

Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali - Future Mission Talk At St. Nicholas Church, Sevenoaks on Tuesday 23 June 2009

I'm very grateful to your response to God's word and to God's purpose that has come to you through my ministry and the way in which that has encouraged you and also I hope, challenged you from time to time.

So, what I've got to say tonight is first of all about what I'm hoping to do in the future, God-willing of course. Something about the nature of the challenge we face in relation to Islam particularly. I know people will want to hear about that. Something about the basis for society in this country as we should more and more promote, and then something about the Anglican Communion and the situation in which we find ourselves. So I hope that'll be enough and Angus can take over after that.

So what I'm hoping to do - we've set up a company limited by guarantee, I think it's called, and its name is OXTRAD - the Oxford centre for Training, Research, Advocacy and Dialogue. We've applied for charitable status, but we haven't yet received it and we've set this up really in response to what church leaders have been saying to me - church leaders from churches under pressure, where Christians are persecuted in one way or another. And what they've been saying is that their greatest need is the development of leadership, of lay leadership and of ordained leadership.

And of course I know from my own experience, this is so. In Iran for instance, when the Revolution came, all the Church's institutions were confiscated and remain so and there is no residential facility at all for training of any kind. Some years ago I, along with Tim Green, who's Michael Green's son, he and I developed a theological education by extension course at a very basic level and they have been using that, but now they are saying, you know, we want more and the Bishop has had, until recent events (who knows what will happen next) but until recently he has been given a little bit more room for manoeuvre by the regime. And, you know we need your prayers so that this continues and indeed increases. So that's one location - the very, very needy situation where there's a tremendous response to the Gospel but where the Church's resources are very, very stretched. I mean to an extent that's almost unimaginable by us.

The other context is the Pakistani context in which of course leadership training is more developed. Nevertheless, there is very little for those Christians who have come specifically from a Muslim background who in many ways need special forming in Christian leadership, and where it is very difficult for them simply to be left to the traditional processes. I can talk more about that later if you wish.

Believers in Central Asia are in a situation that's even more difficult. Quite often their leaders disappear or are injured or even killed and it is in that situation that training and leadership development has to go on. In Egypt there are some initiatives also and the very large Sudanese population who need ministry to them and in Northern Nigeria of course, as you know, that is another frontier of confrontation and conflict between Christians and Muslims and it is very important also to work there.

There are many other areas in the world that I could talk about but that's the kind of field that I'm hoping to work in. Many of the leaders are Anglican but not all of them. Some are from an Assemblies of God background, some from independent churches and so forth, so it's quite varied. So there's training; there is also research about what exactly is needed, what the situation is in a particular country or even a particular part of a country because it can vary from one part of a country to another. In some parts it's easier, in others more difficult so some fundamental research is needed.

There is then the question of advocacy. As a member of the House of Lords these last years I have been very conscious of the need to bring to the world's attention the situation of Christians in many parts of the world, and people here and the press here are still really very ill informed about what is going on. So I was very heartened when I announced my intention to do this that the media were very interested. I mean, they may have been interested for the wrong reasons but, you know you've got to take what you get with the media, I always think. But there is quite a lot to be done and can be done along with other people like Caroline Cox, Open Doors, Release International and the Barnabas Fund and others who do this, in co-operation with them.

And then, the final 'D' of OXTRAD is of course Dialogue. Now this word has been considerably misused recently to mean putting everything on one level, not emphasising the uniqueness of Christ, not taking seriously the responsibility of Christian witness to people of other faiths and of no faith. That is not the sense, you won't be surprised to learn, that is not the sense in which we are using the word. We are using the word particularly in the sense that I am in active dialogue with Governments in a number of countries where, what's the word... fundamental Islam is in the ascendant. About the position of Christians and indeed of others who may be under pressure, how that position can be relieved, what Government can do about it and we've had some small gains in protecting freedoms

I don't want to exaggerate what has been gained but sometimes there have been small gains and if something happens in a country and you are talking to the authorities - civic, religious, political then at least you can go to them and say now, you know, what are you going to do about this situation?

I remember coming back after such a dialogue from a Middle Eastern country last year and it was a very constructive time with the Government representatives but as soon as I came back I learned that a church being dedicated was attacked by an extremist mob and 800 worshippers had to be barricaded inside the church for hours. So immediately I got in touch with the authorities and said, look, you know, what is the point of you giving us assurances when we meet, when as soon as I come back, this kind of thing happens? So I think it does have some effect but you've got to be careful about it.

So that is what OXTRAD, God willing will be doing. But this leads to some reflections about the situation of Islam in the world today and I just want to say something about that so that you are not in any doubt about what I think.

The first thing is about loving Muslims. You know, whatever else we say and whatever else we do, it is necessary for us as Christians, as Christian missionaries and ministers, to love Muslims. This is not about hate or dislike or Islam-o-phobia or whatever they call it, Muslim-o-phobia. Many of my relatives and friends are Muslims. When the earthquake happened in Kashmir, I went there as you know and much of our energies were directed towards relieving Muslims. But when I got back I learned that my senior uncle, senior surviving uncle who is a Muslim, a Shia Muslim leader, had gone from place to place looking for me. Now he's an old man and I was very embarrassed that he should be going looking for me and you know, not able to meet me.

So there is no option for me but to love Muslims because some of the people who are nearest and dearest to me are Muslims and even when people behave in a way that is hurtful for Christians and indeed damages the Gospel, we still need to love them. Whoever they are.

Loving Muslims is the first thing and then secondly – understanding Islam. No missionary can work in any situation where they do not understand the context in which they are working and people here know that I have given a very significant part of my life to understanding what Muslims believe, how they live, how they think, what it is that moves them and things like that. Now because of that commitment, there are both positive and negative aspects to my response to Islam.

On the one hand I seek to build on what people know already. I mean that's a good educational principle so to go from the known to the unknown, particularly in talking to Muslims about Jesus. There are many things that Muslims believe about Jesus – some of them are correct from a Christian point of view and some of them are not.

Also, in some countries, many Muslims have I believe a real, though incomplete, experience of Jesus in a dream or a vision or an experience of healing, or whatever it may be. This is very widespread and I have always found this a way in to talking to them about the person of our Lord and about his work. And such people are normally very open to Christians sharing in this way.

But of course there are negative sides to this understanding as well. I have given a lot of time for example to the study of Sharia, of Islamic law in its various aspects. I got into this really because we were ministering in a situation where the rulers were trying to Islamicize the country and so we had to learn about it in order to oppose, publicly sometimes, many of the things that they were trying to do, not just in relation to Christians but also for example, to groups like women and other minorities. It is well known that some of my activities got me into a certain amount of hot water at that time for doing this.

But since then I've retained an active interest on questions of Sharia, how Muslim scholars deal with these questions and to encourage Muslim countries to think progressively in this area and we have made some gains, as we have done so. But you can imagine my alarm when it was suggested in this country that Sharia might become part of public law. I think as I have said myself, this would be a very dangerous development indeed because of the way in which the British legal tradition has developed on completely different assumptions; Judeo-Christian assumptions indeed with the Ten Commandments as the spine, as it were of the tradition. Whereas Sharia has developed on other assumptions that are not compatible with the legal tradition here.

So loving Muslims, understanding Islam, and that brings me to resisting ideology. That is to say, in my lifetime many Muslims have reinterpreted Islam, not as a faith but as a totalising ideology which takes over every aspect of life whether that is political, social, family, personal and so forth. And the result of that is a great restriction of people's freedom and I have been concerned naturally, for freedom of expression, freedom of belief, freedom to change your belief and all of those things that affect the task of Christian mission in particular contexts.

I think that we do need to distinguish between what Muslims believe – their faith, (which we can respect, although we may disagree with it) and this interpretation of Islam as an all-encompassing ideology which I believe must be resisted, particularly in this country at this time rather than capitulating to its demands. But that's also true elsewhere.

And then finally, not only resisting ideology but combating extremism. I think it is very important for us to combat extremism not in any aggressive way, but by encouraging everything that works against it. In Pakistan for instance, I've been encouraging the Government for many years now to take steps in the reform of the

educational curriculum for instance. Not just at the Madrassas, I mean that's an extreme example, but even of mainstream education so that people are taught to respect one another and one another's freedom.

But extremism also needs to be combated by not allowing extremists to set up areas where Christian mission cannot work effectively, where women are not allowed freedom, where a particular kind of law or custom operates which is contrary to the wider legal tradition of the country in which we find ourselves.

Now of course I have done this in many Muslim contexts but I never thought 20 years ago, 25 years ago, that we'd be faced with a similar situation in some parts of Britain. And I think the denial by our leaders - religious, political, social - that this is happening, will be found to be very dangerous indeed for the body politic in this country.

That brings me to this country and, as you know, I have given quite a lot of my energies in trying to reverse the sort of historical amnesia that has seized the people of this land so that they do not know from where they have come. They do not know the rock from which they have been hewn and I think this is very dangerous. This year alone, well the last 12 months alone, we've had a crisis in the financial world that has affected every one of us. We've now had this political crisis and we are still in it, and a senior family division judge has warned of the steady disappearance of the family in any form that can be recognised.

Now these are huge challenges, I mean what has happened in the financial world? At its best, British business was known for responsibility, for trust - 'my word is my bond', for truth-telling and for hard work. And each one of these virtues if you like, each one was related in some way to Christian faith and its values. Responsibility was related to accountability before God, for example. Trust is another word for faith. Hard work was related to the Reformation idea that all work was sacred, not just the work of clergy and church officials and so forth. "Who sweeps the room as for thy laws makes that and the action fine" (George Herbert). There was deliberate encouragement, I mean I knew a lot of businessmen in the 1980s when the big bang happened you know, not the cosmological Big Bang but the city's big bang, and you remember that people were actively being encouraged to give up these values and these virtues for the sake of making more money.

On Question Time now was it Boris Johnson, I don't know whether that was good or bad but he said something about incentives for wealth-making and I had to say, 'all those excuses to justify wealth-making have actually landed us in debt'. They've not made wealth for us; they have made us debtors and indeed our children debtors.

In the political realm similarly, what we have got is not a failure of process though it is that to some extent. What we have got is moral and spiritual failure. A lack of a moral and spiritual vision by which our leaders should live and work and it is scandalous to see what has happened. It is not any one person's responsibility, or even of a few but there is something systemic at the heart of it. This is what really alarms me; the way in which the system has been operated. There was a Matt cartoon a few weeks ago with 2 MPs walking down Westminster and one saying to the other, 'now that they have rumbled what I've been up to, the Speaker will have to go.' But you know there is this displacement activity, blaming other people.

I mean of course there is individual responsibility in this, but it is the system and it is the lack of a spiritual and a moral principle that has caused what has happened to occur. There are particular issues in terms of a Christian basis for society that I need to remind you about. I have talked about them on many occasions but I believe for

example, that the dignity of the human person cannot be defended without an explicit appeal to the Bible, to the Bible's teaching which has been at the heart of the moral tradition in this country - that all human beings are made in God's image. This means that protection must be extended to the earliest parts of the life of a human person, and to the latest.

For 6 years I was the Chair of the Ethics and Law Committee of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority. When I was about to leave, the Government official who was giving me my gong said, 'you've never been comfortable here Bishop, have you?' And I said, 'well no but I'm not comfortable in lots of places, but I still feel it my responsibility to be there, exactly, precisely to make sure that this sanctity of life, of the special nature of the human embryo and the human foetus was respected.' I'm sorry to say that since I left it has gradually been eroded more and more.

But that is also true at the other end. The euthanasia and assisted suicide lobby seems to roll on regardless of any decisions. Lord Joffe's Bill has been defeated several times in the House of Lords; it keeps coming back. Now if I introduces as a private member, a bill in the House, it might, if I were lucky get one reading and then you'd never hear of it again. Why does this Bill keep coming back? What's behind it?

So whether it is dignity or equality or liberty - these have to be grounded in a worldview and the worldview that we need is the Christian worldview. I think we should be prepared to say this clearly because we have now seen the jeopardy in which we have placed ourselves by abandoning it.

The other is the state of the family. No country will be able to develop a moral vision and to inculcate virtues and to hold onto values where the family is weak because that is the fundamental place for formation in moral and spiritual terms for people. The attack on the family I believe has not been accidental. I think it was, as I've written before, a well-planned way of deconstructing society for the sake of some kind of political revolution.

Well the political revolution did not come but we certainly had a social revolution and those who have argued for free relationships, those who have said that these relationships are not about a socio-religious adherence to socio-religious criteria, (and they're all around us these people still) have led us up the garden path. They have caused enormous destruction, they have damaged children and the result has been, not just one generation but now several, who are compass-less in the living of their lives.

So I intend to continue saying these things - they are not popular but nevertheless, somebody has to say them and say them clearly. I have just written an article for Standpoint which says more-or-less this and ANVIL is celebrating its 25th anniversary - you remember when they began this new journal, and I have also written an article which I hope will be read by clergy and Christian workers on how to address this issue. How we got here and what to do about it.

Then finally, the Anglican Communion. It all comes back, doesn't it, to that. I think there are several issues here. One is what we might call the question about God's self-disclosure. I mean, that's the basic issue; the issue about revelation.

Now, some people don't believe that God reveals himself at all. They just think people have a natural religiosity and we should encourage it - if it takes a Christian form, so much the better but if it doesn't, that's fine also. Other people believe that God does disclose himself but we cannot know the content of what he's asking of us. I find this a very mysterious sort of view. I mean, if I meet you in any meaningful way, I'm

bound to learn something about you and your will and purpose, and yet in the highest circles this view is held and what it does I think, is to disable revelation as far as God's will for us is concerned. So it remains at the level of the mystical. It remains at the level of the numinous, of the mysterious even. But it cannot be cashed in as far as our day to day behaviour and our relationships are concerned.

Now I'm not saying that revelation as the mysterious and as the numinous is not valuable, of course it is but in the tradition of the Bible, when God discloses himself, he also asks something of us. Always.

I think the denial of the relationship between God's revelation and what it asks of us is at the root of the situation that we are facing in the Anglican Communion and when we ask more explicitly, 'how do we know what God has revealed of himself and how do we know what it is that God's revelation is asking of us?', that brings us immediately to Scripture because Scripture is both the inspired and the inspiring record of God's revelation of himself and of God's demand on us.

This is why Scripture has had (I use that tense advisedly), has had a normative place in the Anglican tradition. And sometimes people ask me, 'why are you an Anglican?' It's a good question, but the only reason I think that is worth giving is that I am Anglican because the faith of the apostles has come to me in this way and I'm enabled to live that faith that I have received. If that ceases or is threatened then we have got a great difficulty. This is why we are facing the situation that we are.

So there's self-disclosure and there's Scripture, and the two are very closely related of course. Scripture bears witness in an inspired and an inspiring way to what God has told us about himself and what he demands of us. However, those who do not believe this, who believe either that there is no such thing as revelation in the sense of the 'otherness' of God coming, breaking into this world, or who believe that it does break in but it has no content that we could articulate; this has led to another major fault in Anglicanism which is syncretism - that is to say, of not being able to hold on to God's unique disclosure, particularly in Jesus Christ, of himself and therefore of being in danger not only of mixing as it were religious ideas and producing something new, but more importantly especially in the Western part of the world, of capitulating to cultural values - whatever they may mean.

This syncretism is all around us and some years ago I made a remark about two religions which now has become quite commonly used to describe the situation but I still do not see how else you could describe it. A very prominent Anglican leader was asked by a secular journalist I think it was, whether she believed that Jesus was Lord and Saviour. And after thinking for a while she said, 'those are not the terms I would use'. So the journalist pressed her as journalists do and said, 'well what terms would you use then?' And she said, 'friend and prophet'. Now I thought to myself, if that is all it is, why am I away from my Muslim family, why I am receiving these brick bats for being from a Muslim background but being a Christian? There's no need for all this, I mean any good Muslim would also say Jesus is friend and prophet. Nothing unique about it in terms of the Christian confession.

In the interest of inclusiveness, people of all faiths and of none are being welcomed to church and without baptism the supper of the Lord is being opened to them and they are being given Communion. And if you ask why this is, why are you doing this, the answer is "because we are in an inclusive church and no one should be denied anything" Well, what kind of understanding is this of commitment to Christ and of those channels of grace that are opened up for us because of that commitment? Many of these people, some of them are prominent leaders as I say, have a view that

would pass muster I think as good Hinduism but it's certainly not Christianity. So if you don't describe it as another religion, what do you describe it as?

But then, within all of this of course there is the question about human sexuality. People have often asked me whether this is a first order or a second order issue and I have said to them, 'it is certainly not a matter of proof-texting' - you know there is proof-texting on both sides. One side will quote Leviticus or Romans 1 or 1 Corinthians 6, and the other will try and say that none of those texts applies to the current situation. I do not believe this is a matter for proof-texting.

I once spoke in this church when we had a joint meeting of the Diocesan Evangelical Fellowship and the Diocesan Renewal Group and I said then, and I say it now that this is a matter of basic Bible anthropology - sorry to use an '-ology' word, but by that I mean how the Bible describes the human condition. Men and women made in God's image, made together in God's image, given a common mission which they fulfil in their respective ways. In other words, women are not men and men are not women. Well some people think that but that is not the Bible's view of things. And this view of the human condition leads to the Bible's view of marriage and the necessity of marriage as the basic condition for the family.

Our Lord reaffirmed this very strongly and if anything, he strengthened a view of marriage. So often when I'm in a Muslim context I find that Muslim women are so impressed, sometimes it is their entry point actually to Christian faith, when they hear what the Christian view is of marriage because they have never heard it before. But then marriage is called a sacrament. It's the only thing in the New Testament that's explicitly called a sacrament in Ephesians 5:32 and what is it a sacrament of? Of the union between Christ and his church. That is it - it's so sacred. So it's not, it cannot be a second order issue. It is fundamental to a Christian view of the human condition.

Now finally, I think I should stop, Christian unity is very precious and I want to do everything to promote Christian unity and not easily to disrupt it. In the last 6 years or so, well more - 7 years nearly, this is what I have tried to do. I have to say it has strained my charity to the utmost limit but I've tried to do it. However, brothers and sisters, as far as I can read the New Testament's mind on this matter, there are two main reasons why this unity can be disrupted.

The first is persistent sexual sin. You know, this is not going wrong now and then - there's always the possibility of repentance for people, and of a new start but persistent sexual sin without repentance is a reason for a disruption in fellowship. Those clergy with whom I have dealt this last 15 years will know that I have acted as far as I can tell consistently in this matter whether it is to do with the lives of the clergy themselves, or of their people.

Secondly, it is persistent and systemic false teaching. We are told not to receive the teachers or the teaching. Why? Because false teachers and false teaching actually eat away the inside of a Christian's life and of a church. I can give you many examples of churches that have been thoroughly corrupted by systemic false teaching.

Now of course, any disruption in fellowship of any kind we must pray is temporary, it is for the sake of restoration. It is not primarily about being punitive, it is not getting our backs on people or whatever you want to say... always for the sake of restoration. When unfortunately we have to discipline clergy I always ask myself, 'is there a way back for them to be able to minister again?' But the way back must be a way of holiness by God's grace because what I have been unwilling to do is to jeopardise the possibility of holiness among God's people. Now I'm sure that many other clergy here

present will agree with me, this is not something I have sought to do. I have prayed that God would release me from this burden but while I've had it, I've done it and I don't apologise for it.

Now what we face in our local church and churches we are also facing in the Communion. Tomorrow the Anglican Church of North America will formally be inaugurated. There are many issues about it, and it's not something that's neat and tidy, cut and dried. But if you asked me, hand on heart with whom I was in fellowship in the United States of America and Canada, well of course there are some people in the Episcopal Church and in the Canadian Church with whom I would say I am in fellowship. But on the whole I would say it is the people and the Bishops and the clergy and the lay people of what is to become the Anglican Church of North America. There is a discernment of fellowship, which is based on the Bible and of our relationship with God through Jesus Christ that shows us with whom we are in authentic fellowship, and sometimes we have to say we cannot be in fellowship with systemic error and with a persistent and unrepentant failure in holiness.

Now how all of this works out in the Communion I do not know, I don't pretend to know but what I do want to do and encourage you to do at the same time is to find fellowship in the Gospel. You won't agree with everything that everyone does, but the main reasons for the disruptions in fellowship I have given you. If they do not exist, there can be fellowship even if there is difference.

I think I've spoken for long enough Angus, thank you very much for your patience but I hope that I have explained myself a little. Thank you.