

THE BISHOP OF ST ALBANS' PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

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Last autumn a new book was published which quickly became a best seller. You can find it on the shelves of every airport bookshop. It is called *Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction* and was written by two American academics, Philip Tetlock and Dan Gardner. They look at the way that experts attempt to predict the future, such as what is going to happen to the financial markets in the coming year. It's telling, however, that Tetlock has concluded that in a wide range of subjects "there was very little difference between the accuracy of so-called 'experts' and guesses made by the man in the street."

Well that's what we re-discovered this past week. Most of us went to bed on Thursday night believing the opinion polls' view that there was a small margin in favour of the United Kingdom remaining in the EU. International money markets agreed and the exchange rates and share indexes reflected this consensus. When we awoke, either during the night or in the morning, we discovered that we had decided to divorce our immediate European neighbours after a forty year marriage and we now want to have a different set of relationships with other countries.

I was saddened by the past four months of debate, which was often small minded, self-centred and lacking in any vision of the common good. There was virtually no substantial discussion about the UK's contribution to building a stronger and safer world. Another regrettable aspect of the campaign, on both sides, was the use of threat and fear. I was disappointed that some of our European partners were demonised. At other points in the debate, some of the world's most vulnerable people, such as those fleeing for their lives and begging us for asylum, were used as political footballs. It was a pity that frequently the discussions simply descended to the level of "what's in it for us?"

But now the decision has been made and we have to move forward, whether we are elated or depressed at the result. We do so against a background of a divided country, with 51.9% of the voters who wanted to leave the EU and 48.1% of the voters who wanted to remain. There is a division between London and the north of England, and there is division between England and Scotland, with the likelihood of another referendum for Scottish independence. Both of our largest political parties have been torn apart, especially the Conservative Party, and there are questions for the Labour Party and the extent to which they are in touch with their traditional voters, especially in the north. These divisions are likely to take generations to heal. As I know from discussion and correspondence, some of our congregations are also divided. So what should we do now? What does this mean for us as Christians?

Firstly, after a great deal of talking, lecturing, persuading and hectoring, we need a period of listening. The second of the two great commandments is "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" and that means seeking to understand others. This listening is especially important, as powerful people and the media will continue to try

to tell us what to think. Yet, as the referendum has shown, the voices of large numbers of people have not been heard. Of course that listening does not mean that we have to agree with everything we hear. Indeed, selfish or racist voices will need to be countered. Nevertheless, we need to listen, especially to those who are marginalised and voiceless and that will include some of our brothers and sisters whose ethnic roots lie in other parts of the world and some of whom are feeling very threatened.

Secondly, we need to work for, and speak on behalf, of the voiceless. As always the rich and the powerful will lose out least in whatever changes come about over the coming months. Huge promises have been made during the campaign that our economy is going to thrive as never before outside the common market of the EU. We have to do all we can to ensure that any benefits are shared and that we seek to become a more equitable society.

Thirdly, we have to resist giving into fear. When we face uncertainty, there is a natural human tendency to retreat and put up the barricades. However, this is the very time when we need to be open to others. It is here that our *Living God's Love* prayer is especially relevant, as we pray week by week that we may live "with generosity and joy, imagination and courage."

Fourthly, we need to redouble our efforts to build relationships with Christians in other countries. Just because we are going to withdraw from the EU does not mean that we need to pull back from our ecumenical links in other countries. Indeed, just last week, the Bishop of Lindköping was with us at the St Albans Pilgrimage. He and his party expressed the hope that we would remain part of the EU. Well, that's not going to happen, but we can continue to build our links across the Anglican Communion and with our Lutheran and Roman Catholic brothers and sisters across the world.

Lastly, the scriptures encourage us to pray for our leaders: "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings should be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity." (1 Timothy 2. 1-2) I hope that every church, school and chaplaincy in the diocese will make this prayer a priority.

**Eternal God, Light of the nations,
in Christ you make all things new:
guide our nation in the coming days through the inspiration of your Spirit,
that understanding may put an end to discord and all bitterness.
Give us grace to rebuild bonds of trust
that together we may work for the dignity and flourishing of all;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.**

+Alan St Albans

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