

Presidential Address to Diocesan Synod Delivered by The Rt Revd Dr David Walker on 23 March 2019

Just over a week ago, a far right wing white supremacist went on a shooting rampage against Muslims gathered for prayer in Canterbury, New Zealand. Their city and ours lie at opposite points on the globe, but we share with them the knowledge of how it feels to have a terrorist murder our innocent fellow citizens. New Zealand, like Manchester two years ago, has responded well to the pain and grief inflicted on its people. People have been drawn together, not pushed apart in the way that those who perpetrate such atrocities wish. Our prayers continue to reach out to them, that they will find light in their darkness, and defeat hatred through love.

Here on this side of the planet, we are now only a few days from the date on which the UK is intended to leave the European Union. Who knows what twists and turns may yet take place over the days ahead. But here too, the gravest danger is that we allow ourselves to be so divided by our variant views on Brexit that we allow the purveyors of hatred a foothold on our nation which they could exploit in order to divide us. You may however, have picked up that the Church of England has announced a cunning plan to challenge those forces of evil. And at the centre of that plan, alongside prayer, lie our two most powerful secret weapons: tea, and cake.

Tea and cake should never be underestimated. They are simple and practical expressions of hospitality and kindness; and these two virtues lie at the heart of the Christian message. God himself is kind, says Jesus in Luke Chapter 6, and that kindness is not restricted to those who in any way merit it. Be kind to one another says Paul to the Ephesians, whilst to Corinth he writes, in that most famous Chapter 13, "love is kind". In the aftermath of the Arena attack, one of the most moving things I witnessed was simply being in a city centre where people were offering snacks and soft drinks randomly to passers by. It helped hold our city together. It was the outdoor, warm summer's day, version of tea and cake.

When I first began visiting food banks in Manchester five years ago, one thing that impressed me was that in many of them, those who came looking for a parcel of groceries to see them through the next few days, were first sat down at a cafe style table and offered something to eat and drink. This simple act of hospitality and kindness turned what could have felt like cold charity into something much warmer and more dignified. Over the last couple of years the mission initiative that has gone most viral across our diocese is a thing called Places of Welcome. We now have almost thirty up and running in Greater Manchester, there are around 200 across the nation as a whole, and there is no suggestion that our energy for them is running out.

Places of Welcome don't have to be run by churches, but a very large proportion of them are. Others take place in mosques, temples, community buildings and wherever volunteers can find a kettle and a biscuit box. The basic rule is that Places of Welcome are run by local community groups who want everyone in their neighbourhood to have a place to go for a friendly face, a cup of tea (with at least a biscuit to accompany it) and a conversation if and when they need it. They provide friendship for the lonely, help integrate newer arrivals, and form part of the support network for those who just struggle with life. Tea and cake.

Next weekend we are invited by our Archbishops to simply open up church buildings and be there with our cups and saucers, for any who want to step in off the street or lane for a few minutes of kindness and hospitality, where you might meet people both like and unlike yourself. I hope as many of us as possible will rise to the challenge, whether or not we have left the EU, with or without a deal, by then. Tea and cake will not find a solution to Brexit, but it might just be what enables us to move on from one of the most divisive periods in our national life that most of us have ever known. It may be what allows us to rebuild trust and respect, that gets us back into the habit of having conversations that don't degenerate into arguments. It may help us understand that

other people, people who take a very different line on political issues than we do, are just as keen on the welfare of our society as we are ourselves.

It can begin in our churches and church halls, but it doesn't end there. Small acts of kindness need to lie at the heart of how we engage as individual disciples of Jesus Christ with those around us. We need to be kind to both neighbours and strangers, to work colleagues and to fellow passengers on the tram, to the driver of the car seeking to get onto the main road from a side street, to the elderly person needing help in the supermarket. Being kind as a church will help us be kind as individuals. That is the kindness that will bind and heal the wounds of our society.

Sometimes I feel that as bishop, I have to ask the church to do things many of us are uncomfortable with. I'm pressing for us to talk openly about the two things that many Anglicans find difficult - money and Jesus. Or I'm asking us to look at new ways of being church that are necessary if we are to reach out and make new disciples among those we have served least well in recent times, but will make our own church a little less comfortable for those of us who like things as they are. Or I'm calling us to sit more lightly to our existing parish boundaries and our expectations of what the vicar should do, or to set aside our reluctance to work alongside the parish next door that we've always envied or looked down on. I can promise you that I will be returning to all those matters before 2019 is out.

But for today I want to call you to something far less daunting. To do what the Church of England does by its very nature. To go back to your tea urns and your cake boxes, to your IKEA mugs and your Gopak tables, and to offer those around you such simple acts of hospitality and kindness that are themselves good news to the poor. To restore this nation, and become God's Church for a Different World, through tea and cake.