and welcome, it's wonderful.

I wish I was not here. For the only reason I am here for this very short period is because of the situation that you face. And possibly, most importantly of what I'm going to say, I want to start with a thank you both to those who are here and those online. Thank you for your witness and your example. For your witness to Christians around the world of faith, steadfastness and courage. For your witness of speaking openly and writing openly about what you're going through and how you feel.

On Wednesday the Archbishop gave a press conference following the attack on the Al-Ahli Hospital. And it was the most extraordinary press conference, unprecedented in many ways. It had all the Heads of the Churches sitting in a row together facing the press, shoulder to shoulder with the Archbishop, as he answered questions.

What a wonderful testimony that is to the unity of the Churches in this the Holy Land. What a wonderful testimony to the change that has come about over the last many years, as people have grown closer together and the Churches, for the first time in centuries, have begun to show that they are one in their love for one another.

Also, at a time like this, I want to say not only thanks, but how sorry, how grieved I am. We came first of all, my colleagues and I, to condole, to be here and to listen. For example, yesterday morning in two hospitals, we listened and listened and listened. Listened to the agonising frustration of doctors in an oncological unit unable to receive the children who need chemotherapy because they are stuck in Gaza. Without a safe corridor, without a ceasefire in which they can get safely to the place where they need to receive their treatment, or their radiotherapy.

We went round a school without many people there because yesterday, obviously, there were fewer. But who'd just been teaching online for the last couple of weeks. A school where 30% of the children have disabilities of one form or another, 70% do not. They learn in that school what it is to be equal before God. And our grief and sorrow in the UK and around the world at the fact that you are prevented from exercising the extraordinary ministry, that through Archbishop after Archbishop, has been the privilege and the example of the Church in this land.

That does bring us to the text of the Gospel that we heard. It is of course a trap. It's a political trick. The trap which is given to Jesus is this: if he said to his questioners, to the Pharisees, 'you need to pay taxes to the emperor', he's showing allegiance to Caesar, the occupying force and he is showing idolatry to the head on the coin. If he says don't pay taxes, he gets into trouble as a rebel and as a rabble rouser. Jesus refuses the false binary of being isolated and cut off and withdrawing from the world around, or being for rebellion as a way in. He refuses the false oversimplification of the situation.

That is, incidentally, a very good lesson for us by itself. The lives of Jesus's followers are to be a messy involvement in the midst of the world as it is: living in the world, blessing all people, serving all, but doing it in the name of Christ, who is God over all. And therefore not afraid to stand up against injustice and wrong and tyranny.

The same traps exist for us today. The Bible always speaks to us today as powerfully as in every past generation. When we lose touch with the Scriptures, we lose touch with the way that God so often speaks to us.

We cannot treat anyone on their own terms, however good or bad they may seem, for God alone sees into the heart.

For Jesus to withdraw from the world and hide away from the choices that are put before him would betray his mission and his calling to offer salvation to the world through Cross and Resurrection: a mission completed and carried out not five kilometres from here.

And you are the people who live in this place. When I come here, every time, I have a profound sense of privilege at being allowed to be here, a profound sense of the privilege of being made welcome, as I have done this week.

Hatred and taking sides in an oversimplified 'these ones are entirely and unconditionally right and those ones are entirely and unconditionally wrong', is to get led down the wrong path. It puts our lives into the hands of leaders of one cause or another, whichever country we're in in the world.

But the first call of Christ, which he says in his answer, his careful answer, is that our lives are to be trusted to the service of Christ. As the Psalmist says in Psalm 146, do not put your trust in Princes, in mortals in whom there is no help. Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God.

Happy is also translated into the Septuagint, into the Greek version of the Old Testament, as 'blessed'. It's a Beatitude. Blessed are those whose hope is in the Lord their God. And what I see here is at the end of everything, the Christians here, because of centuries of oppression and pressure, have put their hope in the Lord their God

Blessed is better than happy. I think happy is a pretty ineffective kind of word. I'm happy when I have a nice piece of cake, I'm happy when the dog comes when I call it. Blessed is about living in a life that is full of the action of God engaging with us. It is about the way in which we're lifted up.

Human causes always fail at some point. Human ideas and ideologies fade with the passing of time but God's word lasts forever.

This is why we must not simplify. In all conflicts such as the terrible, disastrous conflict in which this land is embroiled, and in which Christians are caught between the pressures of greater human powers.

In this land it is essential that we recognise the huge complexity and causes of the conflict, for in simplification there lies only condemnation and ending up trusting in Princes.

I am constantly aware how hard it is for you. For all those who are watching in the West Bank. For all those who are listening. I'm constantly aware of the intense pressure on you, the constant indignities and injustices. The way that you are shut down at this moment. The number of those in the West Bank, quite apart from Gaza, who have been shot and killed in the last two weeks. I believe the number I heard yesterday was 74, somewhere around that number, the highest number there has been for very many years in a two week period.

How do you hold on to a sense of the love of God? If your son, your brother, your daughter, your mother has just been shot by someone who had no right to be there in the first place by international law. How do you do that?

It would be patronising for someone who lives in the immense security and safety of the UK to come and stand among you and tell you what to do.

But I know after 20 years of working in places of appalling conflict and cruelty and savagery, such as you are experiencing and experienced from the 7th and on the 7th October, I know that putting your trust in God does not make things easy. But somehow, it changes the foundation on which you stand and prevents the corrosion and the danger of hatred from gaining a foothold in your lives, hearts and communities.

How extraordinary was yesterday? To hear the doctors doing everything they could to treat people online. To see how disabled children with autism were being reached out to online. That is courage. That is not despairing. That is saying just because we can't do everything it doesn't mean we do nothing at all.

It is always difficult to trust God and let our own wisdom and ideas arise out of the love of God, and the knowledge of His faithfulness. If it was easy, the Psalmist would not constantly be reminding us of it. They would not say the Lord is my shepherd, the Lord is my shepherd, not anyone else. Not the King, the Lord is my shepherd.

There are many great causes in our world today for which we are called to give even our own lives.

They are causes of justice, of human dignity, of mercy and righteousness, they are causes of struggling against the principalities and powers of this world.

A lasting memory of a trip I made last December to Kiev was the 17-hour train journey between Warsaw and Kiev. We started at the station in Kiev, an enormous Stalinist-era station into which you could fit this cathedral about five times.

We boarded a midnight train and saw, as if from some image of an old black and white film, soldiers in full battle dress hugging their families and

saying goodbye to them, as they got on the train to go to the front. They are fighting for their existence and liberty.

There are causes in which we have to struggle. But when the cause becomes God, we become idolators. The cause must be in the service of God, it must not be God. And I have seen that again and been inspired with it again. I've been coming to this holy land for over 40 years, I first came in fact 44 years ago.

I've been inspired again, as always, by the utter simplicity of the worship of the Christians here who turn to God first and let God meet with them, and who fills our empty hearts and hands and gives us courage.

And the other danger, the other temptation which these Pharisees put before Jesus, is to withdraw. It's not to make Caesar God. It is to withdraw from the world. To keep away from the world, its compromises and mess and difficult decisions. To keep our heads down and seek to pray and worship in a way that does not attract attention. It's been the fault of many churches throughout history.

It says be religious, be separate. It is a powerful temptation and has a disguise of holiness, because it is so close to real holiness and so far. We are to withdraw and pray because that is what Jesus does. We are to listen to the call of the Kingdom of God in the songs of heaven and dance to their tune, not to the ones of this world. We are to be holy, different and distinct because we love one another even when we disagree.

We are to learn to disagree well, and that was so evident in the marvellous sight of the Christian leaders with the Archbishop on Wednesday. They still disagreed. They aren't in communion with each other, but they are shoulder to shoulder in love.

But we are not to put a wall around us and try to shut out all that happens in the world; on the contrary. Our lives and words must address injustice, challenge the powerful, and that is hard. But it is the pattern of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. It is hard even in times of peace, let alone in times of war.

100,000 people marched for Palestine on the streets yesterday in London. But at the same time we recognise that there were 13 times more anti-Jewish attacks in the UK last week than three weeks ago. To condemn the attacks is not to say Israel is always right. It is to observe and defend the weak and vulnerable.

To call for ceasefire as the Christian leaders are doing, to call for humanitarian corridors so children needing chemo can get out and get somewhere where their cancer treatment can be continued, is not to say that Hamas is right. It is to say that there is justice and mercy in the heart of God and we are to speak to that. We defend the weak and vulnerable.

And we see two attitudes in our world today. If you go back to the 19th century, the International Committee of the Red Cross was founded. It was founded after a battle in Northern Italy called the Battle of Solferino, where a Swiss man saw the terrible suffering of the wounded on both

sides.

The ICRC seek to do good in the mess and complexity of the world. They seem to be there where it's horrible to be. They are in Gaza, they are in all sorts of places and wars and troubles. They're in the Ukraine. They are seeking to do what is right.

Christians are also called to be in the middle of the mess simply because God in Christ is in the middle of the mess. And this is what I witness in the Church of the land which we call holy because of the Holy One. I witness the church being the church with enormous courage, of love, mercy and forgiveness. Of being fully human and rightly angry when injustice is seen before us, when young men in the Occupied Territories get shot while they're in their fields, when women and children are killed in a church compound or hospital compound. And rightly, we say that is wrong.

It is wrong to deprive non-combatants of medical treatment. It is also of course wrong to kill babies, whichever side you're on. It is wrong.

But the church here is being the church. It is being a church of love, mercy and forgiveness. It refuses hate, but it refuses to withdraw from the world. It seeks to be a blessing to all in the name of Christ, loving amidst chaos, cruelty and darkness, anxious and yet persevering, angry and yet seeking reconciliation, confused and yet ploughing steadfastly onwards, divided and yet loving one another.

This is the church being the church. And the world around can do no more than wonder at the beauty of such a church and give thanks to God, while never forgetting the tortures and the terrors of this land, especially for those who call on the name of Christ.

Amen.

12 min read

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