



**THE ARCHBISHOP
OF YORK**

Each year Christians on the Left host a church service at the beginning of the Labour Party Conference. This year Archbishop Stephen was invited to preach at St James in the City, Liverpool. His sermon follows in full...

Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called... take hold of the life that is truly life. (1 Timothy 6. 12 & 19)

First of all, it's a real joy to be with you. Yes, indeed, any invitation from Liverpool is always welcomed. My eldest son came to University here in Liverpool, twelve or thirteen years ago, and basically stayed. He was a member of this church for some years and I've worshipped here quite a number of times. And my daughter in law, his wife was ordained Deacon this year. They serve in Norris Green, which those of you who know Liverpool know, it's a pretty challenging bit of Liverpool. And well, that's what we need to talk about. We need to talk much more about the huge discrepancies of wealth and opportunity in our nation. The way that we're not a very United Kingdom, and the way that we need a new vision, a new home for everybody, but particularly, for the so many left behind communities.

Perhaps I should start by saying that today's readings are those set by the Church for today, not ones we've chosen for ourselves. And they are very challenging for everyone in public and political life whether you are on the right or the left.

But actually, I'm not going to go for the obvious and preach on the text, 'Those who want to get rich fall into temptation...' (1 Timothy 6. 9), or 'The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil' (1 Timothy 6. 10), or 'Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth' (1 Timothy 6. 17), though all these texts are important and very relevant to what is happening in our nation and our world at the moment, especially for those who believe that wealth trickles down, when all of those without much wealth, and especially the poor, know it gathers and expands in the aquifers and coffers of the wealthy and is carefully guarded.

No, I want to preach on Paul's final words, almost the last words in this whole letter to Timothy: 'Be rich in good deeds... be generous and willing to share... in this way you will take hold of the life that is truly life!' (1 Timothy 6. 18 & 19)

Let us build a coalition of hopefulness and goodwill around what we know to be true and good and right. Let us invest in what we know to be true and good and right. Or as Jesus says, Seek first the kingdom of God. And then everything else will be added to you. For in Christ we are shown what our humanity can be.

So, though you may – or may not – be pleased about this week's tax cuts, if you are a beneficiary what you choose to do with your additional money, is an uncomfortable question only you can answer, and no politician or economist can make it for you. It is about each of us asking what is right, what is best in us rising to the surface and shaping who we are. Kevin's quote, I mean, I wrote it down. 'When people treat you like a person, you become a person!'. So what can we do to let what is best in us, rise to the surface so that we acquire our full humanity, generous instincts of goodness and grace, that come from a life shaped by the gospel and imitating Christ. Because brothers and sisters, isn't that the message of the Gospel? That God in Jesus Christ has treated us so well, has lavished His blessings upon us, has forgiven us again, how many times? As many as 70 times? No, seventy times seven. God goes on giving us a second chance, walking the second mile, turning the other cheek. Why? Even dying for us so that we could become fully the people that we are meant to be. Generous instincts of goodness and grace that come

from a life shaped by the gospel and imitating Christ. This life is often hidden and neglected, sometimes not known about at all, but it is the image of God within us.

If you walk around virtually any major city almost anywhere in the world, without knowing it you will be stepping over hidden, subterranean rivers and streams.

There are many lost rivers here in Liverpool – the Alt, the Garston and the Pool, all tributaries of the Mersey, but now built over.

Sometimes in extraordinary weather conditions these underground streams break the surface, and for a moment we see them again.

Following the death of Her Late Majesty the Queen, I think something extraordinary happened in our nation, of which the most obvious outward sign was the great queue of people, thousands and thousands of people, stretching along the Thames from the east end of London in Southwark park to Westminster.

As you may know, I was in London quite a bit during the past fortnight.

I stayed at Lambeth Place and every time I stepped out of the front door, I encountered this astonishing queue. I chatted – and indeed sung hymns – with many people.

And although a few selected folks had pushing in rights (I'm afraid I was one of them) for most people, whoever you were and whatever your wealth or position, you had to stand in line; David Beckham alongside a pensioner from Crewe or the unemployed job seeker from Hull.

To coin a phrase, the queue levelled us up.

But it also represented something *breaking out*.

Something that was always there, but hidden from view, broke the surface: not just an outpouring of grief, but a reaffirmation of some of the things and the deep-seated values that are the best of us. Sometimes these values are considered old fashioned values, or British values. These are Christian values.

For a while we were one humanity. We felt united. It wasn't that our differences had disappeared, but they were re-configured within a wider and deeper belonging.

And it felt good, like life itself as it is meant to be, because there has been so much in our nation in recent years that has torn us apart. It has been ugly.

Just this week, alongside that mini-budget, one of the great misnomers was there was nothing mini about this budget, we have heard that the child poverty gap between the Northeast, where I serve, and the rest of the country has reached a 20-year high.

Consequently, but sadly not surprisingly, we have also heard in this week's report from the Children's Society that children are becoming more unhappy with their lives, prospects, schooling and appearance.

It also tells us that 85% of parents are deeply worried about the cost-of-living crisis. And that is before winter has arrived.

A child growing up in Blackpool or Hartlepool now finds that their life expectancy has gone down, and the gap between their healthy life expectancy and other parts of the country grows wider and wider.

Yes, I'm sure we need a new approach to policy, but most of all we need a hopeful vision. And the hopeful vision given us by Christ, whether we reckon ourselves left or right, or even Christian, begins with the recognition that, left or right, black or white, male or female, gay or straight - or for that matter any other of the categories and groupings that we are put in or confined by or constrained by - we belong to each other; we have responsibilities to each other. We are one humanity inhabiting one world.

But this also means that we are very unlikely to share with one another (let alone care for one another!) until we have a sense that we first belong to one other and have a commitment to each other. We are sisters and brothers to each other. How do we Christians know this? Because every time we say the Lord's Prayer, we declare it. The very first two words of the Lord's Prayer are a radical statement about what it means to be human.

We say Our Father, now I know the word father can be problematic, but there isn't time here. God is the motherly father, you know, God is not male or female. But what those words say is, if you say Our Father, what you're also saying is that everybody else who says this prayer with me is my sister and my brother, to whom I have responsibilities, and in whom I am called to enter into relationships of giving and receiving love.

Moreover, until we realise that our well-being is inextricably tied up with the well-being of our neighbour, we will never build a fair society. The streams of grace may appear from time to time. But they will soon be covered over.

Oh yes, we might be prepared to give our neighbour a handout, but never a hand up. It will always be charity, never justice.

But we are one humanity, and the big issues for our nation, and the massive global issues of peace and climate justice for our world, will only ever be addressed when we take hold of the life that is life, that is the Christian vision of who we are as children of God, made in God's image, decent and precious to God and to each other.

The word economy comes from two Greek words: oikos, meaning household; and nomos, meaning law. So, the literal meaning is 'the law of the household.'

Furthermore, nomos is from another Greek word, nemein, meaning to distribute, indicating that law and justice here have something to do with fair distribution.

This seems to me to be a good place to begin thinking about a hopeful Christian perspective on the economic well-being of communities and nations.

A good economy is meant to be like a well-run household. And even though most people don't claim a great understanding of economics (and I

sometimes think that economists and the politicians they advise would prefer to keep it that way) we do know what a well-run household should be like.

One of the things we take for granted in a well run household– in fact, if it wasn't there, we would hold up our hands in horror – is that everyone is catered for fairly and according to their need. There is no preferential treatment. We are - as it were – altogether in the queue.

In a family – a household – it would be unthinkable that at the dinner table some are fed while others go hungry.

Yet increasingly, the safety net in our nation is a foodbank, where more and more people have to go to get what our economy itself fails to provide. I was in Middlesbrough in North Ormesby, earlier this year, visiting a school. When I send my kids off to school, we'd often send them off with their lunchbox because that's what you do, isn't it? In this school, you go with an empty one. Because there's a food bank in the school. So these kids go to the Breakfast Club first, and they receive free school meals. And then at the end of the day, there's trestle tables set out in the playground, and that's where you fill up your box so you can have some tea. What has happened to us as a nation that the children are taking an empty lunchbox to school to fill up so they can have some tea when they get home?

This is deeply shocking. And what is even more shocking is that we are not shocked anymore. We take this kind of inequality for granted.

What we need is a hopeful vision. A vision that unites all of us and a vision which recognises our common humanity. And I think we saw something of this rising to the surface last week when we stood alongside each other in the queue, levelled up, one people, one nation.

We find this vision in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. For in Christ there is a new humanity and from Christ we learn of our belonging to each other and the responsibilities that flow from it – the joyful responsibilities for these other people who are our sisters and brothers.

We take hold of the life that is truly life, the life of God and our lives lived in community with God and with each other.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, said, 'He has brought down rulers from their thrones and has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant...' (Luke 1. 52-54)

This isn't levelling up, but over-throwing. It is a redistribution. It is mercy and justice. And it can only come from a place of vision about who we are, where we belong, and where our mutual responsibilities lie.

Without it we perish.

We build walls and post sentries. Some get rich. Most don't. Many are left behind altogether. Nations fragment. Dis-ease stirs. Walls are built higher. More sentries are recruited. More misery ensues. Discord ferments. Wars are started.

And the most pressing issue of all – climate emergency, care for the poor, the excluded, the refugee are neglected altogether.

In the name of Jesus Christ, our brother and our Saviour, let us look for a better way, not putting our trust in wealth, but in God. Amen.

