

Opening remarks by Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby at the launch of the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism, hosted by the Archbishop at Lambeth Palace today.



"This is a remarkable occasion. It's extraordinarily timely. When this was planned and this report was being written we had no idea about the way in which this would be so timely and so appropriate; and in the midst of such a difficult time.

"The Paris attacks, the increased police patrolling of Jewish neighbourhoods... which is a peculiar and remarkable obscenity when we are commemorating the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz.

"Recently I attended the Holocaust Memorial Day ceremony at Westminster Abbey and spent an hour and more meeting survivors. It was, as ever, something that grips one and changes the whole perspective that one has of the world around us – and how it feels to people for whom, unpredictably, it has become a nightmare in their living memory. How they spoke of that and what it did to them, and what events today do to them, is something that has to be held onto very, very strongly indeed.

"The All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Antisemitism, commissioned by John Mann – to whom special thanks is owed, and to the other panellists who made it possible for it to be a cross-party report, and of course experience shows that these have far more impact – is an extraordinary report. It is wide-ranging without being vague, and it is specific without being narrow. That is a huge achievement in a subject as complex and difficult and, let us be honest, as deeply embedded in our history and culture in Western Europe as antisemitism.

"With great clarity the Committee have communicated both the stark reality of rising antisemitism in this country, and the key responses necessary to counter it. Responses of raising public awareness and accountability – and, I hope, shock; because I think many people feel that this is something that is part of history, not part of contemporary life. And other responses, including directly confronting antisemitic discourse, and shaping a new and resilient religious literacy in our civic life. Huge amounts of the report struck me forcefully when I was reading it yesterday – paragraphs 365 and 380 had a particular impact.

"The issue of antisemitism is not just as though it were merely the essential right of people to live freely, to worship unimpeded, or to play an active role in society without fear of verbal or physical assault. The issue of antisemitism goes to the heart of the belief that all humanity has been made in the image of God. The blasphemy of antisemitism is that it seeks to diminish, to distort and ultimately to destroy that divine gift.

"In the few days when I was Bishop of Durham – about a year and a half – at Auckland Castle, which had previously been the home of the Bishops of Durham for almost as long as here, there were the Zurbaran paintings of the Sons of Jacob, bought by a previous Bishop of Durham in the Eighteenth Century in protest against the rejection by the House of Lords of the measure giving full civic rights to Jewish people in this country. He bought the pictures to show where he stood, and where the roots of our culture were.

"The struggle against antisemitism was going on long before that, both in parliament and elsewhere, and yet we still find it an issue. That is an extraordinary thing. What other struggle has been going on for hundreds of years and still is of current importance?

"So it is our responsibility, now, to respond to this report by acting on its recommendations. And I want to say that despite our failings, of which I am more than aware and often deeply embarrassed by, as the Church of England we commit ourselves to be both accountable and to hold others to account, and to pay attention to this report.

"This is a vital report that calls us not only to be aware of the profound dangers of antisemitism being anything but confronted, but also calls for active ways of combating it.

"From our ongoing commitment to the work of the Council of Christians and Jews, through to the ministry of our churches and church schools, this is something on which we will act; and I trust and I hope that all those who have positions of responsibility in this room will also act, with passion and commitment."

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