



by, at the February 2024 group of sessions of the General Synod

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"God is greater than our fears, our enemies and our failures. He is unbreakably faithful. When that is our comfort and peace, then in this world of suffering we can truly be God's church for God's world."

In September 2023, Antonio Guterres, Secretary General the United Nations declared the world is coming off its hinges. How should we the followers of Jesus Christ respond?

Walter Brueggemann commented on the Psalms that the Psalms have the abrasive effect of dismantling the old systems that hide the well off from the dangerous realities of life. The ordinal never uses the word suffering.

The Psalms speak constantly of suffering as a dangerous theological reality, and we are curiously blind to it. Church of England Bishops at consecration commit to all sorts of things, some probable, some improbable, but they don't commit to suffer. By contrast, the Chaldean Church tells its Bishops that they will be the first to suffer. Cyprian writes endlessly of suffering, especially referring to the confessors and martyrs, ascribing to them influence in advising or rebuking the Bishop. And he had a high view of Bishops.

One of the great treasures of the communities of St. Anselm at Lambeth, is that altogether we say the Psalms on the prayer book monthly cycle. So every month we're reminded of how many enemies we have and what we want it to happen to them. Psalm 56 talks about our internal life in suffering when we face enemies, and enemies are mentioned 71 times in the Psalms. And in Psalm 56, David is in a place of immense trouble, it refers to him being at Gath, which was in Philistia, very close to where Gaza is. Suffering as part of God's people's experience comes from the normal challenges of life. From those who will be wrongly perceive as enemies externally, and also from those we wrongly perceive as enemies internally.

And to add to what the Secretary General of the United Nations said, as Lord Cameron said recently, when he looks around at the world today as Foreign Secretary, all the lights are flashing red. We live in a world of suffering. And unlike in the past, it is a world where we are aware of the suffering.

In Europe, the Ukrainian Russian war is frozen. We will discuss it later in this group of sessions. And the suffering of the people in Ukraine has increased, not least because it has been replaced as the principal concern by the havoc and horror of the Levant and all that is going on in that area. The House of Bishops commented on this last Friday week.

But there is much more.

Let us briefly turn our minds to the forgotten horrors, those whose very existence is scarcely mentioned. In Myanmar civil war has raged for several years, and millions have been driven from their homes. In the DRC, more than 5 million have now died in war or because of war since 1995. In Sudan, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, whom I saw on Wednesday, the intolerable suffering of the people would constitute the worst refugee crisis on Earth, were it not for the crises in all the surrounding countries.

Between them, they create one great region of shifting internally displaced people and refugees, harried, hunted, women violated, children traumatised, driven from place to place. And the world does not watch. The world turns its head away.

And in saying that, in this world, we have also forgotten so many other areas. Displacement in northeast India, in the South Pacific, in the Philippines. We forget the tensions in Korea with a nuclear armed power. In Pakistan again, nuclear armed, in Nigeria, in massacres in Mozambique, where Anglicans work in an interfaith manner, alongside the UN mediation Support Unit to find ways of undermining the popular appeal of ISIS. And in the Philippines, where low-level insurgency still happens in various places.

And I've not even spoken as yet of the vast numbers of people on the southern borders of the United States, or of the 75% of refugees who stay in the usually exceptionally poor countries on the immediate borders of their own. Those countries of refuge themselves staggeringly poor, struggling, bearing the lion's share of people movement.

Pope Francis a few months ago described what is already happening as a third world war. Right or wrong, he is describing a state of global uncertainty and great change. Like all such periods, minorities are blamed for uncertainties, conspiracies are assumed where there is uncontrollability and leaders are criticised where the future is hard to see. Amidst it all, there is intense, terrible, indescribable personal suffering, and neither is it confined to abroad. Communities in this country, as so many people in this chamber know well, suffer from poverty and lack of resource, broken families, mental illness, abuse. It is the nature of life to suffer, not worse than ever before, but a reality of suffering.

Suffering is normal. The Psalms say so, the news tell us so, experience reveals itself. Yet in our comfortable country, for many, not for all, our expectations of suffering are low. Job's comments in the language of the King James Version, man is born to suffering as the sparks fly upwards, is replaced by an expectation that in every situation, there is some way to put it right. And a febrile angst becomes normal.

It is very tempting to say that in such a time as this, we should put aside the issues within the church, but that would be a very serious mistake. In 1939, George Bell wrote an article on the behaviour of the church in a time of war. 'What should the church do in a time of war?' it was entitled. His simple conclusion was that the right strategy, a word he did not use, is to be even more the church. We must be even more the church with all our challenges and difficulties and as we work through them. What that looks like is seen in many cases, but I'm going to take Psalm 56, if you have access to that, do look it up. Remembering that Psalm 56 is the song of someone surrounded by danger and without human hope of rescue.

We are to recognise reality and continue to seek to live in holy obedience. I am convinced that is the aim of all the different groups in the differing discussions that we have, already had in many Synods, and will have in this. The church suffers and has enemies, people suffer and have enemies. Enemies are part of life.

But behind enmity isn't mere human difference. Other malign forces, more malign, are at work. As Paul tells us in Ephesians six, our struggle isn't against flesh and blood, we need to remember that, but against the principalities and powers. Suffering and enmity have prolonged and profound impacts on each one of us.

We have to start by recognising those impacts. The fear and suffering that come from division, make us look at other people as our enemies and we have to resist that illusion in faithful and honest community. Causes of fear, which leads to a sense of enmity are well disguised as uncertainty, unpredictability and uncontrollability of life and like barnacles on the hull of a ship, they attach themselves to make us see other people as our enemies, and that is the devil's work.

Enemies make us afraid. Fear makes us suffer. Someone the Archbishop of York and I met recently from outside the church said that while they were working on a project for the church, they grew to fear opening their emails, because of the bitterness and abuse they were subject to. At Lambeth, the brilliant member of staff who deals with the endless correspondence that comes in, is worn down by the expressions of hatred, normally coming from within the church.

In both the Old Testament and New Testament we're encouraged not to fear, but the psalmist with honesty says 'when I am afraid'. Fear corrodes, it causes neurological degeneration of hormones and chemicals that make us ill.

Second, suffering and enemies are relentless. The Psalm says, all day long enemies oppress me. We all have people who never seem to give up, situations that are never resolved, anxieties that torment. If they can't get us one way, they seem to have time to try again, endlessly. The principalities and powers work intelligently through our minds and emotions, twisting what is said and done, to find a reason to accuse from within and without. They accuse us ceaselessly and without mercy. Spurgeon, commenting on this Psalm said, a wolf can always find in a lamb's discourse, a reason to eat him.

We get blamed for provoking the accusations, not just the justifiable criticism, that's fine, but the accusations that are pulled on us. That's not my view alone, but it's a view of two people experienced in dispute and conflict, who have observed the General Synod. Each group, or person, or supporter of a cause, can too easily be made to feel guilty for being so tasty, so provocative, when they are a lamb.

We are human and that is why we fail. But we are all also mysteriously but assuredly, being transformed into the likeness of Christ, by the work of the Holy Spirit of God. And so we must cooperate with that, we should not seek to use ambiguity of meaning by others to our advantage. See verses five and six.

But we need to assume the best and the most generous, rather than the worst. Suffering and enemies are faced best in communities that trust across divides, rather than in self protecting, and reinforcing huddles, because the very act of trusting across the divides builds our resilience and our ability to see the best in others. It is a trial though, to do that. And we as God's people, as the Church of England, must deal well with the issues that faces us internally, if we are able to minister effectively externally to our nation and world.

At the end of April, we will have a meeting of primates of the Anglican Communion in Rome. There we will look at what the communion could do to remain in a variable geometry of unity, but also an unvarying commitment of love in Christ. Those two expressions vary in geometry of unity and unvarying commitment of love in Christ offer us all a way forward in holy obedience to God.

They are not perfect states, but they are steps along the journey. I wonder if we are able to imagine the same in the Church of England. Honesty, transparency, love in agreement, persistence in good change, all point unbelievers to Christ, whose spirit calls us to shine as light.

And third, enemies and suffering drive us to God if we are wise in honest protest, passionate lament and proper assurance. Verse eight of the Psalm, tears are stored up. But the Psalmist asks God, you've stored up my tears in a bottle but do you ever check on them? Do ever make sure that you remember them?

Together, we must pray truthfully and with lament and protest, which like the word suffering are rare in our liturgies. God knows. We must not leave God out of our discussions, neither instrumentalise that false view of God that puts God in our pocket to do what we want. So God sees our suffering, our enemies, our fears, and nothing, not even our fears, are lost.

Fourth, God is our refuge. God is our refuge, not our politics and our organisations. They are realities of any structured life, of any institution, they're not evils, but God is our refuge, they never will be. Verses one, two, three, four and nine.

The Psalmist, amidst this desperation, gives thanks. We are never beyond the strength and the recall of God. David escaped from Gath, not because of himself, but because of God's faithfulness. The Lord does not abandon His church today, however it wanders, for he searches and finds it and carries it back.

The Psalmist of Psalm 56 is also the Psalmist of the shepherd Psalm, 23. We can fail but God cannot. Amidst the turmoil of the world, the fears of even greater conflicts, perhaps overwhelming continents, the hard choices we have to make, God is always at work among us today and every day. There is no fear, I have no fear, we must not fear for the future of the church. Suffering is normal, but God is faithful and we are called to be His faithful people.

And today the church remembers Polycarp as he was martyred in 155 he had the option of denying his faith. 'Eighty and six years I have served him and he has done me no wrong'. How then can I blaspheme my King and Saviour? I bless You, Father, for judging me worthy of this hour, so that in the company of the martyrs I may share the cup of Christ.

Brueggemann's words about reality, call us back to the need to be living as people certainly who are different from the world, but live genuinely in the world. Not in self referential groups that reinterpret the world for their own benefit, and that takes depth of listening, and above all, trust in the good purposes of God for God's Church, shown in history and to be completed in time.

God is greater than our fears, than our enemies and in our failures. God is unbreakably faithful to covenant and promise. When that is our comfort and peace, then in this world, at this time, off its hinges, we can in all our troubles, be truly the church we should be, truly God's Church in God's world.

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