

Watch or read the Archbishop of Canterbury's speech at the Trades Union Congress conference in Manchester today.

Transcript as delivered:

Two thousand five hundred years ago, the Prophet Amos, speaking into a society divided between rich and poor, which had forgotten the values which alone could establish stability in a hostile world, cried out “but let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream”.

Five hundred years later, near Nazareth, a young pregnant woman called Mary went to see her cousin Elizabeth. Mary, greeted by Elizabeth as the mother of the Saviour Jesus, cried out in what we know as the Magnificat, saying about God:

“He has shown strength with his arm;

He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

And lifted up the lowly;

He has filled the hungry with good things,

And the rich he has sent away empty”.

By the way, I'd better warn you there's quite a bit of God in this. It's sort of my job. [Laughter]

Mary's song is revolution in immortal verse. It is describing God, not describing human aspiration. It says justice is who God is. Who God is sets the pattern for who we should be, and what our society should be. That is political, but not party political. The bible is political from one end to the other. But we step into dangerous territory when either left or right claim God as being solely on their side. Jesus was highly political, He told the rich that, they would face woes. He criticised the King of the time as a fox. He spoke harsh words to leaders of the nations when they were uncaring of the needy.

Mary's song, the Magnificat, central to the New Testament, is so revolutionary that anyone who takes it seriously finds it a threat to power and entitlement.

Like all human institutions, the church has been very variable in holding to its originating vision. In Jerusalem, the earliest Christian community chose to share what they had with those who had the greatest needs. They held to generosity and equivalence before God, so that neither gender, nor social status, nor identity, nor ethnicity gave privilege.

Justice is God's nature, but it is our responsibility. To speak to the TUC in its 150th year, is to receive the enormous gift of being in the presence of a gathering that has been instrumental over that century and a half in reducing inequality, challenging injustice, and speaking up for the poor, the marginalised and the oppressed. The TUC itself began by facing prejudice, legal disadvantage and persecution. It took one of the Tolpuddle martyrs, betrayed by their local vicar. It took many years for that to begin to be unwound, probably right until the years of social change which began after 1910 and were brought to an abrupt halt by the outbreak of the Great War.

In 1879 my predecessor, Archbishop Tait, met with the TUC, at the urging of a number of Christian leaders, to begin the process of changing the Church of England's scandalous hostility to unions. In the years that followed, one of those clergy who had called the meeting, Bishop Lightfoot of Durham, together with Bishop Wescott of Durham at another moment, were involved in mediating between mine owners and mine workers to try and bring the very minimal levels of humanity that were so clearly absent in the privatised pits before the 1940s.

All this is not mere history, nor is it long ago and far away. Contrary to the proverb, the past is not a different country, and we still do today many of the things that were done in the past in different forms, things that diminish human dignity and treat labour as mere resource, like capital.

In 2007 I was asked to go to Liverpool as Dean of the Anglican Cathedral there. It was one of the happiest periods of my life, not only for me but also for the whole family. In 2010 we had the privilege of welcoming a couple of thousand local trade unionists at the end of their march of protest against austerity, where they were addressed in the cathedral by Tony Benn.

In Liverpool, the bitterness of the docks remained, from before the system was reformed, when daily work was uncertain and thus also the ability to feed the family. John McDonnell knew that from his father, and experienced the gig economy and zero hours contracts in those days.

Today there are some who view that kind of oppression of the employed as a virtue. The gig economy, zero hours contracts, is nothing new, it is simply the reincarnation of an ancient evil. And God says, "let justice flow down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream".

Great and historic advances were won over this last century and a half by the determination and vision of working men and women in trade unions. Not everything was perfect, not every decision of every union was without fault. I have no illusions about the fallibility of institutions, whether they be churches, companies, governments, or trade unions. It is all too easy to find privilege and power, influence and importance an overwhelming temptation which often subdues our original vision and motivation. We know that in the Church.

And let us not delude ourselves into thinking that the gig economy is the only reincarnation of oppression of the vulnerable in employment.

Pensions are just one example of the profit motive leading to the weakest being given the most risk and the strongest the most protection. In these areas, and in employment rights, and in many others, we see that where inequality and profound injustice seem entrenched, insurmountable, it leads to instability in our society: divisions between peoples, and vulnerability to the populism that stirs hatred between different ethnicities and religious groups, the rise of ancient demons of racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia and xenophobia. And the rise of extremism. "Let justice flow down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream".

I meet frequently with other religious leaders, not only those from my own tradition but from the other faith traditions that are part of the essential fabric of this country. It would be wrong of me to stand before you today and not speak of some of the anxiety I have heard from my Jewish and my Muslim friends, about the language used to refer to them in political discussion and debate. It is anxiety I share. On both left and right we have too often in recent times seen language which has been insensitive to the very real vulnerabilities of those who are too often talked about, but much less often talked with. I know that all people of goodwill in this hall share that sense of concern and will do all they can to build that society and that politics of mutual respect, understanding and friendship.

We all know that when any vulnerable group is objectified, trolled in social media, dismissed, then all of us are diminished. Such things are not worthy of our country, of its great Christian heritage, of its possibilities and vision of a generous, just and righteous society. Many of us know the great poem by Pastor Niemoller, written after 1945:

"First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me."

Oppression of minorities, division, instability and economic injustice march together. A few weeks ago, it was reported that households are now even more indebted than they were in 2008. That is the result of low pay, an economy that allocates rewards through power not for labour. The result is that debt support charities, including one based in Bradford of which I am a patron, Christians Against Poverty, find more and more people crowding to their doors, caught in debt slavery. More than that, when these charities help them – strengthening their families, working with them to negotiate with their lenders – it has been the understanding that the creditors would contribute so that the charity can help people get their life back on track. A third of lenders and debt collectors simply fail to contribute. That is not an economic decision of the market, it is a failure of common human decency, of values. It says no to the common good, solidarity. And God replies, 'but let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.'

It is for us to bring justice, for Trade Unions, church, for government, everyone in society. The alternative to our action is destructive fatalism. A book was published last year called "The Great Leveller". The author's pessimistic thesis is that inequality has only ever been addressed through war, famine, disease, revolution and natural disaster. He gives an example of privileged societies; among many he looked back to the Aztec elite who, as he puts it, and I quote: "wore feather-work and jade ornaments, lived in two-storey houses, ate the flesh of human sacrifices, drank chocolate...and did not pay taxes".

Well, if you will excuse a sarcastic remark, thanks goodness we're not like that. By the way, before I'm accused of not liking chocolate, that is the one bit of that quote in which I have every sympathy for the Aztec elite.

Not paying taxes speaks of the absence of commitment to our shared humanity, to solidarity and justice. If you earn money from a community, you should pay your share of tax to that community. I was in business, and I know that, within limits, it's right and proper for people to arrange their tax affairs, and for companies to do so. But when vast companies like Amazon, and other online traders, the new industries, can get away with paying almost nothing in tax, there is something wrong with the tax system. They don't pay a real living wage, so the tax payer must support their workers with benefits. And having leached off the tax payer once they don't pay for our defence, for security, for stability, for justice, for health, for equality, for education. Then they complain of an undertrained work force, from the education they have not paid for, and pay almost nothing for apprenticeships. Those are only a fraction of the costs of aggressive tax management.

Mary spoke of the God who gave us Jesus as the one who "has shown strength with his arm;

He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

And lifted up the lowly;

He has filled the hungry with good things,

And sent the rich away empty".

But this book, The Great Leveller, is wrong. We need not await an apocalypse in despairing fatalism. A future of justice is in our hands. The TUC over 150 years, together with so many other parts of civil society, stands as one of those groups which offer hope to our future, to the vulnerable and to the weak.

But for good values to be in the ascendant, the TUC must have both a clear focus and genuine flexibility, a lesson we in the church too are seeking to learn.

There is a need for focus on the founding vision; to know what it is that you are seeking to achieve, and never to lose sight of that. The TUC has profound socialist roots. It also has profound Christian roots. Christian Socialism itself can be dated back to 1848. Fired with enthusiasm after a Chartist demonstration, FD Maurice, Charles Kingsley, and John Ludlow, formed the first Christian Socialist group. The Christian faith teaches that all men and women are created equally, and they are created in the image of God. This belief was shared by an increasing number of activists through the years. At the same time, the influence of the non-conformist churches was seen in the organisation of trade unions and cooperatives and, ultimately, in the foundation of the Labour Party. At the heart of the TUC was the vision that for every oppressed worker there should be an organisation which can speak truth to power with conviction and strength, not only in the public sector, but in every area of work where the weak face the powerful, and the hungry face the satisfied. There must be Unions in the gig economy. There must be unions in industries being automated, unions wherever workers are vulnerable. There must be a new unionisation, or, President, there will only be a new victimisation.

Unions must have a vision of a just and a righteous society. Power and influence are not zero-sum games – when we seek the common good all benefit. The world in which we live at the moment, in which for people at lower levels of income, real earnings are virtually the same as they were almost twenty years ago (rising by just 1.7%) and lower by 7% than at the crash (as was reported on the BBC this morning), is matched by the 11% increase in FTSE 100 chief executives' remuneration over the last twelve months. We need genuine living wages that enable people to save more than ten pounds a month, if they're lucky, and put an end to the days when replacing a fridge or a car tyre is a household crisis. Unions are crucial to achieving real living wages.

Five years ago, I said to the Chief Executive of Wonga that I wanted credit unions to compete him out of business. Well he's gone! Today I dream that governments, now and in the future, put church-run food banks out of business. I dream of empty night shelters. I dream of debt advice charities without clients. When justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream, the food banks close, the night shelters are empty, families and households are hopeful of better lives for themselves and their children, money is not a tyrant, and justice is seen.

But this not a vision for government alone. Governments of any party, all parties, will fail, act foolishly, be far away. Only partnership between governments, civil society - including unions and churches - business and community, can heal the sicknesses of society now and in the future.

But with focus on our aims there must also be flexibility. Your own paper on the future of work speaks of the monumental changes before us. Once again, I do not lecture you as one who has got it right. Flexibility is about adjusting to a world where through communication and social networks we may have information but not affection; we risk recognition of issues, but not relationships to stand alongside people. We amplify communication but not conversation. We embrace automation and risk losing human dignity. Unions will bring people together, negotiate through change, keep the eyes of all on the dignity of the human person. To do that they must be present, have members in the affected parts of our economy, which will be almost all of it. To gain the members needs imagination, flexibility, and seeking the good of the worker, not just the power of a union. The Church fell into the trap of seeking its own power for many centuries.

Regardless of Brexit, a principle need of the next few years is resilience in our society. Resilience in the face of change, resilience in a world where the rule-based order we have become used to and which gives us security, is more and more fragile. Resilient societies need resilient institutions, including Unions. Resilience comes with solidarity, the common good and the right use of power, including by all here.

In talking of power and accountability the church unapologetically returns to the teaching of Jesus, as I do now. From the beginning to the end of the Bible, with prophets, with Luke who recounts Mary's song in the New Testament, above all with Jesus himself there is the call to justice, and justice means the right handling of power, the willingness to serve. On the last night of his life he knelt and washed his disciples' feet. Abuse of power whether from government, employer, church or trade unions – yes it has happened in all of them – creates a free fire zone in which only the powerful survive, while the vulnerable are destroyed, and all human value is lost. It is the cradle of chaos, and from it rises havoc and destruction.

For 150 years the TUC has served as a model for other trade unions around the world in their fight for the rights of workers and the defence of their dignity. In 150 years from now, the world will surely look entirely different. But if we adapt – if we all adapt – if you adapt, the Church also, serving the common good, helping to establish justice, acting in righteousness, not frightened and self-protective and power-seeking, but courageous and self-giving, then we may expect with joy that in this land justice will flow down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

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