

Diocesan Synod Address – June 2016

Earlier this week we spent some time at the bedside of Sally's aunt as she died in a nursing home. It had been a rapid decline in health as earlier this year we had hosted her 90th birthday tea party at Bishopsgrove. I was struck as we anointed her and prayed at how she palpably was not in control of her life or her death, and how we often delude ourselves about being in control of our destiny. For all the skill of the carers, the reality was that she had little control and neither did we; the ultimate power lay with God alone and together we waited on God.

Having little control is, you will appreciate, not default episcopal mode. To paraphrase the centurion in the famous story, I am a man under authority and I say to this person "go" and they go and to that person "come" and they come. I, like many of you, am used to being in charge. Well, sometimes! I was reminded at Sally's aunt's bedside that there are circumstances which bring us face to face with the limits of our control. And then our strength comes from being prepared to come in humility before God in the company of one another, recognising that there are some things that only he can heal, only he can control and redeem. Then and only then do we embrace the part we are given, loving as only we can love and allowing God to hold us through the events that unfold.

What's true at a personal level is surely true at a political level. Here in the UK, living as we still do with the days when Britain ruled the waves still fresh in our national psyche, it's perhaps no surprise that the language of control has dominated the EU referendum debate. We have a collective memory, some sort of shared (or is it nostalgic) assumption, of being set apart, of being powerful, of having a right to be in control.

Both sides of the referendum debate have been shot through with precisely those assumptions. It's been framed, to my huge frustration, in terms of control from those in favour of Brexit and leadership from those campaigning for Remain. I don't doubt the complex policy challenges we face as a nation; economics, migration, welfare, law and other significant areas are directly affected by our membership of the EU. But I believe that, though I have a personal view as you do as referendum day approaches, both campaigns are failing to reflect deeper issues about humankind.

But even before you get going on theology, on a purely historical level the assumption of our right to be in control is demonstrably flawed. You will recall the photograph at the Yalta Conference of 1945 where President F.D. Roosevelt is seated, flanked by Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin. It is the image for me of how victory over evil in Europe and the Pacific was won by the Allies. The greatest triumph of our lifetimes was won by an alliance, often not under our command and leadership, and still today it is a coming together of nations in shared defence interest that underpins NATO. Closer to home our political parties are clearly broad churches holding various positions in coalition, and that for the most part is what we value despite occasional frustrations.

These historical insights are supported and enhanced by our faith, which teaches us that Christians should be wary when there is talk of the decisiveness of individual or collective control, for we believe that who we are and what we do are not governed simply by our choices but by a gracious God who gifts life to us and calls us. We have no abiding city and our citizenship is not of this world but of a kingdom which has no borders and is universal, catholic, as we proclaim every Sunday. We have no God-given right to be in charge or in control, but we do have a responsibility and a vocation to be lovingly present, discerning our right and proper contribution and fulfilling it at whatever cost is asked of us.

I am uneasy too about the argument peddled by Remain that our role is to lead Europe from within the EU. Part of our challenge is to be better members not exert more dominance. Our theology helps us here, for we are members one of another St Paul tells us. Romans 12 is pivotal for us, with its exhortation not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think and to understand our interdependence. 'We are the Body of Christ' is again what we proclaim weekly, stressing our individual roles in the whole 'whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free.' That's why we rightly put such emphasis on collaborative and cooperative ministry and why, to bring it right into this room, we have such an elaborate system of checks and balances in our ecclesiology with synodical polity binding episcopal leadership with elected lay and clerical representation.

It's why the doctors and nurses work in teams together with chaplains and with the patients themselves, to find the best ways to heal where possible; and the best way, at the end, for the great power of death to take its course. We move together to the kingdom of heaven not by trying to wrestle control that we have no business exercising or by inflating our own sense of importance, but by exercising what power we do have proportionately and lovingly; by recognising in humility the limits of those powers; and by receiving with thanks the gifts and insights and strengths of others. A theology of the Kingdom of God challenges language of leadership and control, puncturing our self-importance and emphasising the one to whom we owe everything.

Since this address was prepared we have learned of the murder of Jo Cox, Member of Parliament. With you I am appalled at her tragic and senseless death. We offer our prayers to her widower, children, parents and family, and to her constituents and colleagues. The affection and, yes, the love for her is clear, so we dare to offer our prayers and our love.

We don't know her killer's motives except by speculation. Anyone with a gun or a knife has power and control, and also the capacity for anger to become not only violence of heart or word but of deed. I reflect on the terrible scenes of derision and dismissal, anger and venom in the meeting of the Leave and Remain flotillas on the Thames the day before her murder. The jeering and the abuse, the obscene gestures from one side and the use of a hose by the other displayed violent anger. These were not mainly politicians. We need to look at ourselves and at others. Our public and political discourse can be principled, passionate and even pointed, but never poisonous.

That holds true whether we are sitting in suits in the corridors of Westminster or Brussels, behind our machines or desks at work, or tired and dazed at the bedside of someone we love. It holds true in our families and our churches and our professional spheres. The vision we need, and the one we Christians of all people properly should hold, is generous with regard to our families, ecumenical with regard to the church, national with regard to our city or county, island and region, global not insular with regard to the nation. Because for all that we may, in our strength, feel that we are in authority, able to say to that person "go" and they go and to another person "come" and they come, all of us are actually reliant on others; and all of us in our personal and professional skills and at our life's end, will come in humility before God asking him to say the word that we may be healed.

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