

9th February 2010

Presidential Address by the Archbishop of Canterbury

In the last few weeks we've seen a number of topics coming up in public discussion, all centring on one set of questions – a set of questions which I think reflects painfully accurately some of the problems we face in our church, locally and internationally. The heated debates around the Equality Bill brought this out in one way, some of the renewed flurries of pressure and anxiety about euthanasia and assisted dying in other ways. And as we look forward to our own debates later in the year on women bishops and on the Anglican Covenant, we may see the parallels. And in the middle of all the frustration that many feel about deferring the debate on women bishops, perhaps we can at least ask how we can spend the intervening time constructively, looking again at whether we might learn anything from the way our culture is moving that will help us maintain some level of health or maturity in our church. That is the task I'm going to attempt, with some trepidation, today.

So what are the questions that link these apparently diverse issues? I'd say that the main thing is something to do with the nature of freedom in society – and thus also with how we talk about our 'rights'. Of course, this was most in evidence in the Equality Bill debates, though it was obscured by fantastic overstatements from zealots on both sides. The basic conflict was not between a systematic assault on Christian values by a godless government on the one side and a demand for licensed bigotry on the other. It was over the question of how society identifies the point at which one set of freedoms and claims so undermines another that injustice results. As in fact the bishops' speeches in the Lords made quite clear, (despite the highly-coloured versions of the debate that were manufactured by some) very few Christians were contesting the civil liberties of gay and lesbian people in general; nor should they have been. What they were contesting was a relatively small but extremely significant point of detail, which was whether government had the right to tell religious bodies which of the tasks for which they might employ people required and which did not require some level of compliance with the public teaching of the Church about behaviour. Government had difficulty seeing that this was not just about clergy and official teachers of the faith; the Church had difficulty explaining that there might be positions, not covered by the neat definitions offered by the government, which had some kind of semi-official standing such that it would be very strange for someone to hold such a position when they were manifestly in dispute with some aspects of the Church's teaching.

But – as our own ongoing discussions about office-holders in the Church and membership of the BNP and similar organisations demonstrates, it is by no means easy to define at what point you want to identify the posts that have such a public and symbolic character that you need to require some kind of compliance.

That underlines a number of important things about the equality debates. One is that we all in fact recognise that communities and organisations have a certain liberty to define what belonging to them might entail; those who belong have to some extent chosen to live with the limits that a community has settled upon, even if they want to argue with those limits or seek to shift them. The limits may thus be a bit fluid; but whether and when they change is not to be decided from outside. The second point, arising from the first, is that if we concede the right to government to settle matters for religious bodies in some areas, how do we resist it in others? The rights and dignities of gay and lesbian people are a matter of proper concern for all of us, and we assume with good reason, even, I should say, with good Christian reason, that the securing of these rights is obviously a mark of civilised and humane society. When those rights are threatened – as in the infamous legislation that was being discussed in Uganda – we quite rightly express repugnance. But not all governments are benign and rational. And it is a short-sighted government that creates powers for itself which could be used by a later government for exactly opposite purposes. Not the least irony in the recent controversy is in the echoes of debate twenty years ago about another government's attempts to regulate teaching about sexuality in schools – but in a quite opposite direction to what we now see prevailing. The freedom of government to settle debated moral questions for the diverse communities of civil society is not something we should endorse too rapidly: governments and political cultures change, and it is a mistake to grant to governments authority that could impact on us in other and even weightier areas, whatever authority we grant government to define fundamental and universal legal entitlements in society at large.

It cuts both ways. The diverse communities of civil society cannot and should not try to determine for the whole of society what legal freedoms should be granted to any particular category of people; but they will argue stubbornly for the freedom on their side to settle for themselves – not at the government's command – how they define the jobs people do publicly on their behalf as specific communities of belief or interest. It is blindingly obvious that there are grey areas here, and that this formulation does not absolve us from argument; it is equally obvious that civil society communities, even religious ones, may change their expectations and

conventions. But looking at it strictly from the rather abstract viewpoint I have been taking here, what matters is that government acknowledges that there is a boundary that it is risky to cross without creating ideological powers for the state that could be deeply dangerous for liberty in general.

In this case, the balance of liberties seems to come out in favour of the liberties of the religious community. Granting such communities freedom to define their own position does not negate the general legal freedoms of anyone; attempting to bind such communities by legal definition arguably does negate the liberties of the community to be what it says it is. But what about the second major ethical matter that has again been in the public eye lately? You will hear many saying that the Church's opposition to legalised assisted dying is precisely an attempt to 'determine for the whole of society what legal freedoms should be granted'; which would imply that the balance of liberties here comes out against the Church. I think this is wrong. The Church does not assume that it has the right to impose any solution; but it will argue fiercely, so long as legal argument continues, that granting a 'right to die' is not only a moral mistake, as I believe myself, but the upsetting of a balance of freedoms. The question isn't about disadvantage to the Church (no-one – yet – denies the Church's freedom to have a view and even a discipline about this), but about the liberties of some of the more vulnerable of the general population. The freedom of one person to utilise in full consciousness a legal provision for assisted suicide brings with it a risk to the freedom of others not to be manipulated or harassed or simply demoralised when in a weakened condition. Once the possibility is there, it will not only be utilised by the smallish number of high-profile hard cases but will also create an ethical framework in which the worthwhileness of some lives is undermined by the legal expression of what feels like public impatience with protracted dying and 'unproductive' lives.

I don't think anyone in this hall would be unmoved by some of the agonising cases that have been in the public eye lately. And, as Andrew Brown shrewdly noted in the Church Times last week, the anxieties are also about our own future and our own capacity to bear prolonged pain and disability. But most of us here, I suspect, would say that the balance of liberties still comes out against a new legal framework, and in favour of holding to the principle – not that life should be prolonged at all costs, but that the legal initiating of a process whose sole or main purpose is to end life is again to cross a moral boundary, and to enter some very dangerous territory in practical terms. Most of us would still hold that the current state of the law, with all its discretionary powers and nuances about degrees of culpability in

extreme cases, serves us better than an opening of the door into provision for the legal ending of lives.

You may disagree with the conclusions I have sketched on these two issues, but I hope you may also see that there is indeed a fundamental complex of concerns here about the balance of liberties in society. The questions are not best addressed in the megaphone tones we are all too used to hearing. In terms that I want to come back to later, they require a three-dimensional approach. The debate over the status and vocational possibilities of LGBT people in the Church is not helped by ignoring the existing facts, which include many regular worshippers of gay or lesbian orientation and many sacrificial and exemplary priests who share this orientation. There are ways of speaking about the question that seem to ignore these human realities or to undervalue them; I have been criticised for doing just this, and I am profoundly sorry for the carelessness that could give such an impression. Equally, there are ways of speaking about the assisted suicide debate that treat its proponents as universally enthusiasts for eugenics and forced euthanasia, and its opponents as heartless sadists, sacrificing ordinary human pity to ideological purity. All the way through this, we need to recover that sense of a balance of liberties and thus a conflict of what may be seen as real goods – something of the tragic recognition that not all goods are compatible in a fallen world. And if this is true, our job is not to secure purity but to find ways of deciding such contested issues that do not simply write off the others in the debate as negligible, morally or spiritually unserious or without moral claims.

Something of that 'tragic' awareness is hard to avoid when we look at the decisions that face us in our Church. Most hold that the ordination of women as bishops is a good, something that will enhance our faithfulness to Christ and our integrity in mission. But that good is at the moment jeopardised in two ways – by the potential loss of those who in conscience cannot see it as a good, and by the equally conscience-driven concern that there are ways of securing the desired good that will corrupt it or compromise it fatally (and so would rather not see it at all than see it happening under such circumstances). And for both many women in the debate and most if not all traditionalists, there is a strong feeling that the Church overall is not listening to how they are defining for themselves the position they occupy, the standards to which they hold themselves accountable. What they hear is the rest of the Church saying, 'Of course we want you – but exclusively on our terms, not yours'; which translates in the ears of many as 'We don't actually want you at all'.

And in the Communion? There is an undoubted good in the independence of local provinces, and there is an undoubted good in the fact that some provinces are increasingly patient, compassionate and thankful in respect of the experience and ministry of gay and lesbian people – entirely in accord with what the Lambeth Conferences and Primates’ statements have said. But when the affirmation of that good takes the form of pre-empting the discernment of the wider Anglican (and a lot of the non-Anglican) fellowship, and of acting in ways that negate the general understanding of the limits set by Bible and tradition, there is a conflict with another undoubted good, which is the capacity of the Anglican family to affirm and support one another in diverse contexts. The freedom claimed, for example, by the Episcopal Church to ordain a partnered homosexual bishop is, simply as a matter of fact, something that has a devastating impact on the freedom of, say, the Malaysian Christian to proclaim the faith without being cast as an enemy of public morality and risking both credibility and personal safety. It hardly needs to be added that the freedom that might be claimed by an African Anglican to support anti-gay legislation likewise has a serious impact on the credibility of the gospel in our setting.

And in the Communion we have no supreme executive to make the decisions that might settle how the balance of freedom might be worked out. The Anglican Covenant has been attacked in some quarters for trying to create an executive power and for seeking to create means of exclusion. This is wholly mistaken. There is no supreme court envisaged, and the constitutional liberties of each province are explicitly safeguarded. But the difficult issue that we cannot simply ignore is this. Certain decisions made by some provinces impact so heavily on the conscience and mission of others that fellowship is strained or shattered and trust destroyed. The present effect of this is chaos – local schisms, outside interventions, all the unedifying stuff you will be hearing about (from both sides) in the debate on Lorna Ashworth’s motion. So what are the vehicles for sharing perspectives, communicating protest, yes, even, negotiating distance or separation, that might spare us a worsening of the situation and the further reduction of Christian relationship to vicious polemic and stony-faced litigation? As I have said before, it may be that the Covenant creates a situation in which there are different levels of relationship between those claiming the name of Anglican. I don’t at all want or relish this, but suspect that, without a major change of heart all round, it may be an unavoidable aspect of limiting the damage we are already doing to ourselves. I make no apology, though, for pleading that we try, through the Covenant, to discover an ecclesial fellowship in which we trust each other to act for our good – an essential feature of anything that might be called a theology of the Body of Christ.

This, you see, is where the Christian understanding of freedom has a distinctive contribution to make to the broader discussion of liberties in society. Christian freedom as St Paul spells it out is always freedom from isolation – from the isolation of sin, separating us from God, and the isolation of competing self-interest that divides us from each other. To be free is to be free for relation; free to contribute what is given to us into the life of the neighbour, for the sake of their formation in Christ's likeness, with the Holy Spirit carrying that gift from heart to heart and life to life. Fullness of freedom for each of us is in contributing to the sanctification of the neighbour. It is never simply a matter of balancing liberties, but of going to another level of thinking about liberty. And the 'purity' of the body of Christ is not to be thought of apart from this work. It is not to put unity above integrity, but to see that unity in this active and sometimes critical sense is how we attain to Christian integrity. The challenges of our local and global Anglican crises have to do with how this shapes our councils and decision-making. It is not a simple plea for the sacrifice of the minority to the majority. But it does mean repeatedly asking how the liberty secured for me or for those like me will actively serve the sanctification of the rest.

Sometimes that may entail restraint – as I believe it does and should in the context of the Communion – though that restraint is empty and even oppressive if it then refuses to engage with those who have accepted restraint for the sake of fellowship. The Covenant specifically encourages and envisages protracted engagement and scrutiny and listening in situations of tension, and that is one of the things that makes it, in my view, worth supporting. If one party accepts restraint, it must be in the hope that they and the rest of the fellowship are then prepared to engage and to look critically at their own assumptions as well as those of the others. For Christians, the 'balance of liberties' is not static.

Here in the Synod, we face not only the question of how we are to frame legislation that, as I think I've said before in this context, has something of good news in it for everyone, not only for one group, but also the longer-haul question of how we go on learning from each other beyond the point of decision. Whatever we decide, we need to look for a resolution that allows some measure of continuing dignity and indeed liberty to all – in something like their own terms. It isn't enough to brush aside the problems some find with codes of practice or others find with the need for women bishops to transfer authority automatically. People have a claim to be heard in their own terms, just as we have been arguing in Parliament. And we have to make difficult judgements about whether granting this freedom to this group

is more likely to undermine someone else's freedom than if the position were reversed. Only – as Christians we somehow have to add to that the question of how granting any freedom anywhere is going to set free the possibility of contributing to each other's holiness.

Earlier I mentioned 'three-dimensionality'. Seeing something in three dimensions is seeing that I can't see everything at once: what's in front of me is not just the surface I see in this particular moment. So seeing in three dimensions requires us to take time with what we see. It may help us look more critically at solutions that seek to do much all at once; and perhaps to search for structures that will keep open the ability to learn from each other. Sometimes those structures may embody what seems to some an unwelcome degree of distance: that would be true of some possible consequences of the Covenant and some proposals for the minority in the women bishops debate. What matters, though, is what they would make possible if used creatively over time; we cannot predict what future reconciliations may be helped to happen by imaginative and empathetic policies now.

But there is the simpler sense of three-dimensionality which just reminds us that the other we meet is the person he or she is, not the person we have created in our fantasies. The priest from Forward in Faith finds himself going to a woman priest for spiritual counsel because he has recognised an authenticity in her ministry from which he can be enriched. The Christian feminist recognises that the Resolution C parish down the road has a better programme for community regeneration than any other in the deanery. The week before last, I spent a morning in the parish of St Ann's, South Bronx, in New York, one of the most violent and impoverished communities in the city. I watched them feeding several hundred people, I was taken to the after-school club where local children learn the literacy and other skills they don't get in their public schools. I spoke with an astonishing Hispanic woman who has single-handedly created a campaign against gun crime in the Bronx that seeks to bring a million women on to the streets, and I saw how prayer unobtrusively shaped every aspect of this work and how people were introduced to Jesus Christ. And I was reminded of another parish in New Orleans that I visited a couple of years ago – a local church planted as a result of the relief work of the Diocese, when local people begged for a church to be opened because they had seen the love of Christ in the work done with and for them. Three-dimensionality in the Episcopal Church which some are tempted to dismiss as no more than a liberal talking shop. I've no doubt similar stories could be told of parishes in the ACNA. And then I think of a telephone conversation in December with the Archbishop of Uganda,

discussing what was being done by Ugandan Anglicans in the devastated north of the country – in the rehabilitation of child soldiers and the continuing, intensely demanding work with all victims of trauma in that appalling situation, work that no-one else is doing or is trusted to do; and the ongoing work of care for those with HIV, where the Uganda Church was in the forefront of African responses to that crisis. Three-dimensionality in a church that has been caricatured as passionately homophobic and obsessed with narrow Biblicism.

It is only a three-dimensional vision that can save us from real betrayal of what God has given us. It will oblige us to ask not how we can win this or that conflict but what we have to give to our neighbour for sanctification in Christ's name and power. It will oblige us to think hard about freedom and mutuality and the genuine difficulty of balancing costs or restraints in order to keep life moving around the Body. It will deepen our desire to be fed and instructed by each other, so that we are all the more alarmed at the prospect of being separated in the zero-sum, self-congratulating mode that some seem to be content with. If, as Our Lord says, the blessed are those who are hungry for God's justice, perhaps we shall discover our blessedness as we hunger for what the neighbour, the stranger and the opponent has to give – and find the time for them to give it and us to receive it: 'doing justice' to them in their three-dimensional reality. And we may be able to show to the world a face rather different from that anxious, self-protective image that is so much in danger of entrenching itself in the popular mind as the typical Christian position. I deeply believe that this Church and this Synod is still capable of showing that face and pray that God will reveal such a vision in us and for us.

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