The Church in the Modern World
Faith and Nation

28 May 2017
Christopher Stoltz

Genesis 23: 10–end Luke 10: 25–37

It wasn't according to plan that 1,500 Members of Parliament, Peers, parliamentary members of staff, visitors to Parliament, Metropolitan Police officers, and representatives from across the emergency services, made their way in an ordered procession into Westminster Abbey on Wednesday 22 March. They had been ordered to leave the Palace of Westminster; to move from Parliament's current home to its place of origin: a Benedictine Abbey, which had served as the 14th century base for the King's Great Council and the Commons.

On that afternoon just over two months ago, Members of Parliament (some of them studiously trying to avoid one another; it was interesting to see who had friends and who didn't), Peers of the Realm (a few of them grumpy about how cold it was in the Abbey, until they were reminded that the lower-than-usual temperature was as a result of their having been let in), Metropolitan Police officers and their commanders, the emergency services – they were all in the Abbey. With a Sikh police commander periodically taking to the pulpit to brief the assembly, it was a sight to behold, and the mere mention of it this evening reminds us of the even greater loss of life in Manchester. That day, in late March, the nation found itself in church.

The nation in church was more formally realised a fortnight after the attack, when a service was held to remember both the victims of the attack and the survivors, those who were grieving, and everyone still coming to terms with those 80 seconds of calamity. The nation was in church, this time willingly, and the service was broadcast live by the BBC.

The service was Christian, of course – it was in a church. But it was the whole nation present that day: we worked closely with the Home Office in planning the service, and the Home Secretary read from the prophet Jeremiah, Rachel weeping for her children. Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London and a Muslim, read that well-known prayer of St Francis of Assisi: 'Lord, make us channels of your peace'. The Duke of Cambridge read the Parable of the Good Samaritan; a story so well known to many of us from earliest years, and yet resonating more powerfully than ever before in the presence of so many faiths, ethnicities, and traditions, all coming together as one.

People of many faiths and no faith had been brought together by the Church; the bereaved, their families, and victims, some of them released from hospital just that morning, assembled in one place, for the first (and almost certainly) last time, before returning to the many corners of the globe from which they came. The Church and the World were as one for that hour.

A few months ago, I was in Germany – in Berlin, to be more specific – and I decided to take a couple of day trips out of Berlin: one to Leipzig to pay my long overdue respects to Mr Bach, and one to Wittenberg, to pay respects to Dr Luther in this 500th anniversary year since the publication of the 95 Theses. It was as result of this time in Germany, conscious of how much is being made by the German government of this Luther Year, that one aspect of his thinking again struck me as informative, especially in the aftermath of both the Westminster and the Manchester attacks.

Luther was practical, if not always correct, about worldly matters. He admonished those who, in entering into debates on predestination (which were not uncommon then), claimed that whatever they did or didn't do (in this life) mattered little, as their actions were not ultimately capable of effecting change – a sort of fatalism: if it's going to happen, it's going to happen, and there's nothing I can do about it. On the other side were those who said, in effect, that they need not eat, because God had already promised them life – why take a simple and effective medication when there's the option of more fervent prayer and more profound hope in that which is unseen.

These examples, Luther felt, constituted a dangerous 'tempting of God'. Christians (and he was only ever speaking to Christians) should make use of the gifts they had been given, and not 'tempt God'; gifts not only material, but also situational, and those which we possess simply by virtue of being human. There was no need to throw oneself out of an upper window of a burning building, should a ladder be available, he said; nor should one feel compelled to wade through the middle of the River Elbe with the provision of a perfectly sound bridge.

Luther, like others before him, understood that we are alive in more than one way – we are alive now, in this life, and we are alive spiritually. Getting on with one's life, whatever the circumstances, always entails the fulfilling of certain obligations, not just to God, but to one another. Abraham's purchase of a grave for his wife Sarah, about which we heard in the first reading, provides one such example. Abraham was, said Luther, 'displaying the heroic virtues of faith, hope, and love', because 'true saints live in the world and carry on civil activities' (LW 4:216). The same could be said of the Good Samaritan who, despite inter-religious suspicion and hatred, did what others, for religious reasons, couldn't get themselves to do.

It seems to me that the importance of fulfilling one's social responsibilities from within whichever circumstances one finds oneself, must inform more broadly the role of the Church in this or *any* nation. Our responsibility, as the Church, is to all people within the realm and beyond, not because of any do-good inclinations we may feel compelled to bring to bear, nor because history ensured that, in this and other lands, the Church and other institutions have grown up side by side, nor for the sake of any reward, in this life or the next, but because we are sharers in God's created order. To put it in Luther's characteristically blunt words: 'God has no need of your good deeds, but your neighbour does'.

Alongside his admonition to patience and faithful service, Luther issued what seems the perfect contradiction. He said, 'You will not change the world'. He had a gloomy side, but don't we all. His point within the overstatement is far from a disincentive to work for change, but rather serves as a reminder that this world, the here and now, can never be perfect. So far, history has proved him, and those with similar claims, correct. People do not always conform even to the most basic standards of human decency. God only knows what possesses a person to run his car, fast, at people he couldn't have known, or to detonate a shrapnel-laden device amongst a young crowd leaving a concert.

The business of the Church, Luther believed, was always going to remain, by necessity, distinct (but not separate) from that of the world; the Church was always going to have on offer something which the worldly authorities wouldn't and couldn't provide, namely the active and real assurance of God's transforming love in Christ which naturally breeds hope and optimism, for the affairs of this life and that which lies beyond it.

There remains a need, I think an urgent need, both on theological and humanitarian grounds, for the Church to play an active role in transforming for good the community and communities in which it is found. Equally, there remains a need not to lose sight of a clear distinction between a Church which is little more than one among many governmental departments, and a Church which can go one step further and say that whatever the affairs of this life, there remains in Christ, risen and ascended, something more in the life to come.