



Neil Turner

Read the Archbishop of Canterbury's sermon at the the Cathedral of St Luke in Panama City.

Readings: Ezekiel 36:24-28; Psalm 16:5-11; Mark 10:35-45

In England, football (the proper football, with the round ball!) is sometimes defined as 30,000 people in the stands in desperate need of exercise, watching 22 people on the pitch in desperate need of a rest.

Sometimes I think that politics is much the same. The readings today speak of three of the great political problems. By political I don't mean only national or international politics, but I also mean the politics of communities, churches and small groups. And the three great problems are dealing with oneself, living in our society and trying to change the world around us.

Jesus finds two of his disciples engaging in wanting a position in the cabinet. In other words, these two disciples come up and say 'we want the top jobs'. What we ask often reveals who we are. Do you know the story of Aladdin and the magic lamp? The point of the story is not the magic lamp, but the three wishes. It is about what is in the heart of Aladdin. And like all good parables, it is not clear what is going to happen. The two disciples believe that Jesus is going to be ruler of Israel. So get your claims in early. And Jesus says, 'You just don't get it'. He says, 'To share with me is to share my suffering.'

I remember a meeting with an English Prime Minister. Given how often we change them, that is not very revealing. He said to me, 'why is everything so difficult?' He was asking the same question [as the disciples]. What he wanted was prestige and the top job, but also to change things for the better – to give instructions and see improvement. And what he found was a cross, a heart that betrayed him, people who did not obey him and situations that seemed impossible to solve.

Jesus points to the need for personal change if we are to cope with the burdens of life. Do not seek your own good in any place, even in the family, but instead seek to serve. In England, the Church of England has for many centuries acted as though it were very important. That has not been attractive. It does not reveal Jesus. A few years ago we rewrote what we are trying to do. We said we must be simpler, bolder and humbler.

And last year for the first time in 70 years, our numbers grew. I wonder if God was saying at last we've got the message. But why is it so difficult? Even with the disciples who've walked daily with Jesus, who've heard every word he said. It starts within ourselves. There are not many of us who feel that we are satisfactory within ourselves. Paul says that's God's message from the cross- he's dealing with that.

He has made a dramatic change and the gift of being able to serve, to put aside ourselves, is offered to us in return for giving our lives to God.

We can know his forgiveness. When we fail we can know his constant faithful love. And when things go well, we can say, like the Psalmist, you have blessed me, I live in a good place.

Therefore it is difficult. The heart of our lives is living them in the presence of Jesus Christ. But like the footballers on the pitch, there is so much happening that it is difficult to remember the presence of Christ, in places of suffering and times of hardship- that is our daily experience.

An English soldier of the 17th century wrote a prayer. It was on the day of a great battle. He prayed, 'Lord, I must be very occupied this day. If I forget thee, do not thou forget me.' It is a prayer I often pray.

The people to whom Ezekiel prophesied would have understood much of the modern world. They did not live in comfortable houses. They were exiles and refugees. They lived in slave labour camps outside Babylon. Their daily struggle was to get food, keep shelter and not to die.

So many people in this world today, over 100 million refugees and displaced persons, would understand those concerns. And so many leaders would understand the difficulty of changing that situation. And yet God changes us. And so we hear from Ezekiel a promise that came true some 40 years later. They required leadership and strength in the way Jesus shows it. We have to recognise our fallibility, and work in the liberty of knowing the forgiveness of God. Because that gives us the freedom to act as we should. Not to look backwards, but to look forwards with hope. We need to live in partnership with others who seek to do good. They may be Christians or not. When the liberty came to Israel that Ezekiel prophesied, it came from a non-Jewish king. They did not say 'we cannot accept his gifts', they gave thanks and went forward to a better future.

What is the hope in this country and our world? It is knowing that we belong to others and that we can share our burdens. If we can create communities and coalitions, whose aim is the common good, we will find the blessing of God.

So many of our problems today will feel to those who come into government like mountains. The biggest is climate change. The others are the levels of migration. The challenges, as Panama becomes part of the Security Council over the next two years, will seem enormous. Panama's representatives will find those alongside them who seek to sabotage what is good. Who seek only their own interest, not the interests of the world. They will see wars everywhere. The temptation will be to enjoy the position but give up on changing things. The temptation for those in the slave labour camps of Babylon was to abandon hope and seek only their own survival. Every year in England on 27th January, we have Holocaust Memorial Day. I heard this year from someone who was eight when he was sent to Auschwitz. How did he survive, I asked. He said, 'We formed groups and encouraged each other'. That is the only way that a person, a family, a society or a nation will flourish in the years to come.

I pray for the government that is leaving here and for the government that is coming in. In England, I pray for the government that will be elected on July 4th. For I know that, like the footballers, in a year they will want nothing more than a good night's sleep.

President Obama was once asked what he would do after he was President. He said, 'First, sleep for six months, and secondly, set up a shop on the beach in Hawaii which will only sell one thing – white t-shirts of medium size.' And the interviewer said, 'why?!', and he said 'so I never have to make a difficult decision again.' In his cabinet meetings, he and his Chief of Staff would sometimes say to each other 'white medium' and all his cabinet thought it was a secret code, when all it meant was 'I'm exhausted'.

So let us pray for our government. Let us pray that each of them know forgiveness for their errors, strength in their weakness and hope facing their problems. For strength, forgiveness and hope will enable them to act rightly, to be humble, to [give their] service and to find that Panama is a better country, and in five years Britain is a better country, because of their ministry. It does not guarantee the election, neither does it guarantee success, but it guarantees a sense that I have run the race, I have met the call set before me. It guarantees knowing the love and the presence of God. May God bless this country and our country and my country, and may God enable them to be light and salt in our troubled world. Amen.

7 min read

Source URL: <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/seek-serve-archbishops-sermon-panama-city-panama>