

## Speech for Awards ceremony at Sarum College

March 2019

James thank you for those kind words of introduction and good morning ladies and gentlemen. Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is commendable...think about these things, says St Paul. So, let's do that!

I am so grateful for the opportunity to speak to you this morning and to participate in this great celebration of your honorable and commendable achievements. I have to say I feel incredibly jealous of you all, having studied the Sarum prospectus of a number of occasions and thought that I'd love the chance to go on almost all of the courses. Maybe my day will come!

Meanwhile, I want to thank each of you for taking the time and the trouble to answer the call on your life to come to Sarum – to grow your knowledge, to deepen your understanding and to discern the truth. I believe it has never been more important to nurture learning, scholarship and the most careful reflection. In this era of fake news, truth has become very slippery and so the attempt to discover, illuminate and articulate it a nobler task.

We are living in a world in which trust in institutions of all kinds has been breaking down – trust in Westminster, the Church, the police, the media, our charities. It's reasonable to say that trust must continue to be earned and can quite fairly be lost - when a politician wrongly claims expenses or children have been sexually abused by those, they might have hoped to trust the most, when the media have obtained their stories through illegal hacking and so on. In a way, the rise of social media has been a response to that breakdown in trust. We make our own news. We connect and listen to those we think we know.

But I think the rise of social media, with its emojis and character limits and oh so slender capacity to articulate the truth, has also fueled an increased tolerance of soundbites and headlines that tell a story in a very superficial and partial way. Nuance, objectivity and perspective are so easily casualties in the mix. So, a story about one MP or one charity or one priest becomes a brush to tar a whole institution, even a whole sector or a whole community of people.

We have been discouraged from precision, from discernment and ultimately from truth. It has come to suit us to arrive at general propositions and to grow them into a whole world view. (And to borrow from Zanny Minton Beddoes we're living with an increasingly prevalent world view that is zero-sum, grievance-laden, mercantilist, racially tinged and nationalistic, personified by one Donald Trump, the so-called leader of the free world.

And whilst this now common or garden distortion of the truth has been much in evidence in the political sphere, it goes way beyond it. We see the terrible toll that social media gaslighting can have on people who are not public figures, with anonymity used by trolls to conceal their identities as they hurl abuse, often based on gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or religious affiliation, disability or appearance. So often, social media can highlight how we fall short of societal norms of beauty and value. Cookies will ensure that we are never far from an advert which will seek to sell us something that will improve our chances of becoming worthy. Too often the impact of this is most keenly felt by children and self-harm may well be the only response they feel they can make.

The fact that technology has become more portable compounds the problem. We can take our phones, and our computers, into our places of sanctuary – our homes, our bedrooms even, and they can pour out their bile there. I couldn't sleep the other night, so I picked up my phone which I keep by the bed. A mistake that. I scrolled through Twitter. And discovered a tweet, which said 'This just happened in Bradford' – with a link to camera footage of an incident earlier this week in which a group of boys repeatedly stamped on another teenager and kicked his head hard and fast back and forth between them like a punchbag. There was no chance of sleeping after that. These encounters with evil and falsehood, especially at times and in places we should associate with refreshment and safety, erode our resilience and our peace of mind.

Of course, easy to be nostalgic for those halcyon days where all encounters were real physical encounters, where those in your friendship circle turned up regularly on your doorstep and were always loving and truthful. But we know that home has not always been a safe place for everyone, and propaganda is not a new invention. And social media has brought with its extraordinary benefits: you only have to see the tweets from those who can't get to church

saying please don't give up social media for Lent to know how positive digital connection can be for those for whom physical connection is logistically difficult or impossible. And social media has allowed new iconographies to develop, where women and oppressed minorities can better control their own space, and at least in theory be seen on their own terms. Surely social media has played an important and ultimately positive role in movements like the MeToo movement, which has exposed the worst excesses of what a patriarchy can do and has done over recent decades and no doubt centuries before that.... Let's not hark back to the glory days that never were.

But let's do recognise this, we are relentlessly exposed to lies, half-truths and vile images and stories. No wonder TOXIC was identified as THE word of 2018.

So, what is the antidote? St Paul has it – Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is commendable - think about these things. Let's do that.

When I was at Christian Aid, I was able to travel around the world seeing colleagues and partner organisations working with communities to help them lift themselves out of poverty. Every trip involved seeing the most terrible pain, deprivation and poverty, yet it was so often also an opportunity to encounter beauty, righteousness and truth.

There were two experiences which forced their way to the front on my mind as I was preparing for today. One came from my visit to Sierra Leone.....

Sierra Leone, where I learned that there are whole communities eating on the 000-001 basis, once every other day. Areas where half the population have no access to clean water at all and are forced to draw their water from dirty rivers. Sierra Leone, a small country with a population roughly the size of Scotland and rich in natural resources like diamonds and titanium ore, but with one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world.

We travelled over the worst roads I have ever experienced, and I am now widely travelled in very poor places. When my team told me, they had booked me into the best place in the area we were about to visit, I was a bit worried that it might be a bit too fancy. I needn't have been. there were no sheets on the mattress and it had no running water, electricity or food. It was new, and

had clearly, proudly and without any sense of irony been named The Promised Land. Although there was no running water, there was what you might call an en-suite bucket. You could request water to be brought and so I did, ask for some hot water to be brought at 6 o'clock in the morning to wash with. I didn't specify an amount and of course I had hopes of a full bucket, hard to lift. The young man who looked after the place brought the water as requested in the morning in a very large bucket. With a full, proud and genuine smile, he handed it over. It was not heavy. I would estimate that there were two to three inches of hot water in the bottom of the bucket. Each drop a jewel, no doubt hard work to collect and heat in time for its 6am delivery and so no doubt hard to part with. As I suppressed my disappointment, I felt hugely humbled by the mismatch between my expectations and my calibration of my needs on the one hand and, on the other hand, his calibration of my needs and what he clearly thought was a rather magnificent offering. Without knowing it, his whole bearing conveyed a powerful message. That although I might not recognise it, I already have all I really need. His whole bearing spoke of this beauty and this truth. And he did me a great service in that moment.

Coming here to Salisbury always reminds me of South Sudan, where I took my last trip for Christian Aid in 2017. The civil war was raging on and I found myself behind opposition lines in Unity State where famine had been declared, seeing how we were setting about spending the money so generously raised from the people of Salisbury Diocese in response to Bishop Nick's special appeal.

In Nyal, I met people who had waded through swamps for five days to flee the fighting, bearing their elderly and their children on their heads, the water sometimes up to their necks. In extreme conditions in which they might have thought just of themselves, they literally carried the most vulnerable and the most needy. The place they reached, where I met them, was desperately poor but local people were sharing what they have and pulling together with those who have arrived. And with the great generosity of Christian Aid supporters and the skills of Christian Aid staff and our partner Unido, those people were able to feed themselves, using fishing equipment we'd given them to catch tilapia and other fish in the river and new seeds and tools to grow vegetables they've never seen before like cabbage and kale, onions and tomatoes too. To

thank us, one group sang and danced and gave us two chickens and an aubergine. Ravenously hungry as they were, they were still ready to give.

Here at home, in my current role as First Commissioner, I see what the money the Church Commissioners raise from our investments can do in helping to fund the work of the church. And I see the Church of England is educating a million of our nation's children and that congregations are involved in 33,000 social action projects across the country, foodbanks, lunch clubs for the elderly, youth groups, parent and toddler groups, meet ups for refugees and asylum seekers. That's an extraordinary effort made possible in large measure because of hundreds of thousands of Christians who, despite everything that the current environment is throwing at them, feel motivated to put their faith in Jesus Christ into action for the service of others in their community. To love their neighbours as themselves.

Resilience, tenderness, generosity – these persist. They are signs that God is at work. In the end, we have a choice. We can choose to be demoralised by the divisions we see in our communities, in our nation and in our world. Or we can see the signs of hope and join in with those. As Lin Yutang put it so beautifully, Hope is like a road in the country. There never used to be a road, but when many people walk on it, the road comes into existence. It leads us on a journey back to one another, a journey that starts with knowledge of things that really matter, grows in understanding and ends in truth.

In a world in which today we tend to notice more brutality than blossom, more harm than harmony, more lies than light, thank you again for turning your minds purposefully and systematically to what is beautiful and what is true. And may it have served only to whet your appetite for further learning and reflection on whatever is honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent and worthy of praise. So that the peace of God will be with you.

Congratulations again – and thank you for listening.

10 – 15 mins (1900 words)