

Diocese of Leeds

Twenty Eighth Diocesan Synod, Saturday 15 June 2024

Presidential Address

Way out on the rim of the galaxy
The gifts of the Lord lie torn
Into whose charge the gifts were given
Have made it a curse for so many to be born
This is my trouble
These were my fathers
So how am I supposed to feel?
Way out on the rim of the broken wheel

Water of life is going to flow again
Changed from the blood of heroes and knaves
The word mercy's going to have a new meaning
When we are judged by the children of our slaves
No adult of sound mind
Can be an innocent bystander
Trial comes before truth's revealed
Out here on the rim of the broken wheel

You and me -- we are the break in the broken wheel
Bleeding wound that will not heal
Lord, spit on our eyes so we can see
How to wake up from this tragedy

Any guesses who wrote that? No, it wasn't Taylor Swift. You will be shocked to hear it is Bruce Cockburn and comes from his 1981 album *Inner City Front*. It has always seemed to me to put into words the sense of human unease at holding together what the universe is for ... and how we live with the mess we have made of it. A broken wheel might still turn, but it will jar at every rotation. And Cockburn is uncomfortably wise about our need for a renewed perspective: "The word mercy's going to have a new meaning when we are judged by the children of our slaves."

How are we, caught up in the struggles of the present world, supposed to hold together in our heads and hearts the competing claims on our commitments? I get criticised on social media for not going on Gaza marches in Leeds, but I am wondering why people aren't marching for Sudan ... and where Sudan's genocides appear on other people's hierarchies of violence. There's too much to take in. So, for many people, there is little alternative to screening out the sights and sounds of the evident brokenness in the world out there.

I think this matters if we are to be honest about our failing to wake up to both (a) the urgency of so many global and local disasters and threats, and (b) our lack of realism with regard to prioritising our energies and engagements. Which 'issues' do I commit to without condemning the choices made by others who don't seem to share my own?

Well, this is a big set of questions and we don't have time to address them here. But, I raise them because we live at a time when we have to be honest about the impact of information and data flood – via screens and social media – on our ability to live and think and choose

wisely. And we have a vital need to keep alive a sense of perspective that keeps us steady when all around us seems to be getting a good shaking.

Two things illustrate this: (a) looking through the eyes of people who are not like us and do not share our cultural or geographical circumstances, and (b) the choices we face in a domestic general election in less than three weeks' time.

It's a bit of a shock leaving an airport at around 40C and landing at another one at around 11C. Yet, when Bishop Toby and I returned ten days ago from a week in Sudan, there was a certain metaphorical symmetry to this as well. We left the heat of a country deep in conflict and suffering and emerged into one that is feeling a bit more than a chill as the general election campaign exposes social and economic challenges not seen for several generations in the UK. Nobody is pretending that nothing is shaken and nothing is broken in the UK.

We went to Sudan to visit our sisters and brothers who, caught up in the destructive cycle of violence launched by rebel forces against the people of Sudan, face a very uncertain and not very promising future. Our meetings with displaced people and refugees, with senior politicians and intelligence personnel, with Christians and Muslims, brought home to us some of the realities which cannot be learned from a Zoom conversation or an email trail. If noticed by western media at all, Sudan's conflict is normally presented as a fight between two power-crazed generals; the reality is that the Rapid Support Forces, stacked with mercenaries and soldiers from surrounding countries and funded and armed by countries such as the United Arab Emirates, is indiscriminately murdering and destroying anything that comes across their path in an attempt to take over the country. This is not a conflict of equals – in any sense.

And the Episcopal Church of Sudan seeks to be faithful to the call of God to serve people and communities – whoever they are – because the Christian story is one of God's people laying down their life in order that the character and purposes of God can be seen and known in the world. Easy for me to say, but hard to understand when listening to a pastor who, having been beaten up by soldiers several times, was then asked how he wanted to die.

I won't go into the complexities of the situation here and now, but suffice it to say that the need of our sister church for our support – in prayer, finance, solidarity and hope – has never been greater. In conversations with Archbishop Ezekiel, who now runs the whole province from a small desk in the corner of his bare bedroom in Port Sudan, we pledged our continuing support – our love and commitment to him and his people. Thank you to all in this diocese who have given money in order to keep besieged clergy paid, fed and resourced to feed and serve others.

But, sitting with and listening to the stories of displaced people – including the Archbishop and his family – it is painfully clear just how fragile life and civilised society is. It did not take long for this conflict to ignite and for people's suffering to explode. Some of the stories we were told were hard to hear. I am grateful to Bishop Toby for the way he has been able to tell some of these in the UK media in order to get Sudan back onto the world's attention

radar. I continue to represent our commitment to Sudan in Parliament and other spheres of influence, and this will continue once a new Parliament is in place in July.

Sitting in Port Sudan, listening to stories and hearing a different perspective (filtered through a different way of seeing and experiencing the world), one can understand the impatience of those who suffer that we in the Western Church are so preoccupied by matters that are not the burning priority in the cauldron of imminent violence. Having houses, goods and people burned shines a different light on some of our other passions.

Which sets in clear relief the situation faced by our own nation. The general election on 4 July this year presents all citizens with a responsibility to think, to vote and to engage properly in a participative parliamentary democracy ... for the sake of the common good. I struggle when I hear voices in the media which assume - as the only criterion for choosing which box to put a cross in – whether this will benefit my material wealth, my own security, my own pension or financial wellbeing.

As a Christian I can't go along with this. This cannot be about choosing a government which will make me feel better or have more; it must take us beyond consumerist self-interest into considering what will best enable all in our society to flourish. It used to be called 'the common good', seeing taxes, for example, as a 'good' and not a burden. In order to help Christians approach the election in a Christian way, the bishops have put together resources that face us with Scripture and encourage us to 'Pray Your Part' in this electoral process. Even the Daily Mail can't complain about bishops urging renewed prayer and study of the scriptures as they take their responsibility seriously for choosing what our country should be like in the future.

What brings these things together – Sudan and the UK general election – is precisely the point articulated by Bruce Cockburn. Our starting point cannot be just the here and now. As the Apostle Paul put it in his letter to the Romans (chapter 12), we must be willing to be "transformed by the renewing of your minds" – which involves being willing to have our mind and perspective changed by exposure in prayer and the reading of scripture – that we might increasingly see through the eyes of God who has bumped along the rim of a broken wheel.

This means starting with a Christian theological anthropology: all people are made in the image of God; the created order belongs to the God who shows himself incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth; Christian discipleship means shaping our individual and common life in such a way that when people touch the church - at whatever level – they meet something of the Jesus we read about in the gospels. Let's at least keep this dynamic simple amid the complexities of everything else.

So, our agenda today has to be seen not as a series of items of business that exist for their own sake. No, rather, they are part of our way of ordering our common life and priorities so that the church in the Diocese of Leeds plays its part – however small or limited – in exposing the world around us (in Sudan and here in England) to the self-sacrificial love, mercy, grace, justice and generosity of God who, to use Cockburn's language, entrusted the gifts of his creation to our charge.

We will discuss money and finance and annual reports. These do not exist for their own sakes. They tell a story of our life and how we are meeting our obligations as stewards of the gifts of the creator. Let's not forget the bigger story into which they fit.

Today we say good bye to Bishop Tony who will retire at the end of August, having finished his public ministry in Wakefield and the diocese early in July. Ordained for 43 years and ministering in West Yorkshire as an archdeacon and suffragan bishop (in Wakefield) played an indispensable part in creating and shaping our now-ten-year-old diocese from 2014. He bears some of the scars of this, but has been faithful, generous and collegial throughout – never losing sight of the bigger picture as I described it earlier. Tony can go into a well-earned retirement knowing that he has served well and fruitfully. Tony, we owe you a large debt of gratitude for your ministry and service among us through so many years of change. We will miss you (but I have begun the process for your replacement and will petition the Dioceses Commission on 23 September!).

Towards the end of our agenda today we will have an update on our Barnabas project which is a vehicle for enabling 'the diocese' to support, encourage, resource and accompany our parishes as they seek a confident and never-boring future. Confidence, however, will emerge only if first our mind, heart and imagination are grasped by the God who has created and called us. Our diocesan dynamic has not changed: confident Christians who grow churches that help to transform our local communities.

The rim of the wheel is broken. But, brokenness – what the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka called 'the solidarity of the shaken' – is what holds us together in bold humility. The earth is the Lord's and everything in it (Psalm 24). Which is why, later, we can go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

The Rt Revd Nicholas Baines
Bishop of Leeds

15 June 2024