



THE ARCHBISHOP
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Last Thursday, there was a short debate in Parliament on the place of Christianity in society.

It was led by one of our Yorkshire MPs, Nick Fletcher.

Unlike so many debates in parliament, the atmosphere was almost entirely positive. In fact, something rather unusual happened: across the spectrum of political opinion, members of parliament agreed with one another.

And what they agreed was this: that the Christian faith, alongside other religions in our multifaith and multicultural society, is a force for good.

In his speech, Nick Fletcher himself made the point that at the coronation, His Majesty The King will be anointed in the name of God, and that as well as Head of State, he is Supreme Governor of the Church of England. At the same time, the coronation will be a moment for us to celebrate the diversity of modern Britain and the contribution that people of all faiths and none make to our society.

Faith makes a difference to life. It teaches us that whoever we are and whatever our status, we are accountable. And it also teaches us responsibility to each other as one human household inhabiting one world.

It was because of this accountability to God and responsibility to each other, and particularly because, in Jesus Christ, we discovered this was not something to fear, but the supreme outworking of love - God was a loving father, and every person a sister and brother - that down through the centuries (and, despite its many failings), the Church has not only encouraged us to care for one another as individuals within our families and communities, but to offer ways of providing care in society as well.

The far-reaching welfare reforms of the period after the second world war were inspired by Christian teaching, and very often carried through by Christian politicians.

William Temple, one of my great predecessors, was one of those who pioneered a Christian narrative for how we might love one another in society and learn to live in peace.

But as Nick Fletcher also said in his speech, "It was the Christian faith that moved John Locke to develop our understanding of religious _____"

toleration.

“It was the Christian faith that compelled William Wilberforce to fight the slave trade, set up homes for the elderly, and establish the Royal Society for the prevention of cruelty to animals.

“It was the Christian faith that moved Lord Shaftesbury to campaign for better working conditions and provisions for the mentally ill.

“It was Christianity that inspired Hannah More to set up free schools for the poor... Josiah Wedgwood to revolutionise working conditions in his factories... and Elizabeth Fry to campaign for prison reform.”

There are many more we could add. Desmond Tutu campaigning against apartheid. Chad Varah setting up the Samaritans. Bruce Kent questioning our reliance on expensive nuclear weapons. Paul Boateng chairing the Archbishops’ Commission for Racial Justice which is meeting at the moment and has just published its second report. Or Marcus Rashford crying out for free school meals for children in deprived communities.

And all those ordinary, Christian people in parishes right across Yorkshire and up and down the country day in day out, serving their local communities in food banks, and homelessness shelters, offering debt relief, support for refugees, and bearing witness to a different way of inhabiting the world.

As we approach the great feast of Easter, this gives an opportunity for us to celebrate the way in which the Christian faith has shaped our nation, and honour all those who do so much to serve our local communities.

However, although the Christian narrative has done so much to shape our society, and although it was genuinely good to hear those MPs acknowledging this, do we today still think of ourselves as being accountable to anyone other than ourselves, or think that we have any responsibility to our neighbour in the same way?

In our society today, we can see growing unrest and inequality, of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, where the big vision of the 1940s and 50s that was shared by politicians of all parties that we could build a society where there was equality of provision and opportunity, is so cut back that only those who can afford it get the care and education that should be everyone’s right. What was once a springboard ~~for~~

everyone, ends up a safety net for those left behind. And often it is our poorest communities in the north who suffer most.

Of course, it isn't just Christians who have a vision for a fairer society, and it isn't just Christians who have the energy and motivation to do something about it. We carry this vision and do this work alongside people of other faiths and no faith at all.

But it is the case, that the ethos and values we all long for do not exist in a vacuum. Nor are they spun out of thin air.

This ethos of mutual belonging and mutual support, and these values of neighbourliness, toleration, generosity, and self-sacrifice, come directly from the Christian story and from the person of Jesus himself.

This Easter, there is a big challenge for our church and for our world.

We Christians must get better at living and telling this story; and in our so-called secular society, we would do well to honour our own history and traditions, and see, as those members of Parliament did last week, where our values come from and what might happen if we lost them.

As Nick Fletcher pointed out right at the beginning of his speech, the tiled floor of the central lobby between the House of Commons and the House of Lords contains the opening words of Psalm 127: "Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain."

is one of great hope. Nothing is ever completely lost, or completely



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