

DIOCESE OF DURHAM: Diocesan Synod: 17 May 2008

**Presidential Address
by the Bishop of Durham, Dr N. T. Wright**

I shall not comment on the headline in yesterday's Church Times: 'Tom Wright: My Future Career as a Heretic.' If you don't know what it's about, you can find out! These are turbulent times on several fronts: to say that is to state the blindingly obvious. The cyclone in Burma and the earthquake in China have reminded us again of what we know but easily screen out, the fragility of all human life and the groaning of all creation. When we look at our own families it is hard not to think of those harrowing scenes of parents searching for children buried under rubble, and to shudder at the thought of entire communities devastated at every level, a million private sorrows swallowed up in a great corporate cry of despair and lament. There would be something to be said, even on a great day like Trinity Sunday, for those leading worship to pick up these unimaginable horrors and enable the congregation to hold them in the presence of God, perhaps by the slow reading or singing of one of the Psalms of lament, or the apocalyptic discourse of Matthew 24, or the Passion Narrative itself. The scriptures do not, after all, promise us a trouble-free life, a magic escape hatch from the common lot of humankind, but rather the presence of God the Father with us and around us, the victory of God incarnate over death itself, and the groaning of God the Spirit within us at the heart of the groaning world. It is important, I think, to begin there, because however pressing our own questions may be, however much we worry about getting the Share right, which is a good and proper thing to do, however excited we may be about the plans which are going ahead in education and mission, which I certainly am, the weekend of Trinity Sunday on the one hand, and the fact of the world's great anguish on the other, place all this in context.

It is because we worship the Triune God that what we call 'the problem of evil' has the particular shape it has: for an atheist or agnostic, the problem is quite different, and indeed might present itself as 'the problem of good': if there is no creator God, no Providence, why is there beauty and joy and laughter? The problem is sharpened up, the closer you get to the creational monotheism of Judaism and Islam, and from one point of view it becomes even sharper for the Christian: if Jesus really did defeat sin and death on the cross and in his resurrection, why are sin and death still so powerful and so horrible? And we who have enjoyed living, these last two months, through Holy Week and Easter, through Ascension and Pentecost, should know that this great story doesn't give us an easy answer to the question of why, and to imagine that it does is to belittle the problem in a way which opens us up again to a rude shock with the next earthquake or hurricane, or indeed the next time, literally or metaphorically, someone is discovered to have perpetrated nameless inhumanities in a locked cellar out of sight.

And the doctrine of the Trinity (I know the preachers among you have already written your sermons for tomorrow, so this is merely to help you fill in the odd footnote) is not an abstract philosophical reflection on mind-blowing mystical imaginations, but the solemn, humble and sober confession that in Jesus Christ we find, not the solution to every puzzle, but the pathway through the darkness, the story that makes sense of the scattered fragments of evidence, the voice that says 'Yes, I know; and yes, it's awful; and yes, I am with you; and yes, all shall be well.' And that all-shall-be-well-ness is not an easygoing, shoulder-shrugging, conscience-absolving cop-out, but a challenge to costly commitment, to allowing the Spirit of Jesus to groan within us in sympathy with the pain of the world, to allowing the Spirit of Jesus within us to convict the world of sin, of righteousness and of judgment, to allowing the Spirit of Jesus working through us to plant the seeds of hope. It is only when you really face up to the darkness in the world and ask the hard questions

about the kingdom of God that you understand what the parables are all about, the strange sowings, the small seeds, the straying sheep, the suffering son. Trinity Sunday is an invitation to celebration, yes, of course, to allow ourselves once again to stare at the sun and be utterly dazzled, but only in order then to address the darkness within and without with the message of the kingdom, the power of the gospel, and the encouragement of hope.

I am ashamed to think that for many clergy over the last generation Trinity Sunday has been a time to say, Well, these things are all very difficult, nobody really understands them very much, it's all a mystery really. Of course in a sense that's true, but if we cop out of doctrinal reflection it's probably a sign that we are also copping out of the hard and high challenge of living the Trinity, of allowing the Spirit to shape and form us into the likeness of Christ, to the glory of the Father. And that likeness of Jesus Christ is of course the likeness of the one who came, not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. And we must never forget, not least when our country is in a crisis of leadership, that those wonderful words were first spoken as a political challenge: the rulers of the world go about things one way, but we're going to go about them the other way. The doctrine of the Trinity, if we know what we are about, is our clue to help us, and to help the people we serve, to find our way through the nightmare of natural disasters and the crisis of political confidence, locally, nationally and internationally. And it is in that context, and only in that context, that we dare to look around ourselves in the church and reflect on where we are going. Two months from now, God willing, Bishop Mark and I will be among the bishops gathering in Canterbury for the Lambeth Conference. Much has been written about this already; many hopes and aspirations, many of them contrary to one another, are invested in the work of this summer. I am very aware that for many people in parishes up and down the country, the controversial discussions of 750 bishops every ten years must seem extremely remote and irrelevant, and there is always a danger that they will be so in fact. But I would be failing in my duty if I did not share with you my own reflections as I prepare for this event, which will be for me as for most of those present a once-in-a-lifetime occasion. I do sometimes feel like the man on the cliff who can see the tsunami coming a mile out to sea and is shouting to the people on the beach to warn them, and all they see is a strange chap dancing about and yelling, and they ignore him . . .

The Lambeth Conference began 141 years ago, in 1867. Archbishop Longley (who had earlier been bishop here in Durham; Longley is one of the few bishops to have served four sees, in his case Ripon, Durham, York and Canterbury) called it because some of the North American bishops were anxious that some of the African bishops were going soft on doctrinal and ethical questions. 76 bishops attended that first conference; around 100 attended the next one, in 1878; in 1888 our own Bishop Lightfoot brought most of the bishops to Auckland Castle after the conference to help him reconsecrate the great chapel after its major reordering. Successive conferences have discussed the major and weighty issues of the day, and the sense has grown up – we Anglicans are rather good at senses growing up rather than sudden pronouncements being handed down – that in a rapidly growing worldwide Communion set in a rapidly changing world this once-a-decade meeting of those solemnly charged with being shepherds of the flock is close to the heart of our common life. Lambeth is not the Vatican; it does not have legislative authority over the member churches; yet its statements, such as they are, have unifying power because they are able to express the mind of the Communion. That is what is meant by calling Lambeth an 'instrument of unity'. When there have been contentious issues – and that is by no means a new thing! – Lambeth has sometimes been able to say either 'this proposal doesn't represent where we are', or perhaps 'although we are not agreed on this matter, we are clear that this is something on which we can agree to differ'. That, for instance, is what happened with the question, dear to the hearts of many of us in this Diocese, of the

admission of children to Communion prior to Confirmation. Not everybody agreed; but everybody agreed that it was something that could be done without breaking up our common life.

Discussions thus need to take place at different levels: both 'what do we think about this issue', and 'how do we regard this issue: is it a central matter on which disagreement will mean disunity, or is it not so central, so that we can have diversity of views and practices without causing problems?' And it is of course on the latter point that the controversies of the last five years have focussed. As I have often summarized it: we all know that some differences don't make a difference (which tune you sing for which hymn, for instance) while other differences do make a difference (if someone says they believe not in the Trinity but in five separate gods). And the question is, how do you tell the difference between the differences that make a difference and the differences that don't make a difference? That was one of the central questions of the sixteenth century, when Anglicanism came to birth, and it's one of the central questions right now.

In all this, I believe we are seeing the outworking of two things, over and above the specific questions which will be on the agenda. I say this partly to give you a sense of perspective on it all, partly to call you to prayer about it all and for those of us who will take part, and partly because to understand these things is actually quite important not only nationally and internationally but also locally, in parish and deanery and diocese. The first current of thought which flows into the Lambeth whirlpool is the question of the church's witness to the unchanging gospel of Jesus Christ amid the multiple social and cultural pressures of our time. Whether you call this 'late modernity' or 'post modernity' or 'secularism' or whatever, nobody can doubt that the challenge of believing in God, let alone in the God we see in Jesus Christ, and working for the kingdom, has taken a particular shape and form in our day. Because we believe in God the creator, we cannot ignore the world around us and say 'we'll just go on saying what we always said'. New challenges mean new opportunities, new possibilities for growth; to avoid them is to be like the servant who buried his master's money in the ground. But equally, because we believe in God the son, who died and rose again, we cannot assume that the pressures around us in the world, the politically correct currents of opinion at any one place or time, are an accurate index to our calling as Christians. The word of the cross is always going to be foolishness and a scandal, even though the word of God the creator is always ultimately going to be 'Yes'. And actually living with this tension – and living with it as the people who pray for the world and the church in the power of the Spirit – is not just the calling of 750 bishops every ten years, but the calling of every Christian, every parish, every deanery and locality, every diocese. These are the questions that are swirling around us, for instance, when we wrestle through negotiations with local education authorities about new academies, or when a parish scratches its collective head about social or cultural problems, and indeed mission opportunities, on the new estate, or with a new immigrant community. How do we speak and live the word and gospel of the triune God in this situation?

It is, tragically, because the church, not least the Anglican Communion, has often sidled around the edge of such questions, and settled for that well-known commodity, typical Anglican fudge, that we are in the position we are in. Clear and wise words need to be spoken, but before they can be spoken they need to be heard in prayer and scripture. That is one of the main things that Lambeth is about. The Archbishop of Canterbury sent round a letter last Sunday to all bishops calling us, not to a political conference where we argue about disputed issues, but to a humble meeting with one another in the presence of the Triune God, in prayer and scripture and sacrament. The journalists are already grumbling that it looks as though there won't be anything to write about if the bishops spend all their time praying and reading the Bible and learning from one another how to take forward Christ's mission in tomorrow's world. Well, that might be a good thing. The rulers of this age

do things one way, but we have to do them differently. I confess that I have been anxious about the direction things are going, or rather the apparent lack of direction that seems to be coming – we haven't, for instance, had any preliminary papers on any topics to be discussed, unlike last time when I gather all bishops received a very fat file some months in advance – but I am committed to going to Lambeth at the invitation of the man whom I believe passionately has been raised up by God for this time, and who is calling us together to share and bear the pain of the church, which may turn out to be the pain of God, so that we may find such healing and hope and new direction as God in his mercy may choose to give us.

This, then, is the first thing I want to say: that the big picture at Lambeth is about the task and question that faces us all, namely, how to be loyal to the gospel in a turbulent and fast-changing world, while at the same time watching for the signs of the kingdom within that world and being prepared to open our eyes and ears to new glimpses of the gospel to which our own traditions might have blinded us. And I am slowly coming to think that the form, as well as the content, of Lambeth is starting to represent in itself a counter-cultural move, a challenge both to the church and through the church to the world about the way we do things, the way we hold together, the way we disagree, the way we learn and suffer and witness to the kingdom.

The second thing about Lambeth flows directly out of this. As I have often said in preaching and lecturing, the call of the church is to be in prayer at the place where the world is in pain. We who live in a world of earthquakes and cyclones, metaphorical as well as literal – should we expect to escape because we belong to Jesus? No: we should expect to be drawn in, to watch with him in the darkness of Gethsemane, to stand with him before the angry rulers of the world and the scornful bystanders, to find that the reproaches of those who reproach him fall on us. When the world is groaning in travail, says Paul, then the church is called also to groan, so that the Spirit may groan within us. Lambeth takes place in a world not only of natural disasters but of enormous political uncertainty, in our own country, in America, in Zimbabwe, in the Middle East, in east and north-east Africa, and in many other places which fall out of the newspapers but which still remain troubled and fearful. The crisis of Western democracy – and if you don't think Western democracy is in crisis, open your eyes – puts at risk many things that we have cheerfully taken for granted. The crisis of global warming and climate change makes us shudder for the future of our children and grandchildren, yet many of the measures we are rushing to take, like growing biofuels, may now appear to cause as many new problems as they solve. The crisis of economic confidence is bringing depressing news for those who thought they had seen light at the end of their financial tunnels – though it is perhaps inevitable, granted the enormous amounts of money flowing around in some small parts of our society and the enormous inequalities that are thereby produced. I was proud yesterday to take part in the fast in aid of the 'drop the debt' campaign, and I believe that until we address these issues directly we will continue to see the economic equivalents of earthquakes and cyclones, with a few getting rich and many getting hurt.

The world is in pain. And the pain of the Anglican Communion, focussed this summer both in the tensions that will be evident at Lambeth and in the fact that, for the first time ever, a rival conference is being held which already instantiates some kind of schism and may propose a formalisation of such a thing, is not something other than the pain of the world. The whole world is struggling with the question of how to live together, and shall we be exempt? The global community is puzzling painfully over the questions of which decisions can and must be taken locally and which decisions can and must only be taken together, internationally, and shall we hold back from that same question? The world as a whole is in pain on the question of gender identity, relationships and behaviour, and do we expect that we won't have to resonate with that pain? This doesn't mean, of course, that we

automatically know the answers, or that we must trim our sails to every passing wind of culture and fashion. It does mean that we are called to live, and indeed to worship and celebrate, at the very places where the tectonic plates are shifting beneath us, to watch and shudder through the earthquake, wind and fire in order to wait for the still, small voice, to be the place where God the Spirit groans with the pain of the world so that our life together, parish by parish, diocese by diocese, will be caught up whether it realises it or not into the very life of the Trinity in which we are formed according to the pattern of Christ so that the world may be redeemed.

I have preached and taught about this for many years without ever imagining that I would be called to live it out in something like a Lambeth Conference; but I do believe that is where we now are. And so I ask your prayers, throughout this coming summer, that the assembled bishops may have wisdom and fresh grace to hear God's word together in scripture, to confront the major issues by speaking the truth in love, to hold the pain of the church within the pain of the world and as the vessel for the pain of God, so that the strange but glorious gospel whose story we have celebrated this last two months may find fresh expression in our common life, nationally and internationally. My friends, the Anglican Communion may not look the same in three months time as it does now. If there is to be reshaping of whatever sort, let us pray that it will be a reshaping according to the pattern of Jesus Christ and in the power of the Spirit. Pray; stir one another up to pray; pray without ceasing; pray in the Spirit; pray for the Triune God to be glorified in the church and before the watching world. Pray for +Mark and myself; we will take courage, every day, from the fact that you will be upholding us day by day and hour by hour.

And, in the middle of it all, we have a diocese to run, decisions to take, housekeeping to attend to, fresh possibilities to explore and embrace. Our Report is full of good things, not least because it breathes the air both of faith and hope and of hard-headed realism. The difficulties we face, not least our perennial questions about money, are important but it's vital that we see them in that same larger global perspective. I am more grateful than I can say to those who work tirelessly behind the scenes to keep us on track in our raising and spending of money, and for the sense that they know, with every calculation they make, that they too are working for the kingdom of God. The work of Chaplains in Higher Education, as indeed elsewhere, is a huge encouragement, as I found last Sunday when I confirmed several students in the Cathedral. And, around it all, we continue to move forward in mission, in a hundred different ways. All of this we shall now look at in much more detail. But, as we approach Trinity Sunday, summing up and celebrating the story of Jesus and the Spirit we have been telling one another these past weeks, we hold all this detail within the love and power and saving purposes of the one true God. The storms may come, the floods may lift up their voice, but the Lord on high is mightier. The nations make much ado, and the kingdoms are moved, but God has shown his voice, and the rebellious earth shall melt away. My brothers and sisters, the Lord of Hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

Amen.