



Archbishop Justin gave the keynote address this morning at the Love your neighbour: Think, Pray, Vote, a conference organised by the Joint Public Issues Team, at Coventry Central Hall.

**Read the speech below:**

Thank you very much . . . It is wonderful to be in Coventry, back again. It sometimes feels like I have never left. I can see loads of friends I know from 15 years of living in the diocese. And occasionally working here as well. So thank you for being here today. It is very nice to be with you.

I am very conscious that this is a room with a huge hunger for justice and the common good.

Your commitment to those virtues and thoughtful engagement, which I have had with many of you, on what that means, on how to build a society for the common good, makes you far more qualified to deliver this lecture than I am. But bad luck, because you're stuck with me.

So I am going to try and do justice to the subject as much as I can.

It is, as John has already said, a providential point and a sign of good ecumenical relations that the House of Bishops of the Church of England published a letter to the parishes and people of the Church entitled 'Who is my neighbour?'

Over the last month or two, the Church has been accused of being too overtly political.

Of sticking its nose into matters that are, quite simply, none of its concern.

And it has been suggested that we stick to the family business of saving souls and let politicians and media commentators get on with important matters of public policy making and the accountability that goes with it.

I want to start off what I am going to say by reminding us, and all of us reminding ourselves of what we already know, that that is a completely false distinction. And it was to Wesley. And it is to us.

And it is in the history of all of the different churches that are represented here.

It is impossible to love Jesus Christ and not to care about the welfare of people in every respect.

It is impossible to love Jesus Christ – as a 19th Century Anglican slum priest in the East End of London put it – he said, if you love Jesus Christ, you will care about drains. It is very neatly put.

We are not, equally – on the other side – an NGO with a pointy roof. Or a nice hall.

The business of proclaiming the Good News of the saving love of Jesus Christ as Wesley did more effectively, perhaps, than any other person in

these islands in the last half millennium; that business, and the business of seeking to transform society go absolutely together. They are indistinguishable. They are literally the two sides of the same coin. You do one, you do the other.

And so, we need to be those, who talk about Jesus Christ and lead people to faith in Jesus Christ, which is the deepest transformation that will happen to an individual, and as it happens to individuals, it will transform society. The two things are not distinguishable.

But I am going to speak today, principally, about why discipleship compels us to be concerned with matters of politics and active participation in politics, and a little about some of the issues we face.

We should never lose sight of the fact, when we are engaging in politics as to why it matters so much. We have the great good fortune, whichever party we support, whichever part of politics we come from, to be able to do that without fear in this country. And let us today remember that in many parts of the world, and particularly in Northern Iraq, in parts of Libya, in Northern Nigeria, that were we to gather in a room like this today, it would be almost certainly the cause of our death. And usually in a very terrible way.

And so the business of engagement in politics is in part a celebration of what we have in this country. And a proclamation that we are deeply committed to a society where freedom of expression and justice are at its heart. Where nobody is excluded because they are poor or rich, or one ethnic background or another or a sexuality. But they are all included with equal value in their opinions.

I'll come back to where that springs from in a moment. But let us hold that fact, that we have the huge privilege of being here today, without fear. It is something I seldom forget for one moment.

I also want to say, you might hear a slight defensiveness in this – I can't possibly imagine why – that history categorically shows us that no one political movement has a monopoly on good ideas.

It is really important that we say that, as Christians.

My most recent predecessors- the most recent ones, say, back to the Reformation - were often also at odds with the Governments of their day – in fact a number of them got executed (who knows?) – on all sorts of issues: on immigration, on the nature of civil society, on the economy, on the national debt. On the question of social justice.

And we were quite often, in different parts of the Church, on the wrong side, by the way. We need to remember that. And therefore when we speak, we speak with a certain humility as well as boldness.

And we also need – in what we say as the Church, not to get drawn into what a programme called this week 'miserabilism'.

That sense that we are only really happy as Christians when things are really bad.

There can be a sort of co-dependency culture, where the worst thing that could happen is that social issues get sorted out. Because then what do we do?

Well, we would have to rejoice in the joy of the Lord always. And that would be tedious [sarcasm/humour].

We have a Gospel of hope. The Good News of Jesus Christ is of hope. Of the victory of what is good at the end of all things. Of the Kingdom of Heaven. These are the great good messages for our country, and for our society and indeed for the whole world.

So we need to be those who live in hope. Who rejoice in hope. Who celebrate hope. Who are seen in praise and celebration to God, everywhere and always.

That is the point.

If we believe – and we do so - that worklessness is corrosive to the human spirit, then we should be thankful that unemployment, over the last seven years – since 2008 – has been much lower than we expected. There have been appalling social problems – I'm going to come back to that in a minute – but let us be thankful and rejoice that the forecast in 2008 that said we would have 3.5 or 4 million unemployed never came about.

We should be thankful when it falls, as it has done in recent years and that we have one of the highest levels of workforce participation we have ever known in this country.

We should be thankful that more businesses are being started than ever before. We cannot accept the miserabilist agenda because we prefer it.

We should also share with confidence our view that those in work should be paid enough to guarantee a good standard of living – the living wage.

That is why the Archbishop of York and the churches – all together - are at the forefront of the campaign for a living wage. Which, by the way, should have a more open door now than we've had for many, many years.

Because, actually, the economists are saying that the major problem with the Western economies – indeed the global economy – is an inadequacy of demand. It is deflation. This is one of the few moments in my lifetime when a higher wage was actually good for the economy.

Because it gives people more wherewithal to avoid deflation and the terrible consequences that has for so many of the most vulnerable groups of society.

We don't want to go back to the 1930s where prices fell very, very sharply – that was the great problem Keynes dealt with and challenged very

severely. There is a wonderful Punch cartoon in about 1937 – just after one of Keynes' great publications where a rather exhausted looking man is carrying a bunch of shopping – he is obviously quite wealthy; but his well-laden wife, who is dressed in the most expensive clothes you can imagine – and she is saying: "Don't worry darling, Mr Keynes says it is our job to spend more."

Well, that had quite a lot of economic sense behind it, in that he was saying that the Great Depression was in part due to inadequacy of demand

And the Living Wage is something that is absolutely essential. It is wonderful that we have lower unemployment, but we want those who are in work not to struggle and not to – as someone said recently to me at a food bank – to find that the month is slightly longer than the pay.

But we rejoice in low unemployment. Let's not be seen as miserable.

If we believe – and we do - that in troubled parts of the world, poverty, war and the scourge of human trafficking diminish all our humanity, we should applaud what this Government has done, to meet our commitment to the 0.7% target. It has only happened in the last five years – let's be clear about that. This is not a long-term thing. It has been a target for a long time. It has been met. There are no or very few votes in it. And yet, the Government has hung on and they need applause for that. It is courageous.

They have led the way in passing the anti-trafficking, anti-modern slavery Bill [the Modern Slavery Bill]. That again, has led the way internationally.

They are leading on preventing sexual violence in conflict.

I am not saying this to get myself out of trouble, but because I do believe in being fair. And that if we are going to talk about justice and involvement in politics, we can't go in saying simply because someone wears a certain badge on their lapel, that they are therefore bad. That is not what Jesus did. So let us celebrate what we should celebrate.

If we believe that the household and the family are crucial then we celebrate measures that support that. We should support all efforts that increase stability and hope in the job market, and welcome good news.

The Bishops' letter this week did quite a lot of that. It did it quite clearly. Obviously that wasn't entirely popular with some people. Almost no one seemed to think it was very good, apart from the people that read it [laughter] – which appears to be a minimal number. And they did actually, on the whole – I wasn't sure whether to be pleased or slightly disappointed that the reviews all started, "To my surprise, the Bishops' letter is quite good" – I wish it wasn't such a surprise.

But politics is the art and the science of securing the common good of the community through government.

Party politics is a mechanism we use as a society to make decisions about who governs.

An election is the reconciled form of civil war. It is the way in which people take power without actually shooting each other. And I have spent enough time in countries where they do shoot each other to say 'Praise God' that we have this, and thank you to the politicians who make sure it works.

Party politics is a field where some Christians will rightly feel personally called to contribute.

Politics in general is something from which none of us should seek to escape– if we respond to the nature of God, who is sovereign over all of society and in every human being in every part.

We should be concerned with and use both politics and party politics to good effect.

But our own response, at the heart of being Christian disciples, is not based on partisanship.

Our concern for the common good stems from us being created in the image of God, and the consequential commands Jesus gives us:

That we are to love God.

Our Neighbour.

Each other.

Our enemies.

If anyone can work out who is left out by that, please do have a word with me afterwards, because I haven't found anyone yet.

And it is not easy. But the distinguishing feature of Christian involvement in politics should be that compelling, fire-raising, wonderful, illuminating, transforming, revolutionary power of love applied indiscriminately and lavishly.

And remember that love doesn't always mean agreement.

When we look at Jesus we see that abundant and scandalous love, freely given for each one of us.

Love that offers salvation, enables justice and human freedom.

And so we respond, because we are compelled to share the love we have received.

We don't speak out about matters that are considered 'political' because we think we have some automatic right to be heard.

We speak out and respond because loving our neighbour places responsibilities on us.

This, of course, does not lead everyone to the same answer to the question of 'how' do we love. Faithful Christians will – and should – vote for different political parties.

So much for our involvement in politics. Now where do we go with it?

I am going to throw out some ideas that I hope will not be too boring.

We live in challenging but hopeful times.

Back to the word hope. Hope is never exterminated. Hope is never eliminated. Because Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. So there is always hope

We have at last seen recovery and flourishing in key parts of the economy for the first time since the financial crisis – over the last year or two

But that has left us with massive loss of output over the last seven years. There is a huge gap between where the economy could be and where it is, because of what happened in 2008.

That is not a party political point. I am not blaming a single party. I am saying that that is something that has happened because of the financial and economic structures that we have built for ourselves, particularly since the 1980s. Economic and financial structures that are committed to materialism and to material good. One of my favourite political writers, a guy called Philip Bobbitt, who wrote a wonderful book called *The Shield of Achilles* about 15 years ago, described the different sorts of societies since the Peace of Westphalia in 1748 [sic. – 1648]. It is a long book, so I won't summarise it all. But he ends up saying the modern society is the 'market' society. He talks about the kingly society, the noble society, the nation state. And then he says; now we have the market society. That as was said a few minutes ago, we live in a society where the politics says the only way you are going to get anywhere is by selling a better product. Is offering a little bit more than anyone else. Bid up. Bid up the way we are going. Have a better bid. A better offer.

And one of the things the Bishops Letter was saying is that although there are wonderful and impressive examples of solidarity in action within parts of our society, we have to ask serious questions about the relationships we have, until recently, taken for granted, and about our moral vision as a nation.

The relationships between state and society.

It was taken for granted in political arena that more state was better. And in another that less state was better. We have to question both of these and say is that what we have understood to work?

It is certainly not what Beveridge thought when he invented the welfare state in the 1940s. His unknown – almost unknown – second work that went with his recommendation for the welfare state, he wrote a second book with Archbishop William Temple and Tawny as his inspiration – and it was called Voluntary Action.

And he was clear that the state cannot put its arms around you and embrace you. The state doesn't give you a food parcel and say that it loves you.

Again, another food bank last year, that I was visiting. Someone taking a food parcel and as so often, because they are so embarrassed often when they come to a food bank, and the great skill of food banks is to make people feel they are not to blame, it is not their fault. And this person came in and they were talked to and they were given the box after the while and they said, "Do you know, this isn't a box of food, it is a box of love."

Now the state can't do that. That is done by the person behind the counter. That is done by the people who welcome, by the group of churches that supported that food bank. That is how they put the arms around them.

Between the market and the consumer. The response to the relationship there.

The responsibilities of civil society.

We have all yet to be convinced as to what kind of compelling or convincing vision we have to inhabit this new world in which we live.

And what we must all do as the churches is proclaim the vision that is transforming. That excites and motivates. That challenges the cynicism that is the next state after the miserabilism. And just before nihilism.

And we all know who supports that. I won't say his name, but he is sexier than any of the bishops, apparently [laughter].

Depends what brand you follow really.

Everyone here is already responding in that way.

Rather than withdrawing, you are active.

You see injustice and you say 'something must be done'.

'And we will do something'.

That's the different bit. It isn't just something must be done. It is we will do something. And then you go out and do it.



The message of 'Think, Pray, Vote' is a call to action.

Indeed, we might go a step further and add 'Act' to the title of today's conference.

We are most effective as the hands and feet of Christ when we are active and outward-looking.

We are also rather better at not splitting. Ecumenism looks better when we are looking outwards, doesn't it.

When we are joyful in our generosity and abundant in our love.

Church members—not just those in the Church of England—give more than 23 million hours of volunteer time every month outside the regular work of the church.

I suspect that a sizable chunk of those 23 million hours are in this room.

It is part of our responsibility.

Voting is also part of that responsibility.

Now I suspect all of you, apart from me, will vote. That is because I'm not allowed to. I don't get a vote in parliamentary election – in fact technically I do, but it has been agreed that I shouldn't use it by one of my predecessors because I have votes elsewhere. But that may change.

It is sometimes quite difficult- - you never wholly agree with any party you vote for.

But if we don't vote, we share responsibility for the entrenchment of apathy and cynicism in our politics.

It was Willie Whitelaw in the mid-80s who famously said at one election, 'There's someone going around the country stirring up apathy' [laughter].

They're still at it.

We are well aware of the imbalance in voter turnout between the young and the older generations.

At the last election, over-65s were almost twice as likely to vote as 18 to 24 year olds.

That means there are one or two people – just one or two – in this audience who may be more likely to vote than the rest of the audience [laughter].

And that means they have much more influence and effect.

And that is not healthy. It is not good that any one sector of our society begins to dominate the way in which politics works. That is why voting is so important. It's not just that it is such a privilege to do it, it's not just that so many people around the world can't; it is that it stops society being dominated by sectoral interests. The more people vote, the more just society is likely to be.

Francis Fukuyama, who famously wrote the book about the end of history, redeemed himself recently with a very good book on modern politics and the understanding of the modern state, in which he says that in the United States they now have 'vetocracy' – it's the rule of the veto. There is some sectoral group that can stop anything happening. That is why people get suspicious and cynical.

So one of the things we can do over the next couple of months is get people enthused about voting. Get out the vote.

Any why is it an affirmation of something good?

Well, the general view of politicians is that they are only in it for themselves. You will see that tomorrow in one of the newspapers.

The other, rarer, narrative is "I went into politics to make a difference."

I am going to be radical and say the more I meet politicians, the more I am impressed, and the less cynical I become. I wouldn't have said that two or three years ago but in this job you meet a lot of politicians and on the whole, in one-to-one conversations they are very straightforward and honest. They are hugely impressive.

They are people doing very long hours in very difficult circumstances, facing appallingly difficult problems to which there is no simple answer. And they have got to convey that in soundbites.

That is not easy.

That is why we need more people to support our politicians.

We are all flawed and liable to do things that do not live up to our own ideals.

It is no use if we imagine them – politicians – as any different from the rest of us in that sense.

We cannot hold them to a higher standard of morality than we are willing to hold ourselves to.

But we do have a great deal of power - particularly activists, particularly the churches - when it comes down to shaping the way that politics works. This is my final major point.

We can as Jim Wallis - the American theologian and political thinker at Sojourners in Washington says, change the wind. He says this: \_\_\_\_\_

“You change society by changing the wind. Change the wind, transform the debate, recast the discussion, alter the context in which political discussions are being made, and you will change the outcomes... You will be surprised at how fast the politicians adjust to a change in the wind.”

That is their skill.

If we are simply amongst those groups that say that we want a consumer politics based on our own particular idea of what society should look like, we will be constantly disappointed when a virtuous politics based on solidarity and the common good fails to develop.

We must have the confidence to ask the big questions about what kind of society we want to be a part of and how we achieve it.

Despite the challenges, there is hope and optimism that we can “sow the seeds of a new politics” at this election.

The electorate can change the wind and politicians are wise enough and careful enough to notice.

Let me give an example. I recently spent an evening at the House of Lords, listening to Jean Vanier, the founder of L’Arche - speak on the question of ‘why the strong need the weak’. Why the strong *need* the weak.

He articulated this sense of profound solidarity so deeply – as he has done for 50 years through L’Arche – a global collection of communities where people with and without learning disabilities share life together, living and working in community.

He set that out before us and as he did so the horizons of possibilities of what society could look like, opened up in front of our eyes. That changes the wind. Those kinds of examples.

Can we be churches that don’t just talk about it but demonstrate it, as L’Arche has? Why does he have such authority? Because for 50 years you can see it happening in his communities.

We *can* do that in the power and spirit of God, and we can change them.

In the Church of England, at General Synod a few years ago, we agreed that public policy should be judged on three criteria:

Fairness. Generosity. Sustainability.

And that has to be lived out amongst and within our own churches.

They are about solidarity across our society. These values and the criteria focus our minds on the command to ‘love our neighbour’.

I return to the definition of politics I offered earlier.

Politics is the art and the science of securing the common good of the community through government.

The church must engage with the political process, and Christians share responsibility with all citizens to participate in democratic structures.

I quote that directly from a letter sent to *The Times* by my wonderful colleagues the Bishops of Leicester and Norwich this week, in response to *The Times'* coverage of the Pastoral Letter.

They suggested in that letter that the Sermon on the Mount might have received a similar response. [laughter].

You may choose to agree. I really couldn't comment.

Jesus' message of radical love for all, and particularly for those on the margins is one we cannot ignore.

If we are commanded to love God, neighbour, enemy, who is left out?

It is in this spirit that we must approach our political engagement.

I started by talking about hope and I'll come back to that in my last few words.

We are to be a community of faith, community with each other, communities of communities. Advocates for a politics committed to mutual flourishing and the common good.

Be generous, kind, loving towards those seeking political office. Be bold in seeking a vision that does justice to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Pray for those who take these huge decisions – of war and peace, of economics, of poverty and wealth. Pray for them, as they struggle knowing deep down within themselves that they are fallible human beings operating on inadequate information in questions that have no easy answers.

I want to end with the words we heard earlier, which happened to be in my talk as well:

*Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."*

Amen.

21 min read

---

**Source URL:** <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/news/archbishop-justins-speech-think-pray-vote-conference>