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A Lenten Pleynte
to the
English Bishops

by
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John Sentamu, Archbishop of York (*ed.*), *On Rock or Sand? Firm Foundations for Britain's Future*, SPCK 2015 xiv+258 pp. paperback

Who is my Neighbour? a Letter from the House of Bishops to the People and Parishes of the Church of England for the General Election 2015, www.churchofengland.org/GeneralElection2015 [downloadable pdf]

Abbreviations

Canterbury = The Most Revd Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury

York = The Most Revd John Sentamu, Archbishop of York

Book = *On Rock or Sand?*

Encyclical = *Who is my Neighbour?*

References to the Encyclical are by paragraph number, to the *Book* by page.

A Lenten Pleynte to the English Bishops

THE ENCYCLICAL is not addressed to the electorate at large, but the Bishops hope in the Preface that “others, who may not profess church allegiance, will nevertheless join in the conversation.” “Now, as we approach the next general election . . .” York begins the last paragraph of his Preface to the *Book*; and after York’s Introduction, Canterbury has the first chapter, so this too is *inter alia* an episcopal address to the English electorate. With what authority?

About this necessary question York contradicts himself. He gives a one-phrase account of the British constitution: “the Queen in Parliament under God” (*Book*, p. 15) and goes on to quote L. L. Blake, “The Coronation Service is where the Divine Law is placed before the law of the State.” Archbishops may be expected to speak the divine law, but on the other hand both York and Canterbury say (on authority?) that the Church has no authority, York beginning with an *of course*: “Of course the Church cannot assume a right to be heard . . .” (*Book*, p. 6) Canterbury: “And it is true that the Church has no automatic right to intervene . . .” (*Book*, p. 37 *Intervene!*? Is the Church of England then a stranger in England?) York does not notice a contradiction between the Queen in Parliament under God and “As a liberal democracy, we . . .” (*Book*, p. 17) Well, which? The next line calls us “citizens”. The British national anthem, unlike the French, does not mention citizens. Personally, unlike Dick Whittington, I am not a citizen. I live in a town and unlike the French am a subject of the Queen.

Another contributor says the *Book* is “certainly not an attempt to impose the values of one religion on the politics of all.” (Sir Philip Mawer, *Book*, p. 215) But what else could it be right for Archbishops and Bishops to do? Isaiah did not invite anybody to join in a conversation. The prophets were more likely to begin “Thus saith the LORD.”

The duty of the audience of prophecy is to judge it true or false; but the Bishops are beginning an ordinary discussion and inviting us to join in. As a layman with no authority in the Church I accept the invitation, though I would much rather have heard prophecy. And I notice to begin with that in both documents standards of argument leave something to be desired.

Perhaps deference prevented sub-editors from pointing out to the Archbishop of York that his own first chapter gets the *Book* going on p. 1 with a false analogy. York compares his experience of being unable to use sterling in Canada with the plight of poor people in England. “His

money won't work! How will he survive?' Olivia, the grand-daughter of the Bishop of Edmonton asked, when I was visiting Canada . . . her question made me consider how we help people in our communities whose money, what little they have, doesn't work, who have to make hard choices, for example between heating and eating." On the contrary their money, unlike the Archbishop's if he tries to pay with £s in Edmonton, does work, only he thinks they need more of it. Another contributor to the *Book* sounds off against the old distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor. It is an "ancient yet false distinction". In the same sentence that the distinction is called false we are told that "attitudes built on this ancient yet false distinction are based on prejudice rather than reality and attach a stigma to all people in poverty." (Julia Unwin, *Book*, p. 110) Well, whether the distinction is true or false it *is* a distinction, the point of which is *not* to attach a stigma to *some* poor people. Was this muddle not obvious enough for anyone to spot?

The Bishops' and Archbishops' pronouncements are sometimes true and relevant. The good things are Christian comment on our politics. "We are called to love our neighbour as ourselves. This is the starting point for all of the church's engagement with society, politics and national life. This is the truth behind everything we have to say here." (§11) This does offer solid grounds of judgement over a surprising range of both politics and politicians. And some of the Bishops' practical remarks are convincing, like the call for a real debate on nuclear weapons. (§72; Enoch Powell would have agreed.) Several contributors to the *Book* justly complain about the low level of public debate both in the gladiatorial Prime Minister's Question Time and the election campaigns conducted in soundbites. (Cf. Ruth Fox, "Politics is treated as a game with an array of commentators . . ." (*Book*, p. 195) Love of neighbour cannot be trivialisation. The Bishops are also right to point out, as practising politicians hardly can, that automatically adversarial politics can have bad effects. (§42: they weaken the comment by beginning "Adversarial politics, while necessary. . ."—*necessary?* was politics *necessarily* worse under Elizabeth I than under Elizabeth II?)

At the level of ordinary political comment there are also feeblenesses. That we have become a society of strangers the Encyclical blames on the advance of communication technologies (§44) though, after all, the modern telephones encourage people to talk more, and FaceBook, Twitter &c. are known as "social media"; but ghettoisation, for instance as practised by some Muslim communities, is not mentioned by the Encyclical. It does claim (§67) that after the Second World War "the nations of Europe" had "a shared determination that never again would global neighbours resort to mass slaughter." The Bishops have forgotten the Cold War! East Germany and West Germany are both in Europe, but for many years war between them was uncomfortably possible. The nations of Europe both sides of the

Iron Curtain were equally willing to engage in mass slaughter. And if, as the Bishops go on in the next paragraph to assert, “European people share culture and heritage,” is not the problem of national disunity precisely that some groups, in Muslim districts for instance, do not share culture and heritage, or even language? This paragraph commends the European Union for “continuing to build structures of trust and co-operation between the nations of Europe.” In 2015 the most newsworthy activity of the EU is in trying to revive the Cold War by dangerous belligerence towards the European nation Russia. If “the creation of what has become the European Union” (*Book*, p. 38) is an example of *solidarity*, God help us!

Even if the Bishops are not speaking *ex cathedra* they are still explicitly addressing us as Bishops, and it seems fair to test their advice by the standard of Christianity. The Archbishops naturally want their doctrine to be supported by the Bible and historic Christian practice. It is a serious objection that to get there, York offers as interpretations both of the New Testament and of the history of the first century AD what are just fantasies. To take the latter first: York says, “Just as it was then, [in St Paul’s time] at the origins of the Church, it is now the task of the Church to articulate a vision of what the Common Profit, the *eudaimonia* of the community, looks like and how to realise it in our own time.” (*Book*, p. 13) As an account of Church and state in the first century AD this is fantastic. Christians were in no position to give advice about how to improve either Israel under the Herods or the Roman Empire as a whole. If Christians were allowed freedom from persecution that was as much as they could hope, and often more than they got. St Peter and St Paul both advised Christians to obey and honour the powers that be, but the idea of telling them how to govern did not arise.

Yet more serious: the Bishops’ principles (when they are not too vague to be definable, like York’s “virtues [*sic*] of global justice, mutual responsibility and hope for the future” (*Book*, p. xiii)) are both incoherent and, to the extent that they have any sense at all, not Christian.

The first of York’s four bullet-points of what he reports as “essentials of the gospel” (*Book*, p. 7) is “All human beings are of equal worth in God’s sight.” If this is the first essential of the Gospel is it not strange that it is not found anywhere in the Gospels? or in any catechism of the Church of England? This equality is the same as “Humanity’s unique relationship to God”, reported by Canterbury to be: “Made in God’s image, we were created to be in relationship with him,” so for Canterbury it follows that “the intrinsic value of each human being has its foundation here. We are all equal.” (*Book*, p. 41)

I call this *incoherent* because of the impossibility of getting any clear idea of what is being asserted. Adam is created in the image of God, and male and female created he them. What is meant by the proposition that this

makes all mankind equal? or of equal worth? If the love of God is infinite towards all humans, equality does not follow. Infinities are not comparable. “Equal worth” implies a sum: all items in the box 40p or the like. *Equality*, to be intelligible, has to be in respect of something or other. In respect of any attributes whatever human beings are unequal. They don’t even all get five distinctions at GCSE. They don’t all win Olympic medals. They are not all Bishops. They don’t even all argue straight. In what sense am I, a layman who have never got higher than the deanery synod, equal with the Archbishop of Canterbury? In what sense are any of us equal to those recognised by the Church as saints? Even in the republic of letters I am not equal to the Bishops. I am superior, because I make sense, whereas they do so only fitfully and hazily.

Most adults in England under our “democratic” system are equal in respect of voting, and one vote is as good as another. Must it follow that we are all equal in political judgement? If so democracy is an ass, and unless their opinions are better than some others the Bishops and Archbishops might as well save their ink-cartridges. One contributor to the *Book* notes “the importance of equipping all citizens with the political literacy skills necessary to ‘navigate their way through the complex nature of politics and decision-making’.” (Sir Philip Mawer, *Book*, pp. 220–1) Even if “political literacy” were a skill, which it certainly is not, this would, with gross obviousness, be impossible. For example our fellow-humans suffering from the latter stages of dementia cannot be newly equipped with judgement.

In the Encyclical “equality in principle” (§62), equal worth in the eyes of God, seems to go with the demand that every human being should be “truly valued for who they are”. (§64) But what if the true valuation leads to imprisonment for child abuse? We are not in charge, thank God, of the Last Judgement, and criminals too are our neighbours who are to be loved and to whom justice must be a form of love. But the British parliament wants to judge (unjustly, in my view, but let us not discuss that just now) that anyone serving a sentence should be deprived of his vote for the duration, i.e. made inferior to the rest of us. (“Except in the sight of God,” the Bishops might retort. But has God been consulted?)

The Encyclical gave the Bishops the chance to correct some of the common fallacies associated with Western “democracy”, but they embrace them, beginning with the notion that majorities have moral authority. We need, the Bishops tell us, a new “political story” that will “enable the people of Britain to articulate . . . what they want to become and how they will work together to live virtuously as well as prosperously.” (§90) But what if we don’t want to live virtuously? What if the democratic majority wants to live in sloth and the love of money? The Bishops offer help in building “the kind of society which many people say they want”. (§3) But what if most people say they want the kind of society we already have?

Poor turnout at elections “reflects a worrying level of non-participation.” (§ 23) Is this the Church’s worry? Why? The Bishops mention “the duty of every Christian adult to vote”. (§118) Why is this a duty? May I not think none of the parties worth voting for? or may I not recognise that I am not a good judge? The “good of the majority” (§32) is surely not the same as the common good (which is said to be (*ibid.*) participation of more people. Why?) The common good has to be good for minorities too. In the *Book* Ruth Fox complains about “unelected judges”. (p. 193) Would justice be more reliable if judges were elected? The same contributor wants parliamentary candidates to reflect the social make-up of the constituency. (p. 197) Why should a good representative be of the same social class? If the solicitor has to engage a barrister should the latter be of the same social class as the client? Why?

“Most people, when asked, subscribe to some version of the idea that all people are created equal.” (§61) If most people adhere to the “self-evident truths” of the American Declaration of Independence does that make them truths, even if they are intelligible? It happens sometimes that most people are wrong.

Christianity does not necessarily support any particular form of government. There is nothing *unChristian* about monarchy or aristocracy, as there is nothing necessarily Christian about democracy. Plutocracy probably is anti-Christian because it confers power on the lovers of the root of all evil, and both the *Book* and the Encyclical warn, as they should, about the dangers of consumerism (e.g. York in *Book*, p. 26; Encyclical §32). But not even plutocratic governments necessarily neglect the poor and needy.

York’s other political virtues, after equality, are the encouragement of the right sort of *work* (*Book*, p. 7) including *stability*; *eudaimonia*, *human flourishing*, *solidarity* (*passim*) and to a lesser extent the more traditional *freedom*. (*Book*, p. 249) Not one of these, except in a non-political sense the last, is Biblical. York gives a not very lucid defence of the use of the Greek word *eudaimonia*, claiming that “it can be translated variously as ‘flourishing’, ‘happiness’ or ‘well-being’ ” before concluding that “ ‘Blessedness’ may come closer.” (*Book*, p. 12n18) If so why not use the word? Could it be that York thinks the Christian term* would not be understood? Liddell and Scott do not, anyway, agree with York on *eudaimonia*. “Prosperity, good fortune, happiness” they say (1864 edition). *Good luck* is one possibility, but can hardly be made to sound like the common good.†

* *makarios*, usually translated “blessed”, is frequent in the New Testament.

† York is also unlucky with *economy*. “In a YouTube video released to coincide with the release of his book, the archbishop says: ‘We need to rediscover the true meaning of the word economy—it means a household, a community whose members share responsibility for each other.’ ” (BBC website accessed 15 January 2015) Not according to the Dictionary: have a look.

Solidarity is shared by York and Canterbury as well as the Bishops. For Canterbury solidarity can outrank charity. (*Book*, p. 51 line 3) The question again arises: what does the word mean? “The concept of solidarity has a deeply theological heritage,” says Canterbury, with “Christian foundations,” (*Book*, p. 37) but he doesn’t say what the Christian foundations are or define the word, so we must again go to the Dictionary. “The fact or quality, on the part of communities etc., of being perfectly united or at one in some respect, esp. in interests, sympathies or aspirations. [then in smaller type] The French origin of the word is freq. referred to during the period of its introduction into English use.” (N.E.D., 1933 edn, repr. 1971) First citation, from the *People’s Press* 1848, that is, the Chartist decade, is: “word of French origin, the naturalisation of which, in this country, is desirable.” Is the deeply theological heritage like *equality/égalité* that of the French Revolution? Canterbury doesn’t tell us.

In common understanding *solidarity* is, as with the famous Polish trades union, *against* another group, in that case the Polish government. The Bishops want international solidarity by way of “strong international alliances”. (§66) Alliances are usually offensive or defensive or both; in either case *against* some other solidarity. The solidarity of NATO and the Warsaw Pact countries was aimed at each other. Some reputable historians believe that the First World War was caused by strong international alliances.

Further, the sort of solidarity recommended by the Bishops is made even harder to grasp because it is thought somehow to be compatible with disunity. “Long before the provision of free state schooling for all, Church of England schools sought to make a liberal education available to all children, and not just those growing up in the Christian faith. This work continues today.” (§86) The Bishops prudently make no attempt to support their history with evidence. It is in fact more like fiction. Long before the Forster Act of 1870, “all children” (who would be unlikely to include the half that were girls) were brought up in the Christian faith and there was no competing Muslim minority. The liberal education, if any, was Christian-based. Prayers (Christian) were universal. But, say the Bishops, “Acknowledging one’s own roots and traditions is a first step towards understanding and respecting the roots and traditions of others.” (§87) (a) Why should it be a first step? and what if the roots and traditions of others are not respectable? (b) How can this on any understanding contribute to *solidarity*?

The Encyclical mentions “practices of living among others” (§85) and says it is a fallacy to suppose that people can only work together if they agree about every issue. (§89) Yes, but could *ad hoc* alliances (whether local or international) be instances of *solidarity* in the Bishops’ sense, or of whatever it is that makes the unity of a nation? Are we together in the nation only as a series of temporary cancellable alliances? Is that solidarity?

Even Her Majesty the Queen is reported as saying that “the Church has a duty to protect the free practice of all faiths in this country [“all” *sic*] and that “It has created an environment for other faith communities and indeed of no faith to live freely.” (*Book*, p. 19) But then is an *environment* a community? can all faiths join together in solidarity by disagreeing with one another? Solidarity in the dictionary sense cannot be the same as freedom to differ.

In practice “the solidarity of the community” means attachment to “British values” (which closely resemble the corresponding French values, allowing the Home Secretary to make recently in the House of Commons the strange delcaration that she was Charlie Hebdo): the values, beliefs, practices common to the Westminster parties, *The Guardian*, the *Daily Telegraph* and the BBC—our great values of freedoms of speech, of the press, of assembly and of religion; that is, freedom to differ. They become examples of real official solidarity when their limits are reached. We are solid for freedom—as long as it is not used against what *The Guardian* holds dear. If it gets awkward, words like *extremism* and *radicalisation* are brought in to show the limits of solidarity and toleration. It is all right to go off and fight against Islamic State but not to go off and fight for Islamic State, though it was all right to “topple” (= depose and fail to prevent the murder of) Saddam Hussein and three years ago to wish to “topple” President Assad. (As to *radicalisation*: there was once a radical party in this country!)

Freedom, ordinary political freedom, is anyway not necessary to the Gospel, and is another thing that could not have been realistically demanded under the Roman Empire. The Gospel is equally for slaves and free. The only freedom offered by the New Testament is freedom from sin, on condition of repentance and faith, and that we both love and become *douloi* of Christ.

This unofficial solidarity of our political classes, sometimes called “political correctness”, is itself a sign that solidarity need not be good. There are more glaring examples. If a whole nation enjoys or suffers from solidarity, the solidarity can be both compulsory and chauvinist, as in Louis XIV’s France or the Third Reich. “Strong communities are schools of virtue,” the Bishops tell us. (§124) Well, some are and some aren’t. Gangs can be strong communities and good examples of solidarity without being schools of virtue.

Christianity offers real literal solidarity, literal embodying: Christians are “very members incorporate in the mystical body of thy Son, which is the blessed company of all faithful peope”. But this does distinguish Christians from, for instance, Jews and Moslems, and the question is whether anything comparable, and if so what, could be good in a nation.

It seems to me strange that the Bishops never tell us to love our country. They would of course have to warn against making love of country an

absolute standard (“my country right or wrong”) and against chauvinism: but love of country would have a better chance than *solidarity* of showing what our attachment to the nation has to do with the great commandment to love one’s neighbour.

The *enemies* in the episcopal statements are easier to understand, but they too are identified as such, in some cases, from a point of view not particularly Christian. The enemies are: inequality, poverty, consumerism (York, *Book*, p. 26) or (in a list York quotes from Beveridge, influenced by Archbishop Temple), “Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor, Idleness”. (*Book*, p. xiv) Idleness may come from the sin of sloth; consumerism offers several of the deadly sins as if they are the Good: pride, avarice, gluttony But: why do Christian authorities think poverty is an evil?

“Tackling poverty and inequality is fundamental” says one contributor (Kirsten England, *Book*, p. 143), by which I suppose she means the eradication of inequality and poverty. (One of the bad effects of inequality is said to be “destabilising”. (§73) Was the rule of the Whig aristocracy unstable?) In these pronouncements equality becomes a little more comprehensible, if not credible, by being for the most part limited to the financial. We are occasionally told that the Bishops’ concern is not only economic, but economic quasi-equality does seem central to them. (“Quasi” because they never say how close to equality of income they think we should come, whether bishops should be evacuated from their palaces, and so on.) “The giant that must be slayed [*sic*] is income inequality—where some few have far too much and the many have too little,’ . . . the two most senior figures in the Church of England said.” (BBC website *loc. cit.*) Canterbury does oppose the view that “the value of a given community is founded solely on its economic outlook.” (*Book*, p. 34) But the *flourishing* remains centrally economic. According to York, the “real meaning of wealth” is “what is due to all human beings to enable their flourishing” (*Book*, p. 3), i.e. *wealth*, at least to the extent of being “comfortably off”, in the ordinary sense of wealth. York’s third bullet-pointed “essential of the Gospel” asserts that “flourishing requires . . . a measure of security in the face of typical human needs” (*Book*, p. 7) = a comfortable income. In this way their *inequality* merges into *poverty*; and their political remedy for both is to make the poor richer, at the expense of the rich. The means will be the living wage, that is, payment above the national minimum and sufficient to keep people out of poverty.

It is surely a political good if a nation flows with milk and honey, and if a lot of people have a share. National well-being requires a hardworking honest workforce, receiving fair pay, which market mechanisms cannot be relied upon to provide. The living wage may be an effective means—but not everybody thinks so, and here the Bishops are in unrecognised difficulties

because they need theological support where it is not forthcoming. York was reported by the BBC as saying, “Once upon a time, you couldn’t really be living in poverty if you had regular wages. You could find yourself on a low income, but not living in poverty. That is no longer so.” (BBC website *loc. cit.*) When was *once upon a time* here or in any other fairy story? The Bishops say that “people cannot live properly when their work brings in too little to support dignity.” (§112) Oh yes they can! as I know by experience. My family, once upon a time when any imaginable “living wage” was much lower than now, was officially poor in that we qualified for financial assistance when I was in the sixth form. My father, a highly skilled workman putting in on average more than fifty hours a week, would now count as one with a wage that was not a living wage. That is, the state judged the family income too little to support dignity, flourishing &c. We did not have a phone or a car. We had a wireless but not a television. On behalf of my loving parents I indignantly deny that we did not live properly. This working-class family joined in societies beginning with the Church (and put our mites in the collection), we lived in a neighbourhood (though it was of council houses), we read books; my father was an accomplished tenor. I personally got to a respectable university far more easily than I would have done now, and I have flourished to the point of being able, not as the hardest thing I have ever tackled, to offer reasonable criticism of several Primates of all England. (But the Bishops do, perhaps inadvertently, put in a word for poverty when they notice that in the 1950s and 1960s “Strong social bonds, forged in the adversity of poor housing, frequently did not translate to the new estates, despite their better conditions.” (§50)) One authority quoted against poverty is Nelson Mandela, who said that “Overcoming poverty . . . is the protection of a fundamental human right . . .” (*Book*, p. 248) Make any sense of that, practical or theoretical, if you can. York, anyway, thinks “we can do it.” “All it takes is a commitment to loving our neighbours as ourselves, from which follows freedom, social justice and equality for all.” (*Book*, p. 249) York does not try to tell us how income-equality for all follows from loving one’s neighbour. It is unclear why there should be thought to be any connection. Were the gentry in Jane Austen’s time relieving the poor of their neighbourhoods necessarily less loving than our professional social workers? Why and how?

York does appeal to the Beatitudes and actually quotes “Blessed are the poor.” (*Book*, p. 254; Luke vi.20) Perhaps I am being simple-minded (there are worse things to be, the Gospels tell us) but I can’t help asking why this does not make poverty a blessed condition, and a determination to eradicate poverty a rejection of what York thinks is the centre of the teaching of Christ. “The Beatitudes open up a new world of spiritual character and holy beauty and consequent joy, beyond humanity’s perceiving. They show us that blessedness lies, not in outward circumstances but in inward life,”

says York, in a central Christian tradition. (*Book*, pp. 254–5) If we are not distracted by the wealth of this world we may have more of a chance of concentrating on what matters. Members of religious orders are sworn to poverty, chastity and obedience, not one of which is approved in the post-Christian world: that does not make them less Christian. But if so why does York think it essential to human flourishing do away with poverty?

As a layman with no theological authority I am embarrassed as well as scandalised to notice that the Bishops are not reliably orthodox. The aim of politics, the Bishops say, is “enabling all people to live good lives.” (§13) This is not something Christianity thinks possible to politics. The enabling is only by the grace of God, through repentance and faith, and usually by way of participation in the life of the Church. “Virtues are ways of living that can be learned.” (§124) Not according to Christianity. “We have no power of ourselves to help ourselves.” (Collect for the second Sunday in Lent) Perhaps all the archiepiscopal positives, *equality, flourishing, solidarity, eudaimonia* . . . are orthodox in “the Judaeo-Christian religion [religion *sic*]” mentioned by York (*Book*, p. 14) but what is that? Is he claiming also to be a chief rabbi?

“Claims to have grasped ultimate truth for all time, whether in theology, politics, economics or anything else, are bound to be wrong,” say the Bishops. (§19) This is just what the Church *does* claim: to have been shown ultimate truth for all time and beyond time. “Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.” (Matthew xxiv.35) The Bishops appear not only not to have accepted the gift, but to be unaware that it is offered. “None of us has a ‘Godseye view’.” (§20*) It should not be surprising then that they do not attempt prophecy. (Our Lord spake as one having authority, and not as the scribes.)

At the end of the Gospel according to St Matthew the Church is given a mission statement: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you . . .” (Matthew xxviii.19–20) This is the Kingdom of Heaven as preached by the first disciples. In the very unusual circumstances of post-Reformation England, the Church’s offer of the Kingdom of Heaven may indeed include moral, political, societal judgement of the nation as well as practical help with loving our neighbours. But could the Kingdom of Heaven sound (from Canterbury) *like this?*—

* Their authority for this is an expurgated, inaccurate and misapplied quotation from Oliver the Protector, “think it possible that you may be mistaken”. The original is more prophetic but mentions bowels so could not be used: “I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken.” How does anyone know that he has been mistaken if not by attaining a God’s-eye view?”

Across the country, we are beginning to see the development of well-structured and researched local initiatives focused on improving social inclusion, particularly in major cities. These initiatives have brought together the facts of unacceptable inequalities and identified integrated responses from the widest range of statutory, local authority, business, third sector and faith organisations and their leaders. (*Book*, p. 36)

This somehow does not sound like building Jerusalem. For Canterbury, “Leeds . . . has flourished in a way that other cities have not” and Salford as “media city” “demonstrates the positive impact of the decision to move a large part of the BBC’s structures there.” (*Book*, p. 35) Is this really a “sign of hope”? (*Book*, p. 36: see the definition of hope quoted below.) Can Leeds, and the BBC domiciled in Salford, really be seen as an answer to the prayer “Thy kingdom come”?

Will the Bishops have to form a party? If so they must first get clearer their prophetic function and of what they are prophets.

What should the Archbishops and Bishops have said? Or should they have remained silent? In a Christian society the Bishops ought to be authoritative about matters of faith and morals. York rightly deplores the “lack of a shared vision of what our society should aim to be” (*Book*, p. 238) and in the special circumstances of England the Church ought to be able to supply it. Whether or not the electorate follows them, the Church of England has then done its duty. But the advice has to be genuinely Christian. In our peculiar moment of history the shortcomings of the Bishops’ efforts are due to their taking some of their “values” from the post-Christian, Enlightenment lump, instead of leavening it.

What should they have said? I have no authority to tell them, except 1 Corinthians xii.10, the applicability of which they will have to judge. I offer, however, a different short list of essentials.

Whatever the Bishops’ judgements, they should have been in a Christian language, which these documents are not. The commonalty of the great words is under the guardianship of the Church of England. Faith, hope, charity: try defining any of them! Canterbury’s definition of hope: “Hope is the idea that all of life is a progression towards this end”, this end being “Jesus returns, all wrongs are set right, and we will spend eternity as God’s companions.” (*Book*, p. 44) Is the second of the theological virtues really so fatuous? What could make the “idea” of perpetual progression towards an end, if it is intelligible at all, not incredible? *Love/charity* caused notorious difficulties to the translators of the English Bible. The great words have to be made in poetry or art (the Good Samaritan; prophecies of Isaiah) so that they can be swallowed down with the language. And they have to be met with in life. And they have to be spoken by the clergy. One mark of English “solidarity” would be the common understanding of these words.

Politics begins with conscience, that is, literally, *knowing together*. The Church is the nation's conscience, and about this there should be solidarity between state and Church. Simple honesty for instance. The banks have been run *dishonestly*, which is a national evil. The Bishops have to make sure that *good* and *evil* are words commonly understood.

Words not found in the Encyclical include *righteousness, commandment, charity, avarice, blessed, blessedness, loyalty, godly, selfish, evil*.

The Church also gives a life-form which has had a particular character in the life of this nation. The Church ought to do what it can to ensure that the law is at least compatible with the Christian way of life. Since the Reformation, Parliament has had the authority to originate moral law only if it is acting on behalf of the Church, or as part of the Church. This of course has got awkward with the increasing mistiness of Christianity and the repeal of the test acts. But even in our present democracy nobody believes that what is right or wrong can be decided by majority vote. During the course of the present parliament there has been an onslaught on Christian marriage, "passionately" supported by the Prime Minister. Marriage is within the province of the Church, and if Divine Law is placed before the law of the State, the governing party has *no right* to contradict the Church's marriage law, whatever the public opinion polls. The Bishops should say so.*

If we are to love our neighbours as ourselves, the National Health Service does not need yet more reorganisation, it needs in some quarters a different spirit. Particularly in homes for the aged, infirm, seriously handicapped, if you don't know what *love* means you can see it in practice (or not as the case may be). As far as material welfare goes, the sick and infirm and elderly should not merely be given a safety net; as Piers Plowman demands, they should "ete whete brede and drynke with myselve;" and if the state cannot organise old folks' homes without cruelty to the residents, they should be returned to the Church, which invented both almshouses and hospitals.

Assuming that the laws are just, they should be enforced. The real place of equality in politics is before the law. For many years celebrities and MPs have got away with some of the worst crimes, those that deliberately target the innocent and young, simply because they are celebs. Jimmy Saville and Cyril Smith were not equal before the law: they were above the law. Will anything be said about this in the election campaign? I heard a strong candidate (there are a few) say that this is not a question of right and left but of right and wrong: right and wrong ought surely to be an area where the Church is listened to.

The Church ought to warn seriously against our celeb culture, and the mindless and immoral popular media on which it depends. Police forces

* Canterbury is on record (ref. mislaid, but I am sure) as saying that Parliament has a "perfect right" to make any marriage law it chooses. Only if we live under a parliamentary dictatorship.

have to be re-educated in their role of law-enforcement. Politicians must not be assumed to have the power to decide that some crimes are not worth bothering about or, it may be, too close to home.

The Church ought to be worrying about long prison sentences that are hard to see as just and rarely succeed in making prisoners reform. Trials that after preparations of two or three years take another two or three years to run are plainly unjust, because punishment begins before sentence. The Church ought to be advocating a better system of justice.

Education in this country is largely in a state of collapse and cannot easily be restored. The Church can have a say in the real notion of education as one of her handmaids, always provided of course that the Church has not altogether lost the spirit that founded the minster schools and the universities.

Foreign policy is well within the prophetic tradition. Quite a lot of Isaiah and Jeremiah is straightforward declaration to the monarchs of Judah of God's will concerning their foreign policy. The stupidity of British foreign policy under the Coalition and even more so under Blair's New Labour amounts to an evil which the Church should denounce. (The Bishops limit themselves to their half-baked support for NATO, and to a mild warning about the intervention in Afghanistan, for which they think "defence of human values" a possible justification. (§70)) This country has joined in secular crusades against lawful governments which have resulted in chaos and suffering, for instance in Libya and Iraq, for which we bear a share of direct responsibility. They have also demonstrated the feebleness of the British army, which cannot be good. We were chased out of Basra by militia that later proved themselves unable to resist terrorist forces a twentieth of their size. Now that there is a moral obligation to get Iraq and Syria out of the really appalling situations they find themselves in because of Western intervention, we do nothing! The Church ought also to have something to say about the unintelligent hostility towards Russia.

For many years, the interests of overseas Christian peoples were taken into account in British foreign policy. The Church ought to be remarking that a direct result of Western intervention in Iraq has been the persecution of churches that in some cases had been there longer than Islam, if not from New Testament times. The Church ought to demand a resumption of British interest in overseas Christians. For instance representations should be made to our trading partner the People's Republic of China about persecution of Christians.

It should be pointed out that there is no moral obligation on this country to posture as a Great Power, and that wars should never be fought unless they are just. (The just war is a specifically Christian concept.)

None of these matters, not even the shape of a Christian society and the need for a Christian conscience, is mentioned in either the Encyclical or the *Book*.

York rebukes the Church for showing “fear and reluctance to act prophetically” (*Book*, pp. 242–3) and Canterbury rightly thinks of “our common journey towards God”. (*Book*, p. 42) The Bishops ought to be able to advise about what can be good about love of country and what makes for the good of the country. As it is, they need advice about the Church. If the laity have to correct the clergy, the Church is in a bad way. *Mutatis mutandis* the situation may be compared to the one in which Solzhenitsyn issued his *Lenten Letter to Pimen Patriarch of All Russia* (English translation Minneapolis, 1972).

And our beloved Monarch needs better advisers. God save the Queen!

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