

The Church of England needs to speak with more than a whisper during this COVID-19 crisis.

Facemasks, social distancing, curfews, imprisoned students, rules of six/eight, hand-washing until they are sore, add more to your own list. The Coronavirus pandemic continues to unfold seemingly without end.

Businesses fail, unemployment rises, and financial crisis looms. The political trumpet in response sounds an uncertain and confusing note. Clear and coherent political leadership seems far off with a disjointed relationship to medical and scientific advice. Add to this potent mix claims of 'fake news' and conspiracy theories and there is a perfect storm.

In the meantime hopes for a vaccine remain high but unfulfilled. Whilst young people contemplate an uncertain future, the elderly have the prospect of endless solitary confinement, imprisoned by an invisible microscopic warder, even university has become prison-like. Likewise working from home remains a mixed blessing and city centres shrivel and wilt as they empty of life. In the U.K. the various nation governments have done superb job in frightening people and encouraging 'snitching' on neighbours and a general breakdown in trust. One suspects this is to reinforce for their own autocratic purposes as rule by diktat relaces parliamentary scrutiny.

Meanwhile, the Archbishop of Canterbury, seemingly off the radar for a while, has emerged with two important statements.

On 16th September 2020 the Archbishop of Canterbury called on ministers to stop controlling people's freedoms from Westminster, saying instead they should "only do centrally what must be done centrally". Writing in the British broadsheet the Daily Telegraph (a newspaper usually associated with the right wing and Conservative Party) with the Bishop of London, Sarah Mullally he condemns an addiction to centralisation and suggests instead "localism". "When it comes to Covid-19," he writes, "the importance of local networks and communities becomes even greater."

The Telegraph quoted a source close to Mr Welby as saying he was “deeply concerned about Christmas and the impact of the ‘rule of six’ on the vulnerable, the needy, the poor and the elderly”.

He writes that the “on-the-ground” response to the pandemic is most vital, with local communities, councils and churches playing “the most important delivery roles of all”. In a thinly veiled criticism of central government, he continued “the temptation to pull more decisions into the centre” in order to feel that “something is being done” should be “resisted”.

And on Friday 25th September in the influential U.K. Times newspaper he spoke of the British people developing ‘uncertainty fatigue ‘national PTSD’¹. Political and social uncertainty dating back to the financial crash of 2008 is fuelling divisions in society. He counsels that those in power, including within the Church, have made hasty decisions that were “often wrong”. This could easily apply to other countries and their leadership, divisions in the United States in its presidential election year are no exception.

So far so good but the Church of England is in a unique position as the Established Church, the state Church with an historic responsibility for the nation. It even has 24 bishops (and a few others) in the U.K. wide legislature in the second revising chamber House of Lords.²

In this respect the Archbishop as the senior representative of the Church of England is only doing what he should. As such the Church should be a voice to the nation, one of comfort and criticism. Previous Archbishops have followed this path and one thinks immediately of the late Robert Runcie with his report ‘Faith in the City’ at a time of riots in Brixton and around the country. This led to his challenge to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher post Falklands War in 1982 when he suggested that we might remember the Argentinian dead as well as the British.

¹ Post Traumatic Stress Disorder usually associated with battle scarred soldiers.

² Interestingly the only other country in the world to have religious leaders by right in its governing bodies is Iran.

I'm glad that Justin Welby has spoken out but the voice of the Church still seems quiet, muted, just a whisper, even at what is indisputably a time of national and international crisis. The best the Church seems to be able to offer is limited socially-spaced seating on a Sunday and a rather coy Zoom online presence. It should instead be a powerful prophetic voice of comfort and leadership to the nation. This has to come from the top.

Now is the time for a more pro-active intervention from the Church of England, especially given its unique position as the historic national Church, even if it risks upsetting the governing party and political powers of the day. If that voice is not louder and more forthcoming others will step-up to fill the void and the consequences could be very unpleasant.

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October 2020