



Archbishop of Canterbury

Address by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams

at the Making a Difference debate

Pride Park Stadium, Derby

Friday 23rd September 2011

Thank you and good evening. The Christian Church exists because 2,000 years ago something persuaded people to think differently about themselves and their immediate environment. The Christian Church began because a difference had been made. The nature of that difference, Christians and other won't entirely agree about – but I think we can't begin to understand the history without recognising the depth of the difference.

And I'll just illustrate that with two stories from the New Testament, two passages, one familiar one not so familiar. The familiar one is the story of the Good Samaritan, the extraordinary moment in which the people of Israel, Jesus' people, are encouraged to think about the most threatening kind of stranger as a potential ally, a potential friend. And it's bizarre, isn't it, that when we say "Good Samaritan" we assume the words 'good' and 'Samaritan' belong together - they were the last two words that belonged together 2,000 years ago.

The second, less well known passage, is St Paul's Letter to Philemon which I know you can all find in the New Testament without any trouble at all. It's a very short letter with a very complicated back story. The back story is about a runaway slave who's come to find St Paul, probably in Rome. St Paul sends him back to his master with a little letter to go with it, knowing the family. And the letter says "I'm sending you back, Onesimus, not as a

slave but as a brother.” Again we shouldn’t underestimate what a difference that represented 2,000 years ago to be encouraged to see the slave as an equal.

It took a very long time for Christianity to get the point about slavery, and yet when it did, in a period which Roy [Hattersley] has written about eloquently, it made a massive difference. A few years ago I was asked to name the individual I thought had made the most difference in the last millennium and without must hesitation I said “William Wilberforce” because the abolition of the slave trade made a difference to countless human lives. And if there is one thing that I think our religious tradition can be deeply thankful for in its history, it’s that it made that difference at that moment.

Well that’s in a sense a familiar point. The kind of difference that the Church - I’m speaking specifically about the Christian Church here but others might want to say parallel things about other religious traditions - the kind of difference that the Church makes is in giving you different pictures of who you are and what your relations can be. Instead of freezing you, in what you think is comfortable and obvious about yourself and your world, it projects you into thinking afresh about who you are and therefore about what you’re capable of. It tells you something you never realised about God, that in turn reveals something you never realised about yourself and your world.

So that is probably the most visible, the most obvious, kind of difference we ought to be thinking about in relation to religious faith and to Christianity in particular. But I want to suggest two other areas where Christian faith makes a difference. Two areas that may be a little bit less obvious, one of them about the place of the Church in our society, one of them more about how we think about ourselves again.

The first of these is something which, I suppose, the last 20 years has reinforced for me again and again and again. When the Christian Church is doing its job it is in a position where it can convene people from very very diverse backgrounds, and act as an honest broker. It sounds very modest, and it is in some ways. But the degree to which the Church says “we’re not here just to fight a corner, just to defend an interest; we’re here for everybody whatever their beliefs” - something which the Church of England has always believed mattered quite a lot. That capacity to broker, to bring people together, to try and clarify for people what their common interests are - that, I believe, is one of the differences that the Church makes and can go on making. And I’m very proud to see it making that

kind of difference here, as it does in so many other places. And one of the joys of Normanton Road this afternoon was to see exactly what that meant literally on the ground.

And the last kind of difference I want to flag up is perhaps a little odd at first sight. It's the difference of knowing that it doesn't matter if you can't make *all* the difference. Let me unscramble that a bit. It's the kind of thing you need to have brackets round isn't it? Sometimes in a world very much preoccupied with outcomes, results, measurable impact, we can forget the importance of doing things because they're worth doing. In the stubborn belief that if you do what's worth doing in its own right actually sooner or later it'll make a difference you can't begin to calculate. Whereas if you constantly rein in your ambitions to make only the kind of difference that you can immediately calculate, whose effect you know, then in fact - and I think I'm echoing something that all the other speakers have said in different ways - in fact you won't make a difference. You'll just reproduce the same.

Martin Luther is alleged to have said, and I hope he did, "If I knew the world would end tomorrow I would plant a tree" - meaning there are some things that just are worth doing, like planting trees. There are some things that just are worth doing, like volunteering in a small scale local charity, that doesn't immediately change the entire climate, weather even, of the society. But which puts down a marker which says "Actually you don't have to take for granted the selfishness, the idleness, the corruptness of the environment we're in. You don't have to take it for granted. It could be different." God knows how and when but it could be, and just doing what is worthwhile because of a vision - this is where I'm entirely with Roy [Hattersley] - because of a vision, a compelling vision, it's worth doing. It will make the kind of difference that ultimately matters most.

So knowing you can't make *all* the difference and that's all right, is I think one of the most important things to liberate our hope, our sense of possibility. The worst thing any of us could do is just go round saying "It's all so complicated." It's one of the things that paralyses us, again and again, in questions like disarmament or environmental responsibility. It's all too complicated; nothing I do is really going to make a difference.

And, of course, so long as everybody says that it's a self fulfilling prophecy. But doing something that witnesses to the right, to a vision, to what you genuinely believe is the truth, because you believe the universe is moving that way - that's the grain of the

universe. To act on the basis of that kind of faith - I would say that is the crucial revolutionary principle.

And not making all the difference is all right. You have witnessed. And witness is a very important concept in Christianity, as it is in other faiths. Witnessing to the way the universe is, the way God is, the way justice is, the way love is, the way harmony is. Do it because it's worth doing.

So, a revolutionary picture of who you are and what your relations might be. The capacity to draw people together. To work out their common interests and their common good - because the church doesn't exist for itself but to proclaim good news to the world.

And the freedom to know that it's all right to do what's worth doing even if it doesn't make *all* the difference. Perhaps that's where the Church makes its difference to the society it's in.

Thank you.