

Six Thoughts on Brexit

It's a funny thing that when Bishops *don't* get involved in politics they are criticized for showing a lack of leadership.

When they *do* get involved in politics, they are told to stop meddling!

This week a large number of bishops – including our own – signed an open letter about Brexit. They wrote:

'Our concern for the common good leads us to express concern about a number of matters'

Seeing the evidence of division in every part of the country they offer six points for consideration. I want to share these with you, and offer some reflections of my own about how they might relate to our Christian faith.

LANGUAGE

The first is language.

With a polarization of views has come an extremity of language.

We are literally less 'civil' with one another in our civil society.

Words have real consequences – extreme language used about politicians has resulted in abuse towards MPs.

In all the talk about Brexit, I am struck that the people being heard least are probably the people it will affect most – the poor and the vulnerable.

In his parable of the banquet, Jesus doesn't have much time for those who only make space for the important and the wealthy – he's more interested in having the low-income, the disabled and the disadvantaged around his table.

Christ is the Word of God who speaks in our hearts - our distinctive witness as Christians is to use the right sort of language and to speak about the right sorts of things.

What we say and how we say it matters.

Lies

The second is lies. In this complex situation where there are many opinions and precious few facts, the bishops write:

'There is an ease with which lies can be told and misrepresentations encouraged. Leaders needs to be honest with us about the costs of political choices, especially on the most vulnerable. '

Politicians have always spoken diplomatically – it's part of being a politician - but most of us sense a change.

There seems to be a weakening of our trust that our leaders are being open and honest with us.

A small number may lie intentionally, but what's more worrying is there seems to be lack of that rigorous enquiry which leads to a fuller understanding of reality. This laziness is a form of dishonesty.

Modelled by our leaders, I see this factual laziness increasingly in our community, where people do not explore or challenge their own assumptions and opinions, and share information they have not taken the time to understand.

We follow a Lord who called himself the 'truth'.

And Christians have always been called to speak the truth in love – indeed, to speak *truthfully* is by its nature to speak *lovingly*, because love compels us never to accept and repeat what we are told merely because we may *wish* it to be true, or because it is *expedient* – but only that which we sincerely and honestly believe to be true, and in the light of energetic searching and prayerful reflection.

Such truth will always be far more complicated and nuanced than the partial information we started out with.

Fear

Then there is fear.

People are *frightened*.

It simply won't do to dismiss it by calling it 'project fear'.

If you are a person needing regular medication to keep you alive and you don't know if you will still be able to access it easily, or at all in the future – that fear is *real*.

Even if people's fears are not well-founded, or are disproportionate, we must still take them seriously.

Love, says the scriptures, casts out fear.

The most loving thing we can do at this time is to listen to one another.

To understand what it is that is worrying each other, not dismiss or belittle it.

There is much to be frightened about as we enter into a time of deep uncertainty.

Christ tell his disciples not to fear, but he only does so by also, at the same time, assuring them of his loving *presence*.

We can help one another not to fear, by giving ourselves to others, so that they know that we are taking their concerns seriously

Fear is lessened when people know they are loved.

Respect

The Bishops also mention *respect*.

In particular they point to a need to respect the people of Ireland, north and south of the border. *'The Irish border'* write the bishops *'is not a political totem to be kicked by the English'*.

All of us, but most of all our politicians, must examine our hearts and ask whether we are really giving due respect to the people of Ireland.

Peace on that island was long-sought and hard-won, and it cannot be traded for what can appear to be chiefly English concerns.

Christians are called to be peacemakers in the most active sense, and we can do so by ensuring that we truly respect the agreements that have enabled peace to flourish in a land where so many have been killed even in recent times.

Sovereignty

Then there is a word we've heard a lot about- Sovereignty – about which the bishops say this:

'The sovereignty of parliament is not just an empty term, it is based on institutions to be honoured and respected: our democracy is endangered by a cavalier disregard for these institutions.'

At the start of the Brexit debate, sovereignty was primarily about our relationship with Europe,

but its focus is now on parliament, and our unwritten constitution, in the light of its imminent suspension on contentious grounds. It's a question about where authority lies and who has the ability to exercise it.

As we know, Christ had a nuanced attitude to worldly authority. He recognized its practical reality, while also bidding his followers to recognize a higher authority.

We are told in the scriptures to pray for our leaders, while recognizing that – in the end – our only true sovereign is God.

In other words, Christians have a duty to uphold legitimate authority even when we disagree with it – but we may sometimes also have a duty to stand up to it when it steps outside the values of God's Kingdom.

The current situation does ask us to consider what are the absolute values we hold in relation to the exercise of power – and in what situation would we consider that power to have gone too far, requiring us to do something about it?

For some people, that has already taken place.

Attention

And finally there is the word, *attention*.

Attention to the meaning of Englishness.

At the centre of Brexit is a fraught and painful confrontation with questions about our deepest identity – are we English? British? European?

What, in fact, do any of these terms mean?

The stories we tell about ourselves can be helpful, full of meaning, rooting us in the past and giving us a sense of future purpose.

But sometimes, these narratives are also destructive and delusional, looking back to a lost and largely imagined past which never was and never will be.

One delusion has become painfully clear – the idea that a nation such as ours can simply withdraw from the European Union and carry on as normal is fantasy.

But at the same time, it is equally clear that the European dream of a continent of freedom and flourishing rooted in shared values, is just as fantastical.

As citizens we are part of national narratives.

But as Christians we are also part of another story.

Individuals who find our identity in Christ – forgiven, redeemed and renewed by God – and we belong to the company of God’s people which we call the Church – which transcends all boundaries.

The Church is *part* of society, but it also stands *apart* from society

And it’s role in the world is to inspire and renew that society with the love of God.

Writing about this in relation to Europe, the priest and theologian Sam Wells says this (in what he says, it’s helpful to know that he has partly Jewish heritage):

‘A renewed Europe must have a heart.

For me there’s only one place that has a claim to be the heart of a new Europe: and that’s Auschwitz.

Auschwitz is the place that teaches humility to all our national and European pretensions,

It teaches honesty to all memories, and is a warning to all the language of purity and power.

A Europe centred on Auschwitz won’t give in to nostalgia or content itself with pragmatics.

It will be alert to the outsider, and attentive to malign ideology.’

This is what Christ is saying in the parable of the banquet.

Begin from the lowest place, the most humble place, and the only place you can go is up higher and better.

All our narratives - national and continental - should begin not by telling the story of glorious past, but of our evident failing to live up to our ideals.

It is from such a place of humility that we will find Christ calling us into a new place:

Language

Lies

Fear

Respect

Sovereignty

Attention

Six words that are worth thinking and praying about in the days and weeks ahead – as we move forward – wherever that might be.