

Presidential Address by the Bishop of Coventry at the June 2016 Meeting of the Coventry Diocesan Synod

The past days have been a reminder, if reminder were needed, of how swiftly and suddenly events can overtake us, and of the fragility of peace and concord. Just over a week ago, we were celebrating the 90th birthday of Her Majesty the Queen. In doing so we reflected on her commitment to the Christ-like values of humility, peace and indeed the active pursuit of reconciliation. Yet even as we held those services of thanksgiving, the first reports were coming in of the tragic events in Orlando, Florida. Fifty people were killed – including the gunman by his own hand – in a brutal attack on the LGBT community.

Then, this past Thursday, we all heard the terrible and shocking news that Jo Cox MP, the mother of two young children, had been shot and stabbed to death in the street. Before becoming an MP, she had worked with Oxfam for some of the most vulnerable people in our world. In Parliament she continued to speak out for the marginalised, and in particular for Syrian refugees. Our country was shocked by her death, and rightly so. It is easy for us to feel helpless in the face of such violence, as it strikes again and again, near and far, in Syria and Iraq, in the United States or closer to home.

As if this were not enough, we come to terms with these acts of violence in the midst of the EU referendum campaign, which is set to conclude in just a matter of days. In a different way, this campaign has also caused us to ask very deep and searching questions about our identity and our future.

For us as a Diocese, that identity is bound up with the Coventry story of reconciliation, and the call it makes upon us to be a reconciled and a reconciling people. What does this mean for us as we look back on the tragedies of the past week, as well as ahead to the referendum itself and to the days and weeks that follow it?

Weeping with those who Weep

In the face of violence, it means that we must ‘weep with those who weep,’ as Paul writes, a few paragraphs before our reading from

Romans.¹ As the people of Christ, the people of the cross, we are called to make space for those of all backgrounds to grieve.

In the darkest of tragedies across the world, we see the Christian Church engaged in exactly this ministry. We saw it in St Peter's Church in Birstall, just hours after the attack on Jo Cox, as well as on the following Sunday when her constituents gathered – in the parish church – to mourn her loss. We saw it again in the service of prayer and remembrance at St Margaret's, Westminster, following the moving tributes to this remarkable woman in both Houses of Parliament.

The same ministry is evident in Orlando, as churches open their doors and offer their facilities for the funerals of the victims. The Church provides a space and offers – as the Bishop of Leeds (in whose Diocese Jo Cox's constituency sits) said in his own moving words – 'a vocabulary for grief and lament.'² That is what we do as Christians, and as the Church.

A Reconciled and Reconciling People

But grief comes in many forms, and each requires its own space. In the coming days, we will see many people in this country deal with a kind of grief – or certainly with bitter disappointment. I offer no predictions as to the exact result of the referendum. However, after it, one side will have won by a close or large margin. And there will be people in our congregations, and others we have in our care, who argued passionately, prayed fervently and then voted for what they believe to be an irreversible and vital choice for our country. But the vote will not have gone their way.

To be a reconciling people, we will ourselves need to be reconciled within the Church, to create a space for people to come together again. Our reading earlier was from Romans 15. This letter was written to a church that may itself have been very divided, given how much space Paul devotes to disagreement in its closing chapters. To such a context, Paul writes: 'Each of us must please our neighbour for the good purpose of building up the neighbour... May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in

¹ Romans 12.15

² <https://nickbaines.wordpress.com/2016/06/18/jo-cox/> [Accessed 21/06/16].

accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.’³

Whichever side wins the referendum campaign, much will change about our national narrative in the months that follow. However, in the midst of this, the Christian story itself remains unchanged. The vote may be important, but it cannot and will not alter the fact that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, members of Christ’s Body, and charged with building one another up in love. If we can show this in our life together, if within our church communities we can be reconciled, then we can be a reconciling people, creating a space for others up and down the country, who may feel both disappointed themselves and divided from their neighbours.

Three days after the referendum on Scottish independence in 2014, the Moderator of the Church of Scotland said in his sermon:

Post referendum there are those who are elated or at least relieved, and there are those who are desperately disappointed, "gutted" - is the description that I have frequently heard. Feelings like these will take time to heal and I want no one to think that I think that there is a quick fix or an easy "dusting down". For some, this referendum has been about national identity; for us all it has been about self-identity and that is about as close to the soul as it gets. So recovery and healing is a soul searching matter and for me, that is a deeply spiritual matter - so no quick fix. Instead, it will take a force of magnanimity and graciousness to restore equilibrium to both nation and individuals.⁴

It is through seeking such reconciliation that we can offer a new and better way of disagreement and of life together. Following the violence of the past week, many have called for a renewal, a detoxification of our political debates. As Christians, and as Christians within the Church of England, called as it is to serve the nation’s good, it will be our opportunity, our responsibility, to join in that renewal. We can do this as we ourselves come together in peace, in spite of our differences, as brothers and sisters in Christ.

³ Romans 15.2, 5-6.

⁴ http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/23111/Sermon-of-the-Rt-Rev-John-Chalmers-at-the-Service-of-Unity-and-Common-Purpose,-St-Giles-Cathedral,-September-21,-2014.pdf [Accessed 21/06/16].

A Nation that Loves its Neighbours

We can also do it by helping to change the narrative about our country, and about the needs of our world. Whatever the referendum's outcome, the ministry of the Church will be to help our nation to hear and to heed Paul's challenge to recognise that the purpose of human living, and its fulfilment, is to be found in building up one's neighbour, in living in harmony with one another and in glorifying the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ with one voice. Paul's charge to please our neighbour in order to build up our neighbour amplifies Jesus' own principle that our love for God is demonstrated in loving our neighbours as ourselves.⁵

The vision of a society that truly enacts love for neighbour, in human relationships and public policy alike, was set out by the House of Bishops in our Pastoral Letter before the last General Election.⁶ If, following the referendum, the same vision can inspire our nation's understanding of its place in Europe and the wider world – whether in or out of the EU – then we will have a powerful narrative to shape our foreign policy, as well as to heal our national divisions. The centenary of the Diocese of Coventry in its modern form is just 18 months away. Our pilgrimage, in which we prayed and walked together, launched our preparations for the celebrations of God's faithfulness to us over the last 100 years. The history of our Diocese and its beloved Cathedral reminds the world that the costs are great when people and nations fail to love their neighbours.

So let our calling be clear. It is – whatever the outcome of Thursday's vote – to make it known that the counterintuitive conviction of Christian faith that, *in setting the interests of others before our own we find that our own interests are better served*, applies not only on the level of personal relationships but also to the conduct of national life and the exercise of international relationships as well. For our nation to act in this way would be the most fitting tribute to the life and work of Jo Cox who, in Jeremy Corbyn's words, 'did not just believe in loving her neighbour; she believed in loving her neighbour's neighbour. She saw a world of neighbours and she believed that every life counted equally'.⁷

⁵ Matthew 19.19; 22.24-40.

⁶ <https://www.churchofengland.org/media/2170230/whoismyneighbour-pages.pdf> [Accessed 21/06/16].

⁷ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2016-06-20/debates/1606205000002/TributesToJoCox#contribution-1606205000014> [Accessed 21/06/16].

In fact, our calling as the Diocese of Coventry goes even further. It is to say that Jesus fulfilled the law in the gospel, with its call not only to love our neighbours but also to love our enemies, so that we may come to regard and to treat them as our neighbours. That would be an even more powerful narrative for our nation: to be a means by which enemies become friends and a 'gentler, kinder, more Christ-child-like world' is built.⁸

⁸ Provost Howard, Christmas Broadcast, 1940.