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Geoff Crawford/Church of England

Read the full text of Archbishop Justin Welby's Presidential address to General Synod:

I'm very grateful to be with you today. These past few weeks have been challenging - to say the least - for many here and many more across the church and outside the church.

And I know that you will have all thought and prayed very hard about the conversations we will have over these coming days.

So I'm grateful that we have this chance to meet as children of God, face to face – and to place our hopes, fears and deep disagreements at the foot of the cross and the empty tomb that unites us.

Because I am convinced that we are united in our desire for a church that in nature, truth and holiness, testifies to the love that God has for us in Jesus Christ.

And yet, and yet. The fears that attack many of us in this Synod are genuine fears. In almost all cases, they are both personal - borne out of deeply felt lived experience - and doctrinal.

Some fear that what we may or may not decide will be wrong and sinful. Or that it might discredit the church. Some fear that it will reject who you are, as God made you or us - thereby diminishing us all. Some fear that it will cause deep divisions here and abroad.

And that is only a small part of the baggage that we bring that we bring with us today - inevitably as human beings we all carry baggage. It is in recognising that we have baggage with us that we carry, that we are able to deal with its weight, recognise its importance, and most importantly listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying, and listen to one another. And that brings me to a passage I'm going to read from the book of Genesis.

Genesis 11:1-9

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly."

And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."

The LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the LORD said, "Look, they are one people, they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another's speech."

So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there

the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth."

This story, as you know, comes at the end of the cycle of the creation and fall narratives. The creation God made good had fallen, due to human choice. The flood has been a second start.

Babel is the moment that apparently sets out the reason for there being so many ethnic groups scattered across the world with so many languages.

But it goes far deeper than that, of course, as does all of scripture, for it speaks to the divine dialectic of scattering and gathering.

The pattern of scattering and gathering is deeply part of the story of the bible and the history of salvation. They happen so many times. We could trace examples for hours.

Some of the most significant in the Old Testament may be seen in going down to Egypt and returning, in going into Exile and returning. In each case Israel is a people, of one language, in covenant with God.

At Babel we see an attempt by humans to stand by themselves without God and His ways. Humans gather and attempt to make a future for themselves – literally built on what they can construct themselves.

The use of language at Babel represented power and control, the imposition of ones will, the means to bring coercion and dominance. We are told God comes down and confuses their language because – well it could be that verse 7 is that 'so they will not understand', but the Hebrew can also mean 'so that they do not listen to one another...'

They want to make a name for themselves, and so choose to attempt self-created unity. They do it not with mutual love, but by coercion.

We constantly face this temptation – to make something of ourselves, or to seek to impose our own unity through rules, hierarchies and structures which become a way of controlling others.

The Church throughout history and in our day has so often given into this temptation to become turned in on itself, narcissistic, imposing unity through force, and losing sight of its divinely ordained call to bring every person to a saving knowledge of the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Unity that we ourselves conjure up has, as its first casualties, those who are different. Look at the church's history of antisemitism, racism, slavery and collusion with evil structures of power. Look at how we have, and do, treat those of different sexualities. But to be such people – directed by fear of the outsider, those who are different – is to be those who simply live to establish our purposes and not God's. We become the very image of the world around us, not the ikon of God.

Then at Pentecost, rightly linked to Babel, God the Holy Spirit does something spectacular, something that creates possibilities beyond human imagination or ambition.

Pentecost is not a gift of translation, but the creation of a new people grafted into the old. This is a gathering, not a scattering, but on an entirely new basis of gathering. Those gathered are gathered by love of Christ and by being saved.

The day after Pentecost must have been very difficult. People from all over the Roman world, all new Christians and no common language, except the language of loving, of being found in Christ. And that defined their identity.

In my scandalous youth, or rather Caroline and mine's scandalous youth, as some may know, Caroline and I smuggled bibles behind the Iron Curtain. There will be some here who don't remember the Iron Curtain. There will be some here who remember St Petersburg before that. At one place we went to in Romania, we had about 200 or more bibles to unload. I was doing that at night in a back garden and Caroline was left with the elderly lady whose house it was. They had no common language – except Christian. They both spoke that. And thus, they sat together, with the occasional alleluia and waving their bibles at each other. It worked.

That was a physical gathering. The Lambeth Conference last summer was another. The pilgrimage to South Sudan this weekend with the Pope and the Moderator was a third. All different, but the physical gathering was built on a gathered reality in the Spirit, not our own construction. A gathered reality of divine and global creation, not human and locally limited.

We have a common language, but it is not a human language. In the Acts the Christians are physically scattered, by persecution. By the move of the Spirit, they remain gathered spiritually to anoint those who will lead evangelism, and they gather new Christians as they scatter the Gospel.

There is a dialectic of gathering and scattering. Even in the times when the church has sinfully and cruelly divided, wreaking havoc on one another in war and hatred, somehow God has prevailed, as he is so much greater than us, and the gospel has gone yet further.

A crucial difference between Babel and Pentecost is that the scattering is not a result of different languages but of Spirit-led human action established out of the Pentecostal and catholic gathering.

The dialectic of scattering and gathering has produced a divine synthesis of a spiritual gathering amongst physical scatterings. The reality is we are scattered to gather those outside the life of the church.

For that to work, we must all speak Christian, because that is our true language, a language of signs and wonders, of words spoken, of symbols, of actions and self-sacrifice.

At Pentecost the gospel is proclaimed – but it is by God's grace in a way that the truth of Jesus is heard in each person's language, and therefore

their culture.

It is an incarnated gospel, real to each person not by their linguistic talent but by the action of the Spirit who comes to them.

For that to be true the people who are needed are those who are not trying to make something of themselves but are seeking to – in all things – live in the light of God.

We have deep and passionately held differences. But let us not fall into caricaturing those among us who don't agree with us as being those who are trying to construct their lives away from God. The evidence is far from that.

And this, of course, is why it is so difficult.

The unity we desire is not one based around agreeing in everything. It can never be of our making or imposing. It can never be by forcing, it is always a gift of God's redemption.

The difference from Babel is the church is scattered but one, so long as we seek the glory of God and to obey the commandment to make disciples.

But God is calling us to do more than listen and speak and act.

He is calling us to more than simply choosing not to build our own edifices that are a memorial to ourselves. He is calling us to be sent to those outside the life of the church.

They are genuinely the scattered, in every way except one, but that is decisive: God in Christ so loves them that he died for them, and our being sent is to live that love in word and deed and gather them.

That was the purpose of the Pilgrimage of Peace from which I returned early this morning. A Pope, an Archbishop and a Moderator, representing streams of Christian thinking that were scattered for half a millennium. Three people sent in the love of Christ to challenge a darkness in South Sudan that has, in the last nine years, cost half a million lives.

Sixty years ago, perhaps thirty, there would have been demonstrations against such a trip. But God's love has changed us in our attitudes between Presbyterian, Anglican and what, in a rotten and hard past, we called Papist. That symbol of unity in Christ means that the Holy Spirit is released in blessing.

That is what unity does. Division quenches the Spirit, we see and hear that in Romans 14, in I Corinthians 12 and 13 and in the farewell discourses of John's Gospel. Unity comes first not from doctrinal unanimity but by mutual love released by the Holy Spirit.

In simple terms, we are all equally loved, all equally to face God in judgement, all equally the object of God's overwhelming love. Whoever we are. Whatever our character. Whatever background, our class or ethnicity. Whatever we think, however bad we are. Whatever our sexuality. Equally loved. And how can that be lived in action as well as word?

How can that be lived so that there is a true gathering, not compartmentalised Christianity, but a people gathered, different in so many ways, but gathered in a community of love? Because anything less is not Pentecost. Anything less is not speaking Christian.

Speaking Christian in word and deed rejects constructing ourselves, building our own narratives about our greatness and others' lack, making our own church: it welcomes being constructed by Christ.

Where people find it difficult to believe what Christians say about God's great love for them because they have been excluded, or made to conceal their identity, or made to feel in some way less – they have not been spoken to in Christian. Along the way, too many people, especially around sexuality, have heard the words of rejection that human tongues create.

And this good news that we have - that God has not left us to construct a life for ourselves. That God has come to us in his only Son Jesus Christ, to save us and call us, to redeem us and summon us and construct us as a people of love, a holy temple – this news is so powerfully deeply profoundly needed in our world today.

For we live in a time of danger and crisis, the greatest since the terrors of Second World War, terrors worse now because of advanced technology.

We are in a recession, for many a long economic depression that multiplies food banks not dignity.

We see an NHS in crisis, education that misses out on aspiration for the poorest, and care systems and housing that do not reach those most desperately in need.

We see an absence of strong family life– that increases mental ill health in children and emotional trauma in adults. Next month the Families and Households Commission will publish their report, setting this out in detail.

The list is longer than that. The list is incredibly long, and our call is clear.

We are called as Christians to be gathered in the Spirit and to show in the life of the Church of England a passionate love for every person, a profound commitment to the proclamation of Christ, a powerful symbol that culture war and crisis is not the way the world must go: God shows a better, a saving way.

Just as God has spoken in His word, God speaks to us today, in a language that our hurting hearts understand. It's a language that gives us a new identity, made in the image of God. God gathers out of a physically and ideologically scattered people a church which acts in unity for those who are different, and does it with unquestioning love.

A common identity, those who are saved, a common tongue, speaking Christian, together offer a common community. To those driven into doubt, or disbelief by the raucous hammering at each other in all our churches around the world - not just Anglican, I know what it feels like to have some raucous hammering - which seems to reject people for their sexual identity or their ethnicity, or their gender, or their youth, or their age or their character or their past or their potential future - we must say; "God himself has come for you. God himself cannot bear to be apart from you, he binds himself to you. He invites you to participate in his divine life and he sets you in his church where all, all have a cherished and essential place."

That is the good news we carry. Whoever we meet, they are loved by God freely and completely. We may say it, we must live it and how we do that is one of the great tests of these times of societal, national and international division. For we live today in a time of war physical, and war cultural. We too easily import culture wars and lapse into their language. It is the sea we swim in. We do not need to drink it.

The church is not called to avoid or to endorse wokery, but to be awake to the Holy Spirit, to show that no division is greater than the unity of our identity in Christ. That is God's accomplished work and our spiritual reality. We saw it and knew it in front of hundreds of thousands in South Sudan these last three days, from all the churches of that conflict-ridden country.

In our discussions in this Synod let us remember and speak out that our brother is never our enemy, that those who listen, may well, outside this hall, may well be listening, for the call of hope, the call of Christ and we are the mouthpiece, we can scatter or gather them. Our language makes the difference.

Even if we get it wrong, we still need not fear look at Church history. For God is faithful even when we fail. We come with fears and baggage; so let us lay our burdens on Christ and let God gather God's church.

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