

THE BISHOP OF ST ALBANS' PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

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This summer I've been reading *The Silk Roads*. It's a history of civilisation written by Peter Frankopan, a Senior Research Fellow at Worcester College, Oxford. On the opening page he writes:

'The accepted and lazy history of civilization' ... 'is one where ancient Greece begat Rome, Rome begat Christian Europe, Christian Europe begat the Renaissance, through Renaissance the Enlightenment, the Enlightenment political democracy and the industrial revolution. Industry crossed with democracy in turn yielded the United States, embodying the right of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness'. I immediately recognised that this was exactly the story that I had been told: the mantra of the political, cultural and moral triumph of the west. But this account was flawed; there were alternative ways of looking at history - ones that did not involve looking at the past from the perspective of the winners of recent history.

Frankopan's book is a *tour de force* as he describes the history of civilisation not from the perspective of Great Britain or even what we call, rather sloppily, 'The West', but from the perspective of the ancient trade routes and he argues that history needs to be told from the perspective of the region from Central Asia to the Middle East, in other words focussing on China and India. It's a timely exploration of history at a time when both those countries are moving rapidly back to centre stage in world affairs.

A fundamental part of our fallen human nature is the tendency to put ourselves and our cultures at the centre of our world and seek to explain everyone else in the light of the way that we understand the world. The problem with this approach is that it is so easy to misread other cultures and histories; at worst it can reignite ancient enmities and sometimes leads to conflict and war. It also prevents us seeing our own blind spots.

Some years ago, an English Franciscan Friar was visiting India and was privileged to meet Mahatma Gandhi. Striking up the conversation he said to Gandhi 'This is the first time I've visited the East'. There was a pause and Gandhi said, 'East of where?' He was challenging the notion that the Friar was making that he lived at the centre of the world and everyone else could be described by how they fitted in with his world view.

This desire to put oneself and one's culture at the centre of the world is exactly what is happening under President Putin at the moment - he is trying to retell the history of Russia from a very skewed perspective to justify his actions. He claims that Ukraine, Moldova, the Baltic states and even Finland are really part of the great Russian Empire and he wants them back so much that he is trying to take Ukraine by force, killing hundreds of thousands of people in the process. It's a rather different historical narrative than the one told by, for example, the Finns.

Now why am I spending so much time on a history book and on our place in the world? Well, in six weeks' time around 1000 bishops from every corner of the Anglican Communion will descend on Canterbury for the Lambeth Conference. Sadly, due to Covid-19, the pre-conference hospitality weeks in the dioceses have been cancelled, so there will be fewer opportunities to engage with bishops from different parts of the world, although we will have a few of them coming to stay in the diocese before and after the conference.

When the Anglican Communion was first established its focus was very much on England; but now the centre of gravity has changed. The Communion is growing most rapidly in Africa, Asia and South America. It's said that there are more practicing Anglicans in Nigeria than in England, America and Canada combined.

Many of those who are coming have amazing stories. At the last Lambeth conference, I was in a Bible study group with bishops from around the world. The most extraordinary were the bishops from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I remember one told me that it took him four days to travel to the far end of his diocese which involved a flight in a small aeroplane, a ride on the back of a motorbike, followed by three days in a canoe paddling up rivers. The country was in civil war; Ebola, which kills eight out of 10 of those who catch it, was rampant. He was risking his life whenever he travelled to share the good news of Jesus Christ. It was humbling to hear of his courage and passion for the gospel and put so many of our moans and complaints into a new perspective.

The Lambeth Conference will not necessarily be a comfortable experience as English is not the first language for many Anglicans; there will be wide disparities of wealth; much diversity of theology and then to cap it all we all come with our cultural baggage, sometimes confusing it with the gospel. There are those parts of the Anglican Communion where the main challenge is righting historic injustices with indigenous populations. Some churches are a tiny Christian minority living amongst an antagonistic Muslim majority. Many provinces will have different disciplines over divorce and remarriage and

admitting unconfirmed (in some cases even unbaptised) people to Holy Communion. And, of course, there are all the differences over sexuality and gender that we in England are discussing under the banner of *Living in Love and Faith*.

Rather than seeing all these differences as problems, they are, in fact, opportunities to humbly listen and learn from our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world, trusting God to lead us beyond our cultural assumptions into a deeper truth.

At the end of the last Lambeth Conference, some 14 years ago, Archbishop Rowan Williams, Archbishop David Moxon of New Zealand, and the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in America, Katharine Jefferts Schori were all invited to visit a school to meet several hundred young people and to answer their questions.

Well, you can imagine the scene and even the sorts of questions that were fired at them. What music do you like? Have you ever met the Queen? What do you mean by 'the Holy Spirit'? What sport do you enjoy most? Why are there so many Christian denominations? And so on.

It was all going very well until the final question. A girl stood up and asked, 'If Jesus were to come back today, what shoes would he be wearing?'

Now any of you who've taken question and answer sessions in schools will know the sense of panic at those moments when you have a difficult question and I understand you could see it written on the faces of the three bishops.

Archbishop Rowan Williams started off and said 'If Jesus were to come back today, he would be wearing *your* shoes'. It's what we mean by the word 'incarnation' where Jesus enters our lives and speaks the language that we all understand.

Then Archbishop David Moxon said 'If Jesus were to come back in person today, he wouldn't be wearing shoes at all. You see', he said, 'my wife is Maori and the Maori don't wear shoes so that they can feel God's earth under their feet. We need to tread lightly on this precious world that God has created and care for it. This is how we grow in wisdom'.

Everyone looked expectantly at the Presiding Bishop of America, Katharine Jefferts Schori. She paused and looked at the girl. 'If Jesus were to come back

today, he would be wearing dancing shoes'. He wants to draw us into the dance of God that brings life and joy to the world.

Jesus indeed wants to draw us into the dance of God that brings life and joy to the world.

Her answer reminded me of the words of the Slovenian theologian, Peter Kuzmic: 'Hope is the ability to hear the music of the future, and faith is the courage to dance to it today.'

We are followers of the God who has created all peoples and cultures and who reveals himself to us in the language and thought forms that we've inherited. But he calls us on a journey of discovery in which day by day we dethrone ourselves, our prejudices, our desire to dominate and instead open ourselves to one another and above all to Christ, entering his joyful dance of creation and redemption.

Please pray for the Anglican Communion and the Lambeth Conference as we gather together to seek God in a few weeks' time. Pray that our minds may be open to God and to one another, pray for an openness and a generosity of spirit and pray above all that our fellowship in the gospel might be strengthened as we seek to follow Christ.

+Alan St Albans
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