

The Consultation of Anglican Bishops in Dialogue

London ON, July 18-19, 2018 “God’s Church for God’s World” (Lambeth 2020 Theme)

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Please NOTE: These are speaking notes from an oral presentation intended to give the opportunity for theological reflection on a theme for a gathering of bishops. Some references to other works and ideas are included in the text but footnotes have been avoided due to the nature of the presentation.

Presentation One, Thursday July 18

Theme: “God’s Church for God’s World” (Lambeth 2020 Theme)

One Lambeth planning “design group” member commented, when the theme was announced:

“This is a beautiful theme that reminds us to look at something greater and bigger than ourselves, . . . to celebrate who we are within God’s Church in God’s World.”

Another member, commented:

“It’s a chance to think about what God is calling us to bring to his world as a church and how do we serve his world, how to we bless the world, and bless the communities that we are part of.”

Notice something: in the first comment the person notes that it is a beautiful theme: it reminds us to look at God . . . and celebrate *who we are*. And in the second, the theme give us a chance to think about . . . *what God is calling us to do . . . and how we: bring, serve, and bless*.

These are perfectly valid statements, better than I can do in a sentence, and they properly bring together a focus on God and our response to God. But notice how quickly, in our language – through our habits – *we shift our focus* from attention on God, to attention on what we must/ought/should “be”, . . . or “be-doing”.

This tendency is very common, at least in North American and Europe, and it may rightly come from a rejection of merely “talking theology” without any human action and response. The response is important. Crucial. Without works, faith is dead. However, one of great failing of our time, and of our theology (“in these parts” at least) is that we shift our focus too quickly from God, and what God is like—to us, and what we are like, or what we should be doing. It happens too quickly, almost like we cannot sustain a focus on God.

It is God’s church, yes. God’s world. So, we discipline ourselves to stop, wait, and focus our gaze, our loving attention on God . . . as long as a we can . . . before shifting onto what we must do, what we cannot wait to do, what we are privileged to do—in response to God’s mission. Not-forgetting that it is God’s mission, God’s power, God’s grace, God’s almighty Word that speaks – and moves everything that is, into being. The same One who speaks the primordial, “let!”

“Let there be light!” and darkness is both obliterated and embraced by it.

“Let there be life!” and it teems forth from the earth.

“Let there be new life!” and Jesus stands up in that darkened tomb.

And death scurries away, defeated, forever.

Focus long enough on that God, and you KNOW what to do. Together. Focus long enough, and faithfully enough, on getting to the bottom of > just exactly what KIND OF GOD < are we dealing with here? What kind of God is revealed in the life death and resurrection of Jesus?

So, in the middle of everything, I'll been trying to keep a focus on that. It sounds perfectly obvious, I know, but I find that it takes intentional effort. It takes practice, for all of us.

Read the newspaper, scroll the social media, and you will see this fallen world. You will see what we have done and what we have left undone. You will see the way language is used. The way truth is diminished or obliterated—and people don't seem to mind. We see the way chaos and collusion, and strong-man politics, hurt people and nations. It puts a knot in your stomach. Gloom in the heart. But this theme will encourage us to focus on God so that we remember there is God-truth: that this is a fallen and redeemed world, and it belongs to God. God's revelation is that a new heaven and a new earth are possible and assured—by the promise of this God, who only has to speak the word, and it will be so.

That's the God of this beautiful theme. We begin with our focus firmly THERE. And yet, this is a God, and we have a LORD, and we work by the power of a Spirit . . . who insists upon our involvement. So, we meet. God seeks to be known here. God wants to move us. We listen. We wait. We act courageously, in response to God' mission.

Nothing fancy is coming from me in these reflections. Often my presentations at the school will be backed up with electronic images and powerpoint presentations!! Exciting! Instead, we are going old-school with our technology: the human voice—mine and yours, the human ear—mine and yours, the pastoral imagination, and some of the holy narratives/images. The fruit, if any comes of these two presentations, will be found in your Dialogue.

The overall focus of these two reflections comes in the form of a question, “What is the true END of our words?” (the question is posed in an excellent set of lectures by Richard Lischer and can be found in *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence*, Eerdmans, 2005. I am gratefully following Lischer's lead in some of what follows.) What is the true end of these dialogues?

Not “end” in the sense of when will they stop, but “end” as in the *telos*—the ultimate object of aim. The trajectory. . . the outcome . . . the promise of these dialogues. “The end is where we start from”, says the poet (T.S. Eliot)

What are God's ends? God's purposes?

Speaking and listening are in a state of crisis at the moment. Words are silenced. Words are not trusted. Words are in a state of chaos, much of the time. Go around the sanctuary after church and you will need to sweep up all of the unheard, unheeded, uncared-for words. They've been thrown out like confetti, landing on no one. Words seem to have lost their power.

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me!” Ever hear that? The only problem with that saying is that it’s completely false. Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can utterly destroy me. . . and words can completely restore me . . . create me. Right? We know that words can out-of-nothing, create me. Redeem me. Restore me. Words.

What is the true end of our words? Why do we repeat and share our stories? Why are the images and symbols of our faith so important to us? Maybe because language / speech is the human thing most akin to grace and the power of God. Word can create whole new worlds.

One of the key skills you’ve developed as bishops, and before you were bishops, is a capacity for “narration” – you hear and take the Christian Story, refracted through the many traditions, and use it as a lens and light to help others focus on all the little narratives of these multiple human situations. In other words, no one becomes a bishop, or thrives as a bishop, without knowing and living the Christian story and helping others to do so. And you are taken seriously because you keep it real. I learned from one of my preaching mentors that, “The cure for boredom in your speech is not brilliance, it is reality.” Our description of the gospel—happening in our lives—has to be sufficiently thick, real, difficult, troubling, and life-giving to be recognizably about “our real lives” and “our real God”. Reality + God = Good News

This will be impossible for me to name *for* you since you come from so many different contexts. So, I will do some narration . . . praying that you will find its focus in your reality . . . so that you can speak to one another a new revelation of God.

The poets understand the end of words. It can be an incredible experience to hear an artist or poet use words to open a ‘world of meaning’ powerfully before us. Novelist Reynolds Price, in his memoir “*A Whole New Life*”, tells of his battle with cancer and his meeting with Jesus by the Lake of Gennesaret, when at the dawn of the author’s first day of radiation treatments, a silent Jesus leads him waist deep into the water, washes him, forgives him, and heals him.

With that done, Price seamlessly returned to his own bed at home.

It is pointless to ask the typical modern questions, Did it really happen? How did it happen? Can you verify this experience? All we need to know—for it to be real—is that a man in trouble met a saviour who was clearly recognizable. In telling his story Price operates as a preacher, creating a little world of meaning that encompasses both Galilee and the place where he lives—a world in which Christ is really present.

The artists seem to be saying to us, “You have the greatest story in the world. Trust your material.” It will interpret your lives for you.

This friend, who teaches at a university on the southeastern coast of the US, tells about when Hurricane Fran hit the coast and then made a hard left right over his city. It destroyed countless homes, uprooted thousands of trees, and in a few minutes changed the face of a whole community.

On Sunday morning, the congregation gathered in its darkened sanctuary still without power and light. They were a devastated group of people. Some still didn’t know if their loved ones were ok, or

not. The pastor had the good sense to preface the liturgy by inviting anyone who wished to do so to tell a hurricane story. And, after an appropriate display of reticence, they began.

Some witnesses recounted rather trivial losses, like an air conditioner or a favorite tree, but other were terrible. It soon became clear, however, that they had more than a hurricane on their minds. A woman testified of a disease she had endured. Another spoke of his painful divorce. An old man, who had probably never uttered an unscripted word in his life, stood up on a pew and there in the darkness gave thanks to God for saving his life on the battlefield fifty years earlier.

The stories differed greatly from one another, but each story testified to some *side* of God's faithfulness. And from the odd collection of stories, a clearly defined figure began to emerge—not of any one of the tellers but of the Object of the tale. By the time the liturgy began, they had already had church. They had already met God.

God is the central character and animator of many repeated performances from a variety of perspectives. Tell it again, and again, and again and you end up with God. Tell it again, and we discover ourselves as well. We "narrate" the story for one another so that it may be heard anew.

As Richard Lischer writes, of preachers, (*The End of Words*, p. 127)

"We have the high and dangerous calling of telling one last story in a world full of lies. The story must be true: true to the unfinished quality of human experience, true to the chaos, true to the church's rich life, but truest of all to the one who is, and who was, and who is to come", the Risen One, Jesus the Lord. True to Him and focused on Him.

Q.1 What has God done in your life that helps you to "keep it real" (according to the Gospel). Why is that good?

Here is a story that all of you know. And it knows you. It reveals a pattern.

Hear again the story from Luke about resurrection life: the Way to Emmaus. Imagine, if you will, your own ways, roads, paths. The actual people, places, smells and sounds where you normally travel.

On that same day, two followers of Jesus were heading towards the village of Emmaus. Their journey was a necessary journey. One that all of us must take over and over and over again.

They were going along - away from Jerusalem - not knowing what to do next. On the road to Emmaus they literally had their backs to all their experiences of Jesus. Their conversation was a post-mortem of sorts—they were confused. The pressures of reality were crushing them - and their faith. What the heck happened? Everything was great, Jesus was the one. When they were with him, they knew they were in the presence of God's own. When they were with him, the future was for the first time, full of hope. But now it was dead, sealed up with Jesus in a sepulcher and they were going home.

If we were to survey this gathering, we could not number all the roads that brought us here. Who were the people?... when were the moments?... what were the paths?... that got you here.

And I'm not just talking about "here" as London, Canada. That's significant, I hope, but I mean what brought you to faith? What was your road to Jerusalem? What was your road to Jesus? Because the two who we hear about on the road to Emmaus had at one time walked the other way on that road. They'd come from somewhere and had met Jesus. The road to Emmaus story implies a round trip. A trip from no-faith, to faith... and now back to no-faith. They walked along the road out of Jerusalem with no faith.

The two walked to Emmaus in a state of dis-belief. And in the midst of their distress, without them noticing, a third person came and walked with them. He didn't announce who he was, he didn't immediately rescue them from their distress. He asked a question that stopped them in their tracks. "What's up with you?"

They stood still, looking sad. "Are you the only one who doesn't know what happened?" Are you the only one who doesn't know that it's all over? They didn't recognize this person. They thought they knew all there was to know about Jesus of Nazareth. But an understanding that reaches only as far as yesterday's events, may be a misunderstanding. Up until yesterday, they were pretty sure about things—yesterday Jesus was dead.

But this is the first day of the week, and at early dawn this morning something happened. They didn't know it. So, this person came to them, opened the scriptures to them, and freed them so that they could enter into a new understanding, a new creation.

Jesus was with them, Jesus was not dead.

Now, in many churches, the narrative could end right there. Couldn't it? Conclusion: This is a story about us, and whenever we walk along in a state of disbelief, we can count on Jesus, to come alongside, to refer us again to the scriptures, to free us, and bring us back to faith. The divine initiative! He is risen, alleluia, Amen. Right?

No. They didn't have clue who he was yet. They began to understand, but they didn't know a thing. They had cognition but didn't re-cognize a thing! So Luke keeps on. And he tells us that if you've got a stranger *like this* walking with you, stay with him as long as you can stay with him long enough to work up the nerve to ask him for something.

As they came close to Emmaus, their destination, it says the stranger walked on ahead. But looking at one another, they got up the nerve.... "Stay with us. Let us give you a meal and a home." So, he did. He went into their home, into the centre of their lives and at table with them, he reached over for the bread, and he blessed it, and he gave it to them. **Then** their eyes were opened. **Then** they recognized him. Faith had returned to them. They had gone from eyes closed to eyes open. Alleluia.

Here. Now, we can end the story, right? We've heard the new Word of God. We've gathered at the table and recognized him in the bread. We're done!

No. Luke keeps on. It says, Then their eyes were opened to him, then they recognized him, and then... he vanished from their sight. Right while they were enjoying it. Right while it was dawning on them that Jesus was risen! and that he was sitting at *their* table! Right where they wanted him! Right when they thought they had it all figured out, Jesus vanished from their sight. Their eyes were opened - but

on emptiness. Kind of like when the women came to the tomb that morning. They did not find a corpse—that's what they expected to find, a corpse. But their eyes opened on emptiness.

However, this emptiness is now full of a presence and they cannot wait to go tell. They drop their utensils and rush out the door.... to Jerusalem... full of faith in him.

Questions:

1. What are the stories that help you to "keep it real", keep it true. From your life, in your diocese, the people. Tell someone, "What HAPPENED".

2. What are the roads / paths (literally or figuratively) that you have travelled from no-faith to faith How do you keep on coming to faith? (What does your "continuous conversion to the fullness of faith" . . . look like?)

Presentation 2, Friday July 19

Sum of Thurs: "What is the true end of words?" Focus on God, before us. Narratives / faith formation.

Theme: Reconciliation

Canada is learning about reconciliation and healing. Not just the Canadian Anglican Church, but all of Canada. Some of this is crystalized in the story of Canada's TRC.

The (TRC) was a truth and reconciliation commission organized by the parties of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement. The Commission was officially established in 2008 with the purpose of documenting the history and impacts of the Indian residential schools, as they were called. (Adapted from the simple but clear description in Wikipedia)

One of these schools operated about an hour's drive from here, the Mohawk Institute. Both the local diocese and the school I come from were involved with this school.

The commission provided former residential school students / or victims / an opportunity to share their experiences during public and private meetings held across the country. It was an intensive listening exercise.

In 2015, the TRC released an Executive Summary of its findings along with 94 "calls to action" regarding reconciliation between Canadians and Indigenous peoples. The Commission officially concluded in December 2015 with the publication of a multi-volume report that concluded the school system amounted to cultural genocide. Kids came from, or were taken from, their native homes and villages, and brought to these schools to have the "Indian" washed out of them. The purpose: to allow these younger indigenous people to assimilate well into "Canadian culture" – as defined by the

settlers who had been around for about 300 years and had not only set up shop but have taken the whole place over.

A familiar story to many of you, I'm sure.

I am telling this story from the vantage point of the child of a settler family—which makes me hesitant to speak about it and eager to listen and learn.

Of course, the goal of the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is found in the name. It was named in a similar fashion to the commissions by the same in Chile in 1990 and South Africa in 2001. In this context *reconciliation* means: the act of restoring a once harmonious relationship. The Commission came under criticism for using the term 'reconciliation' in their name, as it implies that there was once a harmonious relationship between settlers and Indigenous peoples that is being restored, while that relationship may never have existed in Canada.

So now, we have an official apology, in fact many apologies, and the huge task of restoration. And, theologically speaking, it's not really reconciliation or restoration in a technical sense, it would be a *new creation*. The divine creation of a right-relationship between those who trace their ancestry on these lands back about 10,000 years and those who trace it back about 100 years. It is ongoing work because reconciliation is not easy.

Canada's racism is not dead and the scourge of racism is all intertwined with the more general problem of classism and other -isms. People still notice the colour of skin. People still notice the tension between cultures. People are not inclined to give up any advantages or privileges that they have. The solutions to these problems are hugely complex.

So, I'd like to simply focus on the language of reconciliation, and our practice of it in Judeo-Christian traditions. This Dialogue is a living, walking, definition of the language of reconciliation in a culture of conflict, in world of violence. How you speak with one another, how you listen, what you say, all matters – hugely – to the rest of us. Reconciliation is not easy. It is impossible. Just as forgiveness is not easy. It is impossible. Impossible without God. God must act, somehow, through the created order, for there to be reconciliation.

Q: Is God willing and able?

In the second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 5, there seems to be an answer.

Some people, Richard Lischer included, (*The End of Words*, Chapter 4) included, consider 2Cor5:19 to be the "thesis statement of the New Testament". The one true statement, or claim, or assertion that proposes and sums up everything else in the New Testament. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself . . . God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself . . . Not counting their trespasses against them. And has entrusted to us the message of reconciliation.

For many others, the key word of the NT would be *salvation* in Christ. For others, the washing away of sin, by grace, through faith. For others, it changes. But if someone asked you, what was God up to in

sending Jesus, divine and human, into the world? You could answer, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

Forgetting for a moment what we are supposed to do with this, the mystery of God is expressed in a message about what God has done, and is doing, and it reveals something of what God is like. What KIND of God this is. What God has done on a macro and on a micro scale, is reconciliation.

As Lischer says, “At the heart of the universe lives a mysterious, hidden Being whose very self is moved by love for all that he has created. In the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, that Being has been revealed as one who is perpetually turning towards us as if to welcome us home.” . . . as if to say that continuing the relationship that we have fractured . . . is everything this God wants.”

Whenever we preach, teach, care for, listen to, dialogue with . . . we participate in this. God’s definitive gesture towards the world. The end (telos) of what God is doing among us is reconciliation.

The one big, hard question of any gathering like this is, how can our work here participate in God’s big plan? How can we become instruments, mediations, of reconciliation – signs of God’s reconciling activity in the world?

So, there is this central thesis statement: God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself—which is universal and broad and all-encompassing. But we all know that reconciliation is not an “idea”. It is local, particular, gritty, activity in everyday life full of blood, sweat, and tears. Jesus is dragged off and beaten nearly to death, then hung on a cross to finish him off slowly. Hung up on a pole on the way in and out of town to be sign of what happens to you if you don’t stay in “right-relationship” with Rome . . .and with the religious authorities. And the Creator of all that is, takes that recipe, that disaster, and reconciles the world to himself through it. How? What? It’s so remarkable, so ingenious, so unexpected - it is shockingly good news.

It doesn’t make sense, fully, until it happens right before our own eyes. On the way in and out of our own cities and villages, in our own families. Reconciliation is the work of God in and through us, and it never happens without ALL of the painful and beautiful particulars – Reconciliation never happens without the people who are trying to PRACTICE it.

What does the reconciling work of God look like where you come from?

The reconciling work of God looks different in South Africa than it does in Canada – looks different in inter-Christian dialogue than it does in Christian-Muslim dialogue – looks different at a conference than it does at the kitchen table. Yet it is the one mighty truth of God that we preach and live: that in the end, (learning from Karl Barth)

1. The world is reconciled to God.
2. Persons and groups are reconciled to one another.
3. Human beings are reconciled to themselves.

What do these three kinds of reconciliation look like walking around?

What are the stories you have of reconciliation?

1. The world is reconciled to God. What does that look like?

Not just the world, but the *kosmos* is reconciled to God, in the end. (Universes . . . all in God's care, space-time as a creature – it's already true, seeing the world from a spacecraft – that turquoise island in the sea of black is already made whole in him, because of one person's death and resurrection – even as its surface burns strife, and its innards bubble away like the sun – it is in the Potter's hands and it is therefore, whole.)

2. Persons and groups are reconciled to one another. Have you seen that happen?

The social dimension of reconciliation is always news, even in the secular sphere." (RL p 135). People will marvel whenever it actually happens – because it's a miracle, even if they do not believe in miracles.

Decades ago, the newspaper captured a moment like this one day on the front page. A black man and a white woman are sitting in her pastor's study at her church. The man's face is serene as he looks away from the camera and far beyond it, as if toward infinity. The woman's line of vision crosses his, but her eyes bore into the viewer – she's looking at you – as if searching the faces of stranger for a little human understanding. Her expression is worried and her eyes are puffy from crying. The man has just forgiven her for falsely accusing him of rape, an accusation that cost him eleven years of his life in prison. The act of forgiveness and the ensuing reconciliation is front page news.

More recently, many narratives work in another direction – the man with power abuses the person, often a woman, without power and he gets away with it for years. No one believes her. No one values her. The work of reconciliation is then is finding and embracing the truth. And it is seen when he finally asks her forgiveness. So many times it does NOT happen. But when it does, it is a glimpse of the time when every single one of those wrongs gets put right, by God.

3. We are reconciled to ourselves. Don't we all yearn for this?

We are created to be unreservedly human and fully alive, which is God's glory. Because Jesus was the last Adam, he gathers in himself a new and reconstituted humanity. Thus, to be fully human is not the consolation prize in some cosmic game, it is what God intends for us all along.

What is your favorite reconciliation story? Is it your own? Were you involved? Was it passed along to you? Is it an old, old story? How is God's work of reconciliation alive and well? Where is it most needed?

R. Todd Townshend, 2018.