

The Archbishops of Canterbury and York gave a joint Presidential Address today at the start of the virtual General Synod of the Church of England. The speeches follow in full

Â

Archbishop of Canterbury

We meet, dear sisters and brothers of the General Synod, in the shadow of the Pandemic. Across our country somewhere around 70,000 extra people will not be with us at Christmas who might very well otherwise have shared in our celebrations.Â

Millions more have been ill, and a significant minority have long Covid, a syndrome whose outcomes and impacts are unclear. The impacts of this virus have been especially serious for specific groups and it has stripped away every attempt to cover weakness.Â

If you have learning difficulties, if you have other disabilities, if you have chronic illnesses, if you are of UK minority ethnic heritage, if you are poor, if you are old or in a care home, then if you contract Covid you are more likely to die. If you are poor and in a front-line occupation you are more likely to get Covid. If you risk yourself for others you are more likely to get Covid.Â

Add to that the vast rise in domestic abuse, in mental illness, in unemployment and financial hardship especially amongst small businesses the low paid and the entrepreneurial and we see that the virus makes its way directly or indirectly into every crack in society.

And this country is richer than most, for even those where the pandemic has been minimal are suffering from the struggling global economy.Â

A day labourer in so many parts of the world works or starves. A child soldier is trapped in violence. Women are ever more vulnerable. Our fellow human beings in the poorest parts of the world, our brothers and sisters in Christ have the virus on top of already intolerable hardship and persecution.Â

We come to the end of 2020 with bereavement, illness, suffering and fear marking much of the year for many of the people in much of the world.Â

Whatever else we are called to do, whatever actions we decide on, we are called to weep with those who weep, to serve those in need, to be courageous in faith and to put our hands in the hand of the creator, saviour and judge of all things, praying with lament, protest, petition and thanksgiving.

Like 2001 with the destruction of the Twin Towers, 2020 will be a year that registers in memory and in history. It can be compared also with 1929, with 1914, with 1989. We are aware that this is a year in which huge changes are happening in our society and the world and consequently in the Church.

Â

For let us be clear there is no possibility of changes in society failing to have a profound effect on the shape, calling and experience of mission in the Church.Â

Institutions that do not adapt to new circumstances are condemned to extinction as are institutions that adapt wrongly, in a way that does not reflect their history, their traditions and their values.

As I have said, 2020 has brought not one but at least 7 obvious crises and too many more to list if one were to look harder:Â

It began with Covid-19 and the immense impact that has had on our sense of security, in those parts of the world where disease and natural disaster that threatens to change our lives for many years are unfamiliar parts of our history, not normal companions to our journey.

Second, the pandemic triggered an economic recession on a scale that is extraordinary. Despite its happily V-shaped nature, for which gratitude is owed not least to the Chancellor of the Exchequer for his decisive action and to the government for its willingness to take great risks, we will still end the year with the economy at least 5% smaller than it began the year.Â

Third, we are facing in society and in the church the black lives matter crisis, racism, come to the fore afresh this year but deeply embedded in our history and in our foundations. Here, I'm using crisis not only in the sense of an alarming event but also something that rightly forces decisions on us.Â

In reviewing 25 CMEAC reports we have seen that there have been numerous recommendations, more than 170, most of which have not been put into practice. We cannot blame anyone but ourselves for that.Â

Fourth, we have the ICCSA report and the dreadful shame that rightly accompanies it. We have discussed this at great length in the past and changes are happening, but there is far yet to go and as on every occasion when we mention safeguarding, we must say clearly how sorry we are and we must recognise that an apology only make sense â as with racism â when it is accompanied by genuine action, repentance and reparation.

Fifth, as a nation we are facing huge change in the way we relate to Europe and the rest of the world. That it will change is not a question- Â it has been settled in two popular votes - the uncertainty is what it will be like and what we will do. The debate over international development funding is only one, albeit an extraordinarily important one part of this question.

Â

Sixth, although it is easily forgotten except on the south coast that there is the ongoing human crisis of immigration, with small boats coming in ever greater numbers across the channel and the picking up of those sinking a routine matter for RNLi and Border Force, as well as for fishing boats. We need to remember that there will be those contemplating that enormously dangerous voyage at this very moment as we sit in our homes or here.Â

Seventh, the underlying challenges to our understanding of democracy in populism, of international law and of what makes for a good society continue to be chronic and destructive weaknesses in the capacity of our societies to respond to change.Â

And underlying all these, overshadowing might be a better word, bigger than any, is the crisis of climate change and the environment.Â

It would be easy for the Church to be fearful. Fearful of these changes, to concentrate only on ourselves, and there have been moments this

year when we have done precisely that. Perhaps we will look back and conclude we acted wrongly, or perhaps we can only conclude that we acted over-prudently in the light of our ignorance about the nature of the virus.Â

Whatever we see over time we also know that at the grassroots level the church has acted magnificently, with lay people and clergy giving every ounce of their energy and commitment to the service of the poor and the needy in our society. They are also heroes of these crises.

However, we cannot remain in crisis mode forever. Therefore, this shared presidential address continues with Archbishop Stephen showing us what actions we have taken and how we are looking forward in order to make space for the empowering and envisioning work of the Holy Spirit.

For as it says in Isaiah 7:9, to King Ahaz panicked by invasion and threats, "if you do not stand in faith you will not stand at all".Â

These crises are not signs of the absence of God but calls to recognise the presence of the Kingdom of God and to act in faith and courage, simplifying our common life, focusing on Jesus Christ, looking outwards to the needy, renewing the call to wash feet, to serve our society and to be the Church FOR England.Â

We do not lose heart. Indeed, we rejoice in Christ. The title of our Christmas campaign whether physical or virtual, is "comfort and joy". It will be lived out, spoken out, proclaimed and celebrated. For it is in pointing not to us, but to God who came to the poorest of the poor in order to be amongst them and with them as Immanuel, God with us, that we fulfil our mission and our calling.

Â

That is our call today and now we turn to Archbishop Stephen to show how we are trying to make space for that call to be realised and answered amidst the human, financial and missional challenges we face.

Â

Archbishop of York

"Some put their trust in chariots and some in horses, but we will call only on the name of the Lord our God" (Psalm 20.7).

When, tomorrow morning, we come to exploring vision and strategy for the Church of England over the next 10 years, you will find, right at the heart of the vision that I believe God is laying upon us, precisely this: a greater dependence on God. And hearing the challenges that confront us, particularly the things that have either emerged this year or whose urgency has been heightened by the events of this year, it would be tempting to say that we don't need to worry too much, everything will be ok, we'll soon be back to normal, and here is the five-point plan for fixing it all.Â

But that is not where we are. And even if we did find a way of overcoming those seven woes that Archbishop Justin has identified, as he said, there is an eighth coming over the horizon which dwarfs all of them, and that is the environmental crisis that if unaddressed will consume everything and render all these other things very small beer indeed.Â

What is the Christian response? Well first of all, soberingly, it is to heed the prophet Jeremiah who warned against treating people carelessly, saying âWoe to you who say peace when there is no peaceâ (Jeremiah 6.14). Â We are facing huge challenges and there is no point in pretending otherwise. But also, as Jesus said, âThe truthâ â and nothing but the truth â will set you free.â (John 8. 32)Â

This year has revealed to us some truths about ourselves. Our finances are more than stretched. The IICSA report has confronted us with some terrible failings and on Wednesday we will have an opportunity to discuss this. Our culture needs to change. We all have a responsibility for this, but the culture of any organisation is most shaped by those in leadership, therefore we bishops and archbishops must take a lead. Â Loving one another and being honest and transparent about our failings is essential. But there are other challenges that relate to this. Therefore, alongside our response to IICSA and all that follows from it, we have set up a number of other groups. Â

The Bishop of London has been leading a Recovery Group which has been dealing with the day-to-day challenges of COVID-19 and liaising with government. The Bishop of Leeds is leading a group to review our governance structures with an aim to simplify the way we do things. The Bishop of Ely is leading a group that is asking questions about our diocesan structures. The Bishop of St. Edmundsbury & Ipswich chairs a group that is looking at how we can improve our effectiveness, exploring a great range of issues about how we can share and simplify various functions, find better ways of doing things âafter all, we have all learned this year that not every meeting has to happen in person! â and where necessary stop doing some things altogether. The Bishop of Sheffield chairs a group that is exploring greater financial mutuality between dioceses. And I have been leading a large consultative process to discern what God might be saying to the Church of England and how we might become a church which is more centred on Christ.Â

All these groups have been collaborating with each other under the chairmanship of the Bishop of Manchester, and many, many other people, lay and ordained, are involved in these processes, lending their energy, time and expertise. Justin and I wish to express our gratitude to them all. It is a huge undertaking. But I believe that through it God will lead us to a better place and, in due course, quite a number of things will come to Synod for deliberation and decision.

But the most important thing is that we put our trust in God.

Iâve always been very moved by Othelloâs words to Desdemona (surely English literatureâs greatest chat up line). He says to her: âI do love and when I love thee not, chaos has come again.âÂ

Wouldnât it be lovely to have someone say that to you!Â

And, of course, it is what God says to us in Christ. We rest secure in the knowledge of the love of God that has been shown us and poured out for us in Jesus Christ. He is our security. He is our peace. He is our hope.Â

When we abandon this love or depart from this love, there is chaos. Now is the time that we in this Synod and in this Church of England, must love one another more than ever. There are going to be difficult changes ahead and hard decisions to make. But it is not the survival of the institution of the Church of England that matters, so much as the love that God has for us in Jesus Christ which has been entrusted to the Church, which is itself the bride of Christ and Godâs most precious beloved.

Whatever happens, and whatever form and shape the Church of England takes, Godâs love for the Church is not in doubt. But because we have been shamed this year by the terrible failings of the past; and because we know in our bones that we canât maintain this way of doing Church for much longer; and because we know this will mean difficult, difficult decisions; and because we know that Jesus loves the poor and we have a special vocation to be a church of the poor; and because we have been charged with the responsibility to be good stewards of the Earth and to bear the gospel of Godâs love to everyone, we are going to have to change. As Hans Kung observed: âTo stay the same when everything else around you changes, is not to stay the same.âÂ

If we do this without love, there will be chaos. If we decide to put our trust in the chariots and horses of the world, we will fail. But if we put our trust in God, and if we learn to love one another, then I believe we can become a simpler, humbler, bolder Church, better able to live and share the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Â

Â

12 min read

Source URL: <https://www.archbishopofyork.org/news/archbishops-presidential-address-general-synod>