

Keynote address

Cardinal Vincent Nichols

Good afternoon everybody. I would like to start with a very heartfelt word of thanks to Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, and to Bob in particular, for doing this work, and presenting it in such an attractive way in the newspaper format.

For everyone who doesn't have one, I know there are copies here. But they really do give, I think, a very clear and very attractive account of what has been listened to - some of which we've heard this morning from our speakers here.

And if I may be slightly auto-biographical, I was rather looking forward to hearing from the Toxteth project because that is the first place that I worked as a priest and it remains very special in my heart but we'll have to wait for the video. Are there snippets from Toxteth in the video?

Now one of the points that Bob asked me to pursue a little bit was something about the role of church leaders in this work of attentive listening and trying to help fashion some shared views of Good Society.

Forgive me but I couldn't help think first of Pope Francis in the way in which, as much as in his actions as anything else, he teaches the importance of giving total attention to somebody who he is meeting.

I could tell you a little story. For example, recently he met three women who had spent many years in the slavery of human trafficking and one of these women said that, since she had been rescued those many years before and all during the period of her servitude, she had never had a good night's sleep. She said she met Pope Francis, he gave her his full attention, they talked for probably a minute or so, she got a photograph. She said that's by my bed, I speak with him before I go to sleep and I sleep well now.

And just that attentiveness, as you were saying, to people's experience, to people's lives can be so transforming.

Pope Francis has an interesting phrase that he uses. He tells us to go to the peripheries. Now when I first heard that, I thought he was thinking of a city like Buenos Aires and the peripheries of the city where the favelas and the very poorest areas would be. Now I think that's in part what he means, but I think in part he also means the peripheries, those places and people who are far from the centres of power. And that's not necessarily a geographical distance at all. So it's not talking about the outskirts of cities but it's talking about distance and therefore helplessness from the centres of power.

I think another point that he makes, that I would like to pick up, is the great importance of keeping together action and reflection. And his reflection on that axiom that we should be seen and go to the peripheries, his reflection is this: he said it is in the peripheries that you will meet the person of Christ most clearly. It is in those who are least endowed, least possessive of power that you will meet Christ and in meeting Christ you will meet the truth, you will meet the truth of our human nature, the truth of what we are called to be.

And I think that's a line that we should pursue, because for me a fundamental principle is going to be that a Good Society is one that recognises, shares and builds on fundamental truths about the human person.

So, for example, and this might be simplistic and therefore rather exaggerated: in the centres of power there is a notion of the person which operates. On the whole it's a notion of the person as an individual, of a person as an individual pursuing what they want to pursue, of an individual engaging with others by way of contract – what will I get out of this? What will you get out of this? Can we between the two of us maximise our two profit margins? – this is the way we work and relate to each other. And that can grow from a single person into groups as well. But there's an understanding of the individual there which is essentially competitive and indeed productive.

If you go to the periphery points, and what we hear in these stories, there's a very complimentary part, maybe seemingly opposing understanding of the human person, but it's the person as essentially relational, as essentially finding his or her self in relationships, in being heard, in being esteemed, and in that sense growing as we've heard through and into friendships.

So that understanding of the person as relational, and not simply individualistic, is maybe what we discover in the projects that we've been hearing about very clearly, but it is a fundamental part of the truth of the human person.

Now it seems to me that, as we pursue our reflection based on our action, we have to hold these two together. We have to hold together the notion that each of us is an individual and each of us does need some skills, whether they're sewing skills or whatever. We do need to work competitively, we do need to be productive and generative, but we also, also always need to be relational. And in that sense growing in human relationships for their very intrinsic value.

To me that's a window on the transcendent because it is when we glimpse the mystery of God as a relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit that we begin to understand the real depth of our own relational character.

But it is important that we hold these two together.

What the relational side of the human person generates is, if you want, the phrase 'emerging goods' – things that aren't the objective of what we want to achieve but they emerge in the whole process. And they are things like friendship, things like trust, they are things like generosity, giftedness. And these actually are the goods that make for a Good Society.

So perhaps at times we are tempted to oppose the individualistic notion of the person, which maybe we can see as operating in the higher echelons of society or in business ethics or whatever, and on the other hand a relational notion of the person, I think we learn that we have to hold them together because they need each other. But most of all, I would suggest what is neglected today is those goods which we produce precisely through our relationships and those are the goods which lie at the heart of a Good Society.

There was for me a tiny snippet of hope in the business news on Radio 4 early this morning. The last item on the business news was an interview with a man who was putting forward a theory of the philosophy of investment. And he spoke about how it was important that people, when they considered how they were going to invest, they should not simply consider what the returns will be, but they should consider the fundamental philosophy of life - what we want to achieve in life and how the financial investment might actually serve something greater than its profit or its growth. The interviewer didn't know how to handle that at all. He just couldn't make sense of it.

But it's there, it's in every human heart, and I think this project of the Good Society will help to bring it to the fore and indeed be an important part of our work for the Good Society that we would picture. Thank you.