

## **The Bishop of Coventry's Presidential Address to the Diocesan Synod June 2017**

Dear Members of Synod, at my last Presidential Address I reflected on the Westminster Bridge attack perpetrated a few days before with a crude ferocity. Our June Synod takes place in the wake of two other atrocities also committed with appalling brutality, killing and injuring defenceless people, young and old, who were going about the simple human business of enjoying life.

There is much that could be said about the actions and attitudes of those caught up in the attacks – remarkable examples of heroism, fortitude and dedication from police, emergency services, bystanders and the victims themselves. These acts of humanity at its most selfless stand in such extraordinary contrast to the criminality and cruelty, self-deception and blasphemy of the killers. Among those who have done their human duty and sought, in extreme conditions, to serve humanity well, I would like to mention the two diocesan bishops in whose dioceses the awful events unfolded.

I was with the Bishop of Manchester on the day after the Manchester attack. He rejoined a meeting of the House of Bishops so that, with the Archbishops, he could lead us in prayer. He acknowledged the anger that we feel in the face of such inhumanity and brought it to the Lord in prayer. On the media in its different forms during the day he spoke about the rage that rails against evil. By the evening, standing with others in the sun

of Albert Square, he spoke of love conquering hate, and the people of Manchester cheered. This was an authentic ministry carrying people through a terrible trauma with a Christian narrative that recognises the reality of evil and the horror it causes but, refusing to be debased and corrupted, takes it to prayer, and turns it to words and deeds of love. And it was compelling.

I was inspired by this public ministry of the Bishop of Manchester, just as I was moved by the words of the Bishop of Southwark who, when he heard about the attack so close to his Cathedral headed to the scene. 'I have come to be among my people', he said, standing at the police cordon. 'I have come to be among my people'. That is the heart of Christian ministry. Its lies at the core of the calling of every parish priest to be among the people, not only the congregation of the Church but the people of the parish, university, school, hospital, community. It is at the centre of the identity of the God of Israel who comes to us in Jesus Christ: 'I have seen . . . my people. I have heard their cry . . . I know their sufferings - I have come down to deliver them' (Exodus 3.7-8).

These last two attacks took place, of course, during the General Election, an election conducted at a time of great national uncertainty. The outcome has led, perhaps, to a greater sense of uncertainty than before. 'Stability' has been held before the British people by politicians and pundits of various

persuasions before, during and after the election as a virtue which the country needs. And rightly so.

In another piece of Christian ministry, this time the morning after the election, when the nation felt far from stable, Bishop Richard Harries's Thought for the Day spoke about the deeper source of national stability to be found in our common Sovereign – Her Majesty the Queen, who is the symbol of the State under whom the Ministers of the Crown, the Government and the Parliament serve. Politicians come and go (and the older I get the quicker they seem to come and go) but the Sovereign stays. Parliaments dissolve but the people endure, connected by the Crown, the sign and seal of our common life.

Bishop Richard made a number of significant constitutional points including the fact that the Prime Minister is the Queen's First Minister who, together with other Ministers and the Queen's Parliament, 'governs under her'. At the same time, he said, the Queen 'serves them'. Such service to the democratic will of the people has been enshrined in the Oath that successive Sovereigns are required to make at the beginning of their coronation since the reign of William and Mary in 1688/9 where they promise that they will govern 'according to the Statutes in Parliament agreed'. This clarification to the coronation after the Glorious Revolution was only a natural evolution of the Oath said since the earliest days of the English monarch in which the King or Queen committed to serve the people, a promise which, together with the formal recognition of the people of their

chosen Monarch, forms a binding covenant between Sovereign and people with its mutuality of responsibility.

This Christian vision of Kingship, and its accompanying Christian vision of political and ecclesiastical leadership as *diakonia* – ministry, service – is rooted even more deeply. Bishop Richard Harries referred to a prayer which is said at the beginning of proceedings in the House of Lords on every occasion, a prayer which begins:

Almighty God, by whom alone Kings reign, and Princes decree justice; and from whom alone cometh all counsel, wisdom, and understanding; we thine unworthy servants, here gathered together in thy Name, do most humbly beseech thee to send down thy Heavenly Wisdom from above, to direct and guide us in all our consultations.

The Queen rules and governs through her Ministers, Government and Parliament under God. ‘God crown you with a crown of glory and righteousness’, the Archbishop has said for centuries as he places the crown upon the Monarch’s head. It is the glory and righteousness of God that abides; the glory of God’s righteousness that endures; the righteousness of God’s glory that is the source of stability for the nations.

I was struck by the vivid description of the sovereignty of God in last Sunday’s Old Testament reading:

It is [the Lord] who sits above the circle of the earth,  
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;  
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,  
and spreads them like a tent to live in;  
who brings princes to naught,  
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.  
Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,  
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,  
when he blows upon them, and they wither,  
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.  
To whom then will you compare me,  
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.

(Isaiah 40.22-25)

Here the peoples, the princes, the rulers are reminded of our fragility and finitude and of God's stability and permanence. This is the same God of eternal stability who has come to his people in self-less mercy in Jesus Christ because he has seen our sufferings, and has come to save us by serving us with the full reality of his presence and life.

We have been greatly blessed these 65 years with a Monarch who defines her sovereignty in terms of service, following the example of her Lord and King, the Servant of all. Let us pray that in a time of great national challenge when our nation has to renegotiate our relationship with the rest of

Europe, redefine its place as a nation, heal its divisions, secure its safety, create its wealth justly and distribute it fairly, that its Government and Parliament may follow her example of serving Christ in all peoples.

Did you hear about the Red Cross's UK Solidarity Fund – a national fund of donations to provide assistance and advice for those who have suffered from acts of terrorism in this country? That is not a bad image for what our nation needs and how stability is achieved. Stability through solidarity, and solidarity expressed through acts of generosity that build up the common life and sustain peace. Solidarity between the people in the nation: people of different views, backgrounds, incomes, capacities, colours, religions. Solidarity with the peoples of Europe: a solidarity borne out of a common history in this part of the earth's geography, a solidarity which, whatever its political or economic form, serves the peace which we have so often denied ourselves and the world. Solidarity between the nations of the world: the sort of solidarity between nations that arises when they seek not their own interests but find ways to serve each others' interests.

Last Sunday we celebrated the Holy and Undivided Trinity whom we worship and serve as the one true God. The God whose divine stability is constituted by the solidarity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit as one God. The God who is so stable that he has the strength to come to us in Jesus Christ by the Spirit in

solidarity with the human race and the whole created order. The God who calls the Church and the State – and all their ministers and instruments – to follow the example of the Christ who ‘came not to be served but to serve and to lay down his life as a ransom for many’ (Mark 10.45).

May God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, defend us and renew us in our land, and give to us, and to all people, partnership, peace and prosperity.