

THE BISHOP OF ST ALBANS' PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

DIOCESAN SYNOD

9 MARCH 2019

Let me start with some verses from John Betjeman's poem *In Westminster Abbey*:

Gracious Lord, oh bomb the
Germans,
Spare their women for Thy Sake,
And if that is not too easy
We will pardon Thy Mistake.
But, gracious Lord, whate'er shall
be,
Don't let anyone bomb me ...

Although dear Lord I am a sinner,
I have done no major crime;
Now I'll come to Evening Service
Whensoever I have the time.
So, Lord, reserve for me a crown,
And do not let my shares go down.

I will labour for Thy Kingdom,
Help our lads to win the war,
Send white feathers to the cowards
Join the Women's Army Corps,
Then wash the steps around Thy
Throne
In the Eternal Safety Zone.

Now I feel a little better,
What a treat to hear Thy Word,
Where the bones of leading
statesmen
Have so often been interr'd.
And now, dear Lord, I cannot wait
Because I have a luncheon date.

The poem explores the perennial temptation for people to make God in our own image. It's called idolatry and is still alive and well in our modern, sophisticated world. Every time we are tempted to limit God and claim that he supports me or my family or my nation more than someone else or another family or nation, we fall into idolatry, into the worship of a tribal God. Alas, history is full of examples of such sin. Think, for example, of the infamous photos of clergy blessing tanks before they are sent to kill people.

Yet the great swathe of the biblical narrative sets an alternative vision before us.

At the beginning of the Bible we find God creating humankind, symbolised by Adam and Eve, with whom he walks together in the Garden of Eden. Then

through the coming of sin, people and families, tribes and nations are divided. That's the point of the extraordinary story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11, a narrative about humanity's hubris trying to build a way up to heaven: *Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people moved eastward, they settled on the plain of Shinar ... They said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens ... So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel—because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world.*

Then God calls Abram to form a new nation through which the entire world will be blessed. God raises up the prophets to speak of God's eternal purposes, which, it is now revealed, are greater than just the chosen people of Israel: *In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it (Isaiah 2.2).*

This vision is then taken into a new stage on the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit falls on people in Jerusalem and they begin to speak in other languages: *'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.'*

And then when we come to the final book of the Bible, we find this same theme picked up again: *After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb (Revelation 7.9)*

The direction of travel is clear. God is the God of the entire world - indeed He is God of the cosmos - and wills that all people will come to bow down and worship the Lamb, Jesus Christ. So this cosmic vision is not some lowest common denominator, wishy-washy 'anything goes' universalism, where we down play the truth of Christianity and fudge all the different religious, philosophical and political differences which are to be found in the world. After all, we are a biblical, creedal Church, rooted in the historic Christian gospel.

However, if we believe that God is God of the entire world, then we have nothing to fear in terms of other religious beliefs, contemporary philosophies or political creeds. Standing firm on the rock which is Jesus Christ we can go

out to meet others, especially those who are different to us, to engage with them and to cooperate when we find common cause.

What does this mean for us today? Well, I want to mention various areas, all related to this theme and all of which have a contemporary relevance.

Firstly, I want to say something about Brexit, which if all goes according to our Prime Minister's plan, will take place in just under four weeks' time. I am not going to comment on the various political options which face us and discuss which might accord most closely with the biblical vision. I know some people believe that our European links are all important, whereas others quite genuinely believe that leaving the European Union will allow us to engage with all the other parts of the world as well as Europe. Within this synod there will be a wide range of views on the various possibilities

However, whatever our views on Brexit we will always be part of Europe, albeit a small island off its West coast and we will still have to trade and to engage with the countries of Europe. Brexit is a sort of divorce and the repercussions will be with us for decades. We need to think how we can heal divisions within our own country, and the divisions between us and the nations of Europe.

Already many of our parishes are twinned with parishes in mainland Europe, especially in Sweden and Italy. One of the things that we can do is to reboot those links and reach out across the water to our brothers and sisters. Whatever Brexit means, it is not about cutting ourselves off from others.

Secondly, I want to say something about racism, which is expressing itself in various ways. There has been a frightening increase in the number of anti-Semitic attacks. This is not just a problem somewhere else - there were forty reported anti-Semitic attacks in Hertfordshire in 2017, the latest year for which we have reports. It is also something which has affected the church – indeed this diocese - and we need to be clear that anti-Semitism is unacceptable. It is therefore good that our cathedral has been hosting the Jewish Living Experience Exhibition during the past two weeks, building stronger community links with the local Jewish community.

Thirdly, turning to some of the good work that is being done by members of this diocese, it was encouraging that St Albans had such a high profile at the latest General Synod meeting which took place in London in mid-February. The debate on gypsies and Roma featured the pioneering chaplaincy work led by Martin Burrell from Luton. The former chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, Sir Trevor Phillips, has said that attitudes towards the gypsy and Roma communities are “the last ‘respectable’ face of racism” where an entire

community can be blamed or dismissed because of the actions of some of its members.

Fourthly, in today's synod meeting we have an opportunity to reflect on the rich life of our diocese in all its diversity as the Bishop of Bedford and the Revd Grace Sentamu Baverstock give us a presentation on 'Celebrating and Including Black and Minority Ethnic People in the Diocese'. I addressed this subject two years ago in my Presidential Address and I am glad to say that since then we have seen a significant rise in the number of BAME ordinands in this diocese. However, we still have a long way to go.

Fifthly, looking further ahead to next year, we will have a wonderful opportunity to engage with the Anglican Communion when we host the 2020 Lambeth Conference. Hundreds of bishops will be coming from all corners of the world. All these different races and languages and peoples are coming to our country. We have decided to invite twenty bishops to come a week early to visit our diocese and we are hoping that each of our deaneries will host an overseas bishop and will engage in some sort of outreach in every corner of the diocese.

Finally, there is a good opportunity coming up when we can undergird all of these areas in prayer. This year, as in previous years, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York are calling on us to share in *Thy Kingdom Come 2019*, which is ten days of prayer running from Ascension Day to the Feast of Pentecost (May 30 - June 9). The idea is for every church, every household and every Christian to pray for the empowering of the Holy Spirit for our effective witness. There are new liturgical and prayer resources available, a daily podcast from Bishop Tom Wright, and 300,000 children in Church of England and Methodist schools will be given an Adventure Prayer map. It will culminate with a celebration in our Cathedral on Sunday evening 9 May.

This is a great time to pray that we might be a generous, welcoming church to people of all backgrounds, as we look forward to the day when we can say, with St John the Evangelist: *After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb* (Revelation 7.9).

+Alan St Albans

4th March 2019