

May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

If you have been following the news of late, you may feel like I do, that we have been on a Welby rollercoaster with our Archbishop of Canterbury. First of all, taking us upwards, Amazon was challenged on its gig economy, then in a fast dip downwards, we learned that the Church of England owns substantial shares in Amazon. Then we seem to be slowly crept upwards again as the Church of England was asked to see through the 'War on Wonga' by buying the bad debts and finding a way to help the most vulnerable. But down we hurtled again yesterday as the Church Commissioners pulled out of a rescue effort.

There has been quite a response to all this. Headlines have been written, comment pieces full of opinion on what the church should and shouldn't be doing. It has been a time of discomfort in many ways and on all sides. Archbishop Justin has tried to publically and practically preach the social Gospel on behalf of the Anglican Church and has received rather a lot of flack for it. 'Who does he think he is', I have read. 'He should stick to God and leave the world of economics alone' said another. In speaking out our Archbishop has encountered powerful structural issues that have hampered his efforts.

A moment ago, I stood and said 'Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ'. As many of you know, Gospel means 'Good news' which suggests that 'Hear the good news of our Lord Jesus Christ' would be the more modern translation. I do sometimes wonder though if this is a bit misleading. When someone asks 'Would you like the good news or the bad news first?' 'good news' always suggests something comforting, something to ease, something to mollify before the delivery of something worse.

Yet, as recent headlines have shown, the good news of the Gospel doesn't always comfort, doesn't always set at ease, and doesn't always mollify. In fact, our readings today make that even more clear. Today's readings might have been better prefaced with 'Hear the news of what is good'.

There is a common misconception of Christianity as simply comfortable. Something that warmly wraps itself around humanity and just makes it feel a bit better.

At times the church does do those things and they are important. But it is a distortion of the Gospel to think this is all the church should do, because the Christian faith also challenges, questions and causes discomfort in matters of the world. The radical ministry of Jesus Christ is unsettling, uncomfortable, and to be honest, sometimes down right inconvenient.

Pope Francis once described a contemporary ethical and anthropological crisis in the world, where 'concern with the idols of power, profit, and money has become a basic norm, rather than the value of a human person' he went on to say that 'We have forgotten and are still forgetting that over and above business, logic, and the parameters of the market, is the profound dignity of the human being'. These are unsettling words to a world which seems to have uncritically accepted a utilitarian society which focuses on material growth and market forces.

I have watched the news and listened to people with great interest over these last two weeks and we have seen an archetypal response to the unsettling nature of the news that is good.

When the discomfiting social Gospel is at work, it comes with the recriminations, the outcries, the disputes and conflicts. As the first reading describes, it 'opposes actions, reproaches sin', and is often inconvenient'. As James writes it 'reveals bitter envy, selfish ambition, hypocrisy and the cravings at war within humanity.

Of course, the elephant in the room to Archbishop Justin's comments is the fact that the human institution of the church has also been revealed to be hypocritical, revealed to be imperfect, and now impotent to help. But we should try not to let that take away – as it is trying so hard to do – from the Gospel truth in what he has said. Let not the revelation of an institutional hypocrisy distract us from tackling our own or that of the world. The social Gospel doesn't just pack up and go home at the first sight of hostility or hypocrisy.

Such a distracting narrative is the persuasive 'work of the devil' that we are called today by James to resist. Standing in the place of mediation between the world and God is always a place of contrast and tension ... and the discomfort of that difficulty isn't a reason to stop trying at least to speak of the news that is truly good.

Admittedly, I am frustrated with the Church of England today. I am frustrated that the 'fiscal rules' of our Commissioners have prevented us from bailing out the bad debts of those in such need. I am frustrated that we do good with one hand to find that we are doing different with the other. Yet I am also glad of the Church of England today, for at least trying. Really trying, and being prepared to encounter all the discomfort that comes with the territory. It makes me wonder what we as a church should be challenging here in our community, in our county. What small injustices might we be called to challenge and unsettle?

Today's readings challenge our comfort, challenge any cherry picking of the 'nice' bits of Christianity and instead call us to robustly critique a society in which power, profit and status has been placed above human dignity. Whether this is done at an institutional level or at the level of social action is almost immaterial – it is the heart for it that is vital. And the being prepared for the initial discomfort but hoping in the transformation it can bring about.

As CS Lewis once said: "I didn't go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don't recommend Christianity."

Amen