

Address to the Archdeaconry Synod of North West Europe, 15th October 2016

I want to offer some general remarks about the context in which we minister – social, political, national church and diocese. I will, of course, say a few words about Brexit, since – even if you are not British – this is a subject that has been in the European press constantly since June.

To begin at the most general level: we live in an era of globalisation. An increasing number of us, including me, have families that stretch across different continents. Our trade is increasingly dependent upon events in far-away countries like China. And our banking systems are interconnected across the world. We are globally connected.

We learnt this at our peril a few years back. We realised that our European banks were in fact deeply implicated in the fortunes of middle-American sub-prime mortgages. The collapse of that mortgage market led to the 2008 banking crisis.

The effects of that crisis have been profound and sustained. We have been living through a long period of austerity. Europe as a whole has struggled to grow. Interest rates are very low: I could get a mortgage in Belgium at a fixed rate of 1.2%. Unemployment, especially youth unemployment, in many countries is high: 43% in Spain, 38% in Italy. Wages in Eastern European countries are low – take home pay in Hungary, which is under 600euros a month. So there are large numbers of people who feel poor, disenfranchised and left behind.

Beyond this, parts of our diocese face significant security or military issues. Turkey has undergone an unsuccessful coup and lives with a resurgent pro-Islamic leadership. Our chaplain in Ankara listened to the warplanes going over his house. The Eastern Ukraine remains under Russian occupation. The Balkan States live with a real fear of Russian tanks one day rolling across their borders. In Western Europe, countries face the threat of terrorism: with bombings in Paris and Brussels and a mass-killing in Nice. Some of us here will know people who were affected. The former head of Britain's MI6, Sir John Sawers, suggested on Wednesday that the world is now as dangerous, or even more dangerous, than during the cold war.

In this context, it is not surprising that people are fearful and are responding by expressing the desire to 'take back control'. There is a longing for strong leaders who will protect us from external threats. There is a rising fear of foreigners and migrants. Populism is on the rise across Europe – with right wing governments in Croatia, Hungary and Poland, for example, and the expectation of a right wing president in Austria. Closer to home for the Archdeaconry of NW Europe, Geert Wilders exerts real influence in the Netherlands as head of the Party for Freedom.

Whilst the longing for strong leaders and protection from foreigners is understandable it is also worrying. Europe saw in the 1930s where these kinds of forces can lead. It is important that Europeans do not lose a sense of history and I suggest that we Christians have a particular responsibility to act as a moral conscience.

In the face of the growing fear of migrants, earlier this week we held a diocesan conference in Cologne on the subject of ministry in Europe to refugees. It was a hugely inspiring event. There were some 60 people from the Diocese in Europe, the Episcopal Convention, the Anglican Communion Office, and USPG. Together we shared ideas, perspectives, and stories. We listened to an encouraging address from the United Nations High Commission on Refugees.

Against a depressing political backdrop we left feeling encouraged, inspired and hopeful that there were practical steps we could take to show compassion, to influence and to reconcile. We prayed that our churches could become places where the gospel of reconciliation enables people from all cultures and backgrounds to find dignity, a spiritual home and a place where they can give and receive.

Meanwhile, on June 23rd the UK voted by a small majority to leave the EU. The sense of powerlessness in the face of globalisation and fears linked to migration were both key factors in the Brexit vote. At the root of that vote was the desire to 'take back control'. For some the desire for control was expressed in terms of political sovereignty, for others as fear of immigration and for still others a protest against a political elite that had not served them well.

I have been in two big church debates about Brexit – one in General Synod and one in the College of Bishops, and the thing that has struck me both times is that most speakers wanted to talk about the condition of the UK, not about Europe. I have formed the impression that the vote was not really about the EU, it could have been about *anything* that seemed to give people some chance of gaining back control.

A study by the Joseph Rowntree foundation has shown how the Brexit vote exposed divisions in British society between richer and poorer, better and less well educated, older and younger. It further increases the cultural if not political separation between England and Scotland. And it introduces a serious problem for Ireland with the political and potentially security issues associated with an External EU border running between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. The actual leaving of Britain from the EU will take two years from when Article 50 is triggered, so that would likely mean March 2019. But renegotiation of thousands of trade deals will take many more years than that. Whereas David Cameron envisaged the Brexit vote as the way of ending his political difficulties, it has in fact opened some of the biggest, strategic political issues that the UK has faced since WW2.

Theresa May has recently clarified what Brexit means. At the Conservative Party conference she said: "We are going to be a fully independent, sovereign country, a country that is no longer part of the political union with supranational institutions that can override national parliaments and courts. So it's not going to be a Norway model or a Switzerland model, it is going to be an agreement between an independent, sovereign United Kingdom and the EU." In practice this looks like being an exit that puts the UK outside the free movement of people and the preferential trade terms of access to the EU – so it is a 'hard Brexit'.

Actually, the UK has a lot less capacity for exercising sovereign control of its destiny than its leaders like to tell us. Under the Article 50 process most of the cards are in the hands of the EU 27. And whilst politicians may have their plans, economic realities are decided by the markets. Following Mrs May's speech the pound has fallen to its lowest level against the dollar for three decades and changes in economic fortunes will shape public attitudes more than political speeches.

In a climate of fear, it behoves politicians to act with reserve and responsibility. Sadly, we seem to be witnessing, to the contrary, a race to the bottom. Some of the recent UK rhetoric about identity feels scary, if like me, you live as a guest in a country that is not your own. Mrs May has said: "If you believe you are a citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere. You don't understand what the very word citizenship means." And the UK Home Secretary Amber Rudd

has suggested that UK companies should be forced to reveal how many foreign workers they employ. Personally, and as a Christian, I experience no conflict between allegiance to a nation and identifying as a citizen of the world. In my view, overcoming the worst aspects of nationalism has been one of the great European achievements of the last 75 years. And if, as most of us here do, we live in a country which is not our maternal home, then the idea of being on a special register sounds scary. That was something else they did in the 1930s.

So how might Brexit affect British residents in the EU? Well the immediate devaluation of sterling against the Euro has hit retired Brits living in Spain and rural France. They are feeling poorer. People are concerned about residence rights, rights to health care, legal rights, employment rights. Pensioners are worried about whether their UK pensions will be frozen at the level they were when they left the UK (as happens if you retire outside the EU). It could be that employing clergy will become more complex. Will we need work visas? Will there need to be arrangements for interim health cover before local health schemes kick in?

I met recently with Lord Bridges, the minister in the House of Lords responsible for the Brexit negotiations. He listened sympathetically. He indicated that the government is keen to engage with the church and is open to hear our ideas. Specifically, he offered to run a roundtable in Brussels so he could hear the concerns of diocesan clergy and lay people directly. That meeting is now scheduled for March 8th 2017. If you are interested in receiving a ticket to this event, do have a word with David Fieldsend, the Archbishop of Canterbury's representative to the EU.

The UK government's position is that the status of British people living in the EU will be taken into account in negotiations under the principle of reciprocity. That's to say, Britain will be offering to give rights to foreign nationals living in Britain that match the rights given to British people living in the EU. I don't know if you will find that reassuring, or not. I do know that lots of Brits abroad are looking at taking out another EU nationality if they can.

I have struggled to understand Brexit theologically. What is God saying to us? My main inspiration has been the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah had the unpopular task of preaching to the city of Jerusalem at a time when the Babylonians were at the gates. Jeremiah could see that disaster was on the way. But he was in a small minority. The false prophets were quite happy to prophecy peace. After all, that was what everyone wanted to hear. 'Don't worry', they said, 'you are a chosen people, Jerusalem is the Lord's dwelling place, God will look after you and everything will be fine'. Jeremiah's message was more complex. Yes: God will continue to be with you. But salvation is coming on the far side of exile. Things are going to get much worse before they get better.

And that could be God's message for the UK. With a Brexit vote come consequences. British voters are grown-ups and they will have to take responsibility for their actions. That means likely harder economic times and a certain kind of exile from the close European relationships that many of us had enjoyed. It is possible that life for British people will get *much* more difficult. But it was in conditions of suffering and deprivation in Babylon that the Israelites did indeed humble themselves and return to the Lord. And so Jeremiah's message was that of hope beyond hope. The Lord says to Israel through Jeremiah: 'Behold, I will pluck them up from their land. Yet after I have plucked them up, I will again have compassion on them, and I will bring them each to his heritage and each to his land.' And later he continues – and now writing to people who are in exile – 'for I know the plans I have for you, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me,

and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek for me with all your heart.’ (Jer 29).

Is that the Lord’s word to the UK? Well, as with any prophetic utterance you will have to test it to decide if it is true. I could be wrong.

Brexit is certainly a wake-up call to the rest of the EU. Manuel Valls, Prime Minister of France wrote yesterday in the Financial Times: “Let’s face facts: the European Project is in trouble. With the growing threat of terrorism, the refugee crisis, lacklustre economic growth and unemployment, the turmoil in Europe is unprecedented.”

The EU project has been unlucky to be clobbered simultaneously by post-2008 austerity and the refugee crisis. But that is the world we are living in. In 2016 the EU has to be seen to be delivering real benefit to the peoples of Europe. It needs to be seen as open and listening. Personally, I think that the European Commission has not yet adequately demonstrated this. The recent proposal to create a European army, for example, over-estimates the extent to which ordinary people feel a sense of loyalty to the EU. You don’t send your young people to go into battle and risk losing blood and lives unless the entity for which you are fighting elicits a high degree of patriotism.

I have spoken about our current social and political context. Let me now say something about the church context. I’ll start with the Church of England perspective.

The Church of England continues to decline, gently. The Church is battling with secularism. Its congregations are growing older – the average age of people in church is well over 60. Within Britain there is a national loss of memory of the Christian story and with it the Christian ethic. Within the church there is uncertainty as to how to respond to rapid social change. And post-2008 poverty in England has increased sharply.

In this context, the Church has embarked on a wide-ranging programme of renewal and reform. There is a renewed commitment to lay discipleship. We are beginning to see a rise in vocations to ordained ministry. There has been a spontaneous desire to address poverty with many churches running food banks. There is a renewal of evangelism. And we are beginning to learn how to manage and conduct disagreement without hatred and bitterness. The Church of England has stayed together. Perhaps more remarkably, the worldwide Anglican Communion is still together.

The foundation for renewal is the life of prayer and the religious life. I was recently at a leadership seminar with 25 other diocesan bishops. We were being tutored by Dr. Kevin Kaizer, one of the world’s top leadership gurus from INSEAD business school in Fontainebleau. Kevin reminded us that as bishops we were supposed to be leading the Church of England, and that if the Church dwindles into insignificance, well it does that on our watch. So with his encouragement, we went through a process of looking hard at our church life, endeavouring to articulate what we had to offer the world and how we could improve our offer. In three groups we were invited to share suggestions for improving our offer. Do you know what came top? Easily the most important area for this group of diocesan bishops was the discipleship of the laity, and in particular, the creation of a rhythm or rule of life.

Perhaps to our joint surprise, we as bishops discovered that what we most long for is that the church could be able to articulate a rule or rhythm of life that draws each of us closer to God

and to each other. In a secular world, yet a world where people are searching for meaning and spirituality, we would long to offer this because we think this would address people's enduringly deep spiritual needs. So what, I wonder, would a rule of life for our diocese look like? Could we imagine it? Would it be helpful? That's something we might like to discuss.

Moreover, when we bishops allowed ourselves to consider the church from the perspective of 'business', (and I'm aware some of you will be very worried about bishops doing this) we realised that we have too easily allowed ourselves to be pushed towards a model that posits the clergy as suppliers and the laity as consumers. That is bad for clergy, who end up trying to supply everything, and for laity who feel disempowered and dependent. A better model is to conceive of the whole people of God – the *laos* - as the product, with the clergy's role being to serve the whole church to equip it better for its ambassadorial role in the world. That, anyway, is how St. Paul saw it - Ephesians chapter 4: "It was he who gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity." That's something else we might return to.

I've offered some reflections on where we are as a national church and what the bishops are thinking about when they get together. Let me say now something about the Diocese in Europe context. We are a minority church in all the countries in which we operate. We cater in the first instance for people who want to worship in English. But we also welcome people who feel at home in an Anglican setting, and who want to worship in their own language. Here in NW Europe, I am delighted with the continuing progress we are making with Dutch translations of Common Worship. More widely, we have a new Anglican community worshipping in Polish in Krakow and a longer established Turkish-speaking Church in Istanbul.

The character of each of our 7 archdeaconries is very different, and particularly between the West and the East. Our Eastern Archdeaconry consists mainly of smaller, highly international, highly diverse congregations mostly located in capitals and other big cities. The ethos feels pioneering. Getting organised, registered and structured is a challenge in the East. I would love to see partnerships between some of the larger churches represented here and the more fragile churches further East: Warsaw, Kiev, Zagreb, Budapest, St. Petersburg, for example. This could be really educational and beneficial for both sides. You don't need to go to Africa to find a mission link: you can find one right here in our own diocese.

As Anglicans we are committed to the goal of Christian Unity, and in the current political context building strong relationships between different European churches is increasingly important. In some places we operate, relationships with the majority Roman Catholic Church or the Orthodox church are very important because we rely on their explicit or implicit patronage and support. I would want to say that at the highest level these relationships are excellent. The Archbishop of Canterbury has warm personal relationships with the Ecumenical Patriarch and Pope Francis. I was part of an ecumenical delegation to welcome the Patriarch of Serbia to London yesterday. We welcome Patriarch Kirill to London next week.

I would draw to your attention one remarkable happening. Last week, I was in Rome for a conference at which pairs of bishops, one Anglican and one Roman Catholic were jointly commissioned and sent out in mission by Pope Francis and Archbishop Justin. I was paired with the Catholic Bishop of Antwerp. If you think about it, that was a truly historic event, unimaginable a few decades ago.

I would also want to stress the importance of working with Pentecostal and Evangelical churches. As a diocese we have not been so strong at this historically. I hold my hand up to that: there are Anglican evangelical missionaries working in Brussels whom I have never met! But current trends show clearly that it is the evangelical and pentecostal churches that are showing the strongest signs of growth. At a lecture at the Gregorian in Rome last week we were told that with current growth projections, Evangelical and Pentecostal churches will by 2050 be larger in global terms than the RC and Anglican churches combined. And we should be talking to them.

You will know that over the last couple of years in the Diocese we have been formulating, agreeing and beginning to roll out a diocesan strategy. One of our strategic aims is to have well-structured archdeaconries. That was especially important in the Eastern Archdeaconry. A year ago we created a full-time, free-standing archdeacon post. This has been hugely beneficial in providing proper oversight and care of chaplaincies which, as I indicated, are often fragile.

Meurig Williams is now leaving his role as Acting Archdeacon of NW Europe to become Archdeacon of France. Meurig is a member of my personal staff which means he is paid by the Church Commissioners. Archdeacon of France is a major responsibility for a big territory and I'm delighted that we have someone of Meurig's ability and experience to fulfil that role.

Paul Vrolijk takes over as Archdeacon of North West Europe with effect from this synod. We are fortunate to have an able group of lay and ordained leaders here in Benelux. And the territory is geographically compact enough that they can work together as a team. Paul will need to delegate and share responsibility. I hope that you will support him in this. And whilst the coffers of the Archdeaconry are not as deep as those of the Church Commissioners I hope that you will all make sure he is properly supported financially and administratively.

In closing, I want to pay tribute to our clergy and lay officers. To succeed as a priest in the diocese in Europe is relatively hard. There is less resourcing and support than in other UK dioceses. Most of us are operating away from our home cultures. But this Archdeaconry is in excellent shape. There have been some notable achievements:

- The planting and rapid growth of our new church in Amersfoort.
- The move of our church in Ghent into the capacious and splendid St. Elisabeth.
- The transformation of Church House Brussels into a building that will be able to offer a high quality meeting and entertainment centre on behalf of the diocese
- The publication of the first serious text book on Anglicanism in the Dutch language together with Dutch language liturgy
- The development of prison ministry in Belgium.
- And the healthy churches that each of you represent, where people are coming to faith and growing in faith.

So my dominant note is thanksgiving. I close with St. Paul's words to the Christians at Colossae: 'We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you. May you be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.'

+Robert