

What sort of a nation shall we be?

Chelmsford Diocesan Synod Presidential Address 18 June 2016

Last Sunday evening I preached at St John's College Cambridge. It's the sort of gig bishops have to do from time to time. A beautiful Evensong followed by a lovely dinner. As a thank you for the sermon they gave me the choir's latest CD. On Thursday afternoon, shortly after Member of Parliament, Jo Cox, was brutally murdered on the streets of Birstall I was listening to it. On came John Ireland's beautiful and powerful anthem, 'Greater love hath no man', a gathering together of biblical texts from St John's gospel, the Song of Songs, I Peter 2, 1 Corinthians 6 and Romans 12. Although it was written in 1912, i.e. before the horrors of the Somme, Guernica, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, the killing fields of Cambodia, Rwanda or Darfur, these texts and this music speak hopefully, and with insightful prescience, to the sadness and horror of these situations saying simply that love cannot be conquered, its fires quenched or its passions drowned, and that there is a higher love which is the source of love, and that it is exemplified for us in painful detail in the death of Jesus Christ, and is also embodied in the sacrificial witness of those who work for justice and give their lives for peace.

So it begins -

Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can the floods drown it. Love is strong as death.
Greater love hath no man than this,
that a man lay down his life for his friends.

I don't suppose for a moment this is what Jo Cox wanted or looked for, but what I do know from the accounts that I have read of her career and her commitments, is that she was a politician who gives the lie to the increasingly fashionable view that public servants in general and politicians in particular, are only in it for themselves; that they want power for its own sake, or the status it brings, but have little idea of what to do with it. Apart from a few scoundrels – and you get these in every walk of life, church included - this tired and cynical view is very far from the truth. Just look at Jo Cox's CV, working for Oxfam before entering politics. And look at her brief record in Parliament: fighting for the rights of refugee children, doing the very thing that we as a diocese in our small way have also been trying to do.

I wrote a first draft of this talk on Monday. I was intending to address some of the big issues of our day – climate change, nuclear weapons proliferation, the mass movement of people - which require international cooperation: for a world which is now a global village is a world that requires global collaboration for global solutions. I was going to relate this to the European Referendum, because it seems to me that the arguments on both sides have been too narrow, too exaggerated, too spiteful. I still think this, but what happened on Thursday brings to the fore another question: what sort of nation do we want to be? Or put it this way: whatever the outcome of Thursday's referendum, what sort of nation are we waking up to on Friday? And what can the church do to bring reconciliation? The person who killed Jo Cox was said to have cried out 'Britain first'. We don't know his motive, and it seems likely that he had mental health issues. But what we must do now, whatever our particular view on the European Union happens to be, or for that matter our view on how best to respond to issues such as immigration, is demonstrate that we put Britain

first by taking hold of the values and beliefs which make Britain great, that is those values and beliefs that we see in Jesus Christ. For those are the values on which our nation's culture, politics and law have been founded.

Yet we do need to face the uncomfortable fact that a recent British social attitudes survey showed that in England and Wales "no religion" is now the largest single identification - nearly half the population and twice the number of those who put down CofE.

Now I am not saying that without the Christian faith there is no big vision for the world or no moral compass – I do not know whether Jo Cox was a person of faith, but she was certainly a person of huge vision and compassion - but there are implications. Even a recent editorial in the Guardian (not usually a great friend of the Christian church) acknowledges this saying –

‘The idea that people have some rights just because they're human, and entirely irrespective of merit, certainly isn't derived from observation of the world. It arose out of Christianity, no matter how much Christians have in practice resisted it. Although human rights have become embedded in our institutions at the same time as religious observance has been in decline, they could become vulnerable in an entirely post-Christian environment where the collective memory slips from the old moorings inherited from Christian ethics.’

It isn't religion that causes the horrors of the world. It is the lack of it, or its perversion into narrow and hateful fundamentalism. And it is important to remember that some of the greatest achievements of the European project

have been things that have their roots in the Christian narrative of loving neighbour and serving the common good.

Yet for many people growing up in Britain religion in general and Christianity in particular seems to stand for things opposed to human rights and freedoms. Anxious for our survival, we have allowed our vision to become too narrow. Let us change this, and become a church which is generous and inclusive, embodying the radical hospitality of God.

And let us remember and celebrate another neglected hallmark of Anglican-English - Christianity, one which we are going to need on Friday morning - legitimate diversity; what the Archbishop of Canterbury calls "good disagreement". Not anything goes, but everyone counts.

This is where reconciliation begins. Everyone matters. Everyone is precious to God. It is where human rights begin. And when we forget it horror takes a hold – either the senseless murder of an MP on Thursday, or the terrible homophobic murders in Orlando last Saturday, or the genocide of a whole people in Syria.

So could we please be Anglican: generous reconcilers, men and women of peace. Could we make sure our churches are open on Thursday, praying for the guidance of God in the life of our nation as we make this momentous decision; and on Friday praying for reconciliation. In a campaign where there has been too much hyperbole and spite, divisions have opened up between us that need to be healed. That it our task, and we play our part by preaching and embodying the gospel of Christ, who laid down his life for his friends. We do it

by prayer. And we do it with sisters and brothers from other faith communities and with all people of good will. We do it with and for the very people we are discussing in this Synod today– the thousands moving into new housing areas across our diocese; the refugee families we are beginning to support with the help of Citizens UK; those whose lives have been blighted by abuse, often from within the church itself.

When Britain wakes up on Friday the big challenges facing our world will still be there. There will still be a terrible discrepancy between rich and poor. The environment will still be at risk. People in danger will still make hazardous journeys to find safety for their families. Vulnerable people will still be exploited and abused. People will still get on their bikes to look for work. In or out of Europe these challenges remain, and we will need to work together, and with others across the world, to deal with them.

Jo Cox's husband, Brendan, made an astonishingly brave statement yesterday. He asked for two things: that his children be bathed in love and that we all unite to fight against the hatred that killed his wife.

Let us pray for those things today. And let us pray for our politicians who will once again have to deal with the consequence of our votes, and who will themselves be feeling anxious and frightened. Let us make sure they know that they have our support. Let us particularly send a message loud and clear to the MPs of East London and Essex: the Church of England is on your side, we thank you for the work you do for the common good. We are with you, praying for you and supporting you.

And against all the indignities, prejudices and hatreds that threaten to consume our world, we the Church of Jesus Christ will sing the song of love's victory, or as the words from 1 Peter in John Ireland's anthem put it -

Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation;
That ye should show forth the praises of him
who hath call'd you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

+Stephen Chelmsford