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On 27 May 2025, Archbishop Stephen gave an address at the ~~Armenian Heritage Conference~~ in Bern, Switzerland titled 'History as a Witness to the Truth: What our Fellowship Demands'. This follows in full, as prepared before delivery

Your Holiness, and all our Sisters and brothers in Christ assembled here – greetings from the Church of England! There has been a long and honoured friendship between the Church of England and the Armenian Church. This goes back at least to the strong bond forged by one of the greatest and most influential laymen of the English Church, William Gladstone, in his searing criticism of the oppression and murder of the Armenian people by the Ottomans. He called the Armenians “one of the most pacific, one of the most industrious, and one of the most intelligent” of peoples. Gladstone was a great Christian statesman whose sympathy for the plight of persecuted people had already encompassed the victims of atrocities in the Balkans and in Bulgaria.

At that time much of Armenia was part of the Ottoman Empire, which of course collapsed after the First World War, in a time of terrible, catastrophic persecution and slaughter for your people. For much of the twentieth century, your country was ruled by Russia, or rather the Soviet Union, and true independence became possible only with the collapse of that empire thirty-five years ago. Archbishop Robert Runcie had visited Armenia in 1979, as Bishop of St Albans. But the end of the Soviet era made possible even closer relations. Archbishop George Carey visited Armenia in 1993: he wrote that the Armenian Church’s “brave Christian witness during hostile Communist rule, the distinctiveness of its traditions and faithful clergy, its courage during and after the massacre of its people...attracted us greatly”. Archbishop Rowan Williams went in 2007, lighting a fire at the Genocide Memorial standing beside Your Holiness. And my former colleague, Archbishop Justin Welby, went as recently as October 2023, in a trip which I know had a profound effect on him.

I mention these things to show how our churches have a history of close relations stretching back over 130 years. But that is a mere moment in comparison with the great history of the Armenian Church, going back almost to the Apostles themselves. Everywhere I read that Armenia is the old Christian nation. We in the Church of England like to think we represent the ancient church of the English nation. But our history is cast in the shade by the great witness to the Gospel represented by the Armenian Church. In England, our medieval churches are part of the landscape. They have survived largely unscathed for centuries. What damage they received mostly was inflicted by our own church conflicts at the time of the Reformation. And then of course there was the bombing in the Second World War. We know how much our churches and our burial grounds represent to our people, how much they speak of the trials of faith, of the endurance of our people, and how much the memory of our people is embedded in those buildings, in those graveyards.

So I share all the more your great concern for the protection of your cultural and religious heritage, especially in Nagorno-Karabakh. Your churches and monasteries have witnessed to the truth of Christ throughout your history, and especially in times of terrible persecution. Your

people's memory, their family histories, are there in those precious sites. All should be concerned for the continued preservation of the history of the Armenian people. And I add my voice to those calling for independent international monitoring of the protection of Armenian heritage and for UNESCO to be allowed to visit the region to fulfil its mandate of safeguarding cultural and religious heritage. This is an issue which affects all faith communities.

But rightly your concerns go much further. For this is not only a question of protecting and valuing the past – it is also about the livelihood and welfare, the rights, of people today. This – for all Christians – at root a simple question of our faithfulness to Christ. For when Jesus, before his arrest and trial in Jerusalem, tells the parable of the sheep and goats, he says but “I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited me in; naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you visited me; I was in prison, and you came to me”? We see our Lord, and we serve our Lord, in all those who are hungry, dispossessed, refugees, imprisoned, poor and afraid.

If we see Christ in others, as Christ himself commands us to, then this is a task for the whole Church. Yes, we are divided by many things – by our different cultural and historical developments, by seeming differences of doctrine, by the way our churches have reacted differently to the challenges they have faced in history – but in Christ we are one, and we are called then to act as one. So it is vital that the worldwide Church working together to protect the dignity and rights of human beings. It is an ecumenical responsibility: our unity in Christ's name is to be sought not only for our own good as a Church, but for the service of others. Together we must feed the hungry, minister to the suffering, aid the refugees, and above fight for the rights of those who live under the shadow of oppression and injustice. This is the Christian way.

I do not know how the Armenian people have found the astonishing resilience they have shown in such a long time of hardship and persecution. And if I am tempted to wonder how they can go on, I know that the answer really lies, in the end, not in us, but in the Lord of Heaven and Earth, whose name we carry as Christians, and in whose light and love we live, and move, and have our being. God in Christ reconciles the world to himself; his Spirit moves us and binds us together, and in him we have our hope.

One of our great Archbishops, Michael Ramsey, said that we are to be the hands and feet as well as the eyes and ears of Christ. I cannot stand here as someone who knows the situation of the Armenian Church and people in my own person, but only as a fellow disciple of Christ, who shares your hope that all will be one and all will be free in Christ. We cannot stand by and say nothing; we cannot obscure the witness of your people to the Gospel in all their long years of suffering. I am honoured and humbled to be invited to be here with you today, to hear your testimony, and with you I pray for peace and justice for all your people.

The International Conference on the Preservation of Armenian Religious, Cultural and Historical Heritage in Artsakh/Nagorno Karabakh, organised by the World Council of Churches (WCC) in collaboration with the Protestant Church in Switzerland, gathered church leaders, academics and public figures from many different Christian traditions. Speakers dwelt on the current plight of refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh, on the urgent need to ensure they could return safely to their homes, and on the importance of proper protection and independent scrutiny of their churches, monasteries and cemeteries.

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