

Edited transcript of Archbishop of Canterbury's address to Old and New conference, Whitby – 27 April 2015

It's a huge privilege to be with you. I'm very grateful for the invitation to be here. It's an extraordinary thing, to stand and look at such a large group of people involved in the Religious life, and it's a hopeful thing. So thank you very much for inviting me. . .

"The Kingdom of Heaven is like treasure hidden in a field". Matthew 13:44. "Which someone found and hid, and then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."

In a little known, but important, discovery recently, this parable has turned out to be incomplete. Under a Roman road picnic site, between Alexandria and Heliopolis, was found a fuller version of Matthew's Gospel, with his own marginal notes [laughter]. I won't read those, they're mainly to do with comments about not being able to get the scribes one needs [laughter]. But the parable continues, rather less poetically than that beautiful opening passage, but nevertheless he was obviously in a hurry and writing in a bumpy chariot, without a spell check [laughter].

However, it goes on, once the person concerned who'd found the field bought it, then things began to go wrong. First of all, he was very absent minded: he'd forgotten exactly where he'd found the treasure and then hidden it, and it was a big field. So he got together a big group of people to help him find it. . . And they trained his main diggers. They found the treasure, but as the years went by they kept losing it. Sometimes it got corroded and needed replacing, at other moments it was confiscated by kings, and at times they forgot again that it existed at all. And there the manuscript fragment ends, and we don't know the rest.

I could extend the metaphor, but I think it's reached its limits. The Kingdom of God is not, as we know, the Church, and the Church is not the Kingdom. The parables of this section of Matthew are in many places about hiding and enemies and confusion. There is the sower a little bit earlier, there's wheat and weeds, there's treasure to be sought. Nothing is entirely obvious, and nothing is entirely simple. In other words, the Kingdom is here, but do not take things therefore as settled. There will be cost and exhaustion and difficulty and deception, before it is fully revealed. It is both obvious and hidden; it is both easy to reach and yet it requires all that we have.

The Church institutionally, through its history, is often said and often wishes to say that it is the Kingdom, not least because that gives us a certain authority. But the Kingdom of God, that which we have and that for which we search, is far more than we are. It is the place of God's reign and rule, of God's authority and decision, in which the light is clearer, the call louder, and the direction better established. It will reach completion at the return of Christ, but in the meantime when we see the signs of the Kingdom, our hearts lift and our faith renews. . .

The treasure of the Kingdom has been seen in many ways, with great diversity, through history. Because God loves us, and because all that we understand of God is fully known in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, we know that the Kingdom is lived out within cultures. It is 'in'

but not 'of'. It is recognisable as itself, as the Kingdom, but it is recognisable in every culture to those who look with the eyes they have.

Last year, in one of my trips in Africa, I saw a painting of the Last Supper, and everyone there, of course, was African, sub-Saharan African. Now a pedant would say, 'that's unlikely to have been strictly accurate.' But that's not the point, of course: the point is that they see with the eyes that they have, and God, in his grace, reveals the presence of the Kingdom.

And so as the Kingdom is revealed around the world, and in different contexts, it bears enough resemblance to what each individual culture understands, to make it clear that this is something they can be part of. And so in Papua New Guinea, where we were last year at one point, where I was talking to a really top-class civil engineer, whose grandfather was the first member of their tribe, up in the hills, ever to see a wheel. Two generations from seeing a wheel to a high-level civil engineering degree at Heriot Watt in Scotland. Extraordinary. And he had come to faith in Christ, as the whole tribe had done, and they understood the Kingdom of God in PNG terms.

So at the heart of what we have to do, as the church, is, in different ways, in diverse ways, in incredibly diverse ways around the world, to be those who live out, who are the clear incarnation of the Kingdom, who enable people to recognise the Kingdom at work. We must be able to give lived and living examples, where, albeit like a light bulb on a poor connection that flickers and fails and yet sparks and illuminates, we can point and see more of what it is to follow Christ.

And that is why the Religious life is so essential. Its history is, to put it kindly, a patchwork of dramatic inspiration, of cycles of strength and weakness, of failures and of persecution, of sin and of saints – often in the same person, particularly with my predecessors [laughter]. Within Anglicanism, we first sought to abolish it, then we renewed it, then we imitated it, then we forgot and neglected it, and now we find ourselves at a new moment where there are growing signs of life and the light of a fresh renewal.

And the parable sets something for us. First, we know that there is much treasure from the past. In the times in which we speak, in which the parable speaks, of Jesus's time, the only way to store things safely was to bury them – and to this day, people with metal detectors reap the benefit. When I was in my parish in Warwickshire, a friend of ours found a key in the garden. It was clearly a key, and it looked quite old. He took it along to the museum in Warwick and they said, "Oh, it's a Roman key." It was near one of the Roman roads. And it's always amused me that, this bloke wandering around saying, "I know I've put it down...Where did I put that key?" [laughter] And his wife saying: "Calm down, it'll turn up." [laughter] But we read quite often, don't we, of people in fields with a metal detector and finding treasure that has been buried. Of course, as we know, in the chaos of war and invasion, the original owners might die or flee, and so the treasure gets forgotten. In Jesus's day there would have been, as today, many stories of that kind, of the person one heard of who found hidden treasure, rather like winning the Lottery today. It is found. The finder hides it in a field, and then he goes and buys the field and claims the treasure. We'll come back to that slightly equivocal form of ethics in a minute.

The Church – and in this little reflection I always mean the institutional Church unless I say otherwise – has often found the treasure of the Religious life. Usually the finding begins with a thirst for God, a desire that the riches of grace should be part of the daily life of the poor. It begins with a deep sense of discontent. There is such a gap between what we know of God and what we see in the world around us here in the Church in England, within the lived life of Christians. Do you note feel often that frustration at that huge gap? Why can't we be more somehow what we ought to be? It is a glaring gap. We are the people of the resurrection, and yet we fear death greatly. We are the people of the riches of Christ, and yet we're profoundly acquisitive. We are the people of the grace and generosity of God, and we play power games in the Church. The people of the holy God are revealed in the sinless life of Christ, and yet we treat confession as an option and repentance as an avoidable luxury for the spiritual elite only. The people of the overflowing of the Spirit turn inwards, and seek to get things the way they want.

What we mean by Religious life is, of course, lived in the Religious communities, but is the life for all Christians. The centre of Religious life is relevant for all Christians. St Anthony didn't mean to start something different when he set off into the desert, not did St Francis. They each just wanted to live the gospel properly. Religious life touches especially, first of all, on conversion, and secondly on community, both of which are at the heart of living the Christian life for all Christians. And to talk about our failures are not to point fingers at others. It's where we all are. When I look around the Anglican Communion, we see nowhere that can hold its head up and say: "We're alright." . . . And the answer is not to beat ourselves up and say how bad we are, but to see what treasure we miss, either through our own sin or by self-condemnation and other condemnation, without seeing the riches of Christ.

On November 14th 1940, Coventry was bombed. It was a great, huge raid, it was, proportionate to the size of the city, one of the biggest raids of the war. There were many other bigger ones on London, but much smaller area. The cathedral, as we know, the 13th-century cathedral of St Michael, was burnt. As it burned, the Dean of the Cathedral – Provost as he was then, Provost Howard, Richard Howard – went in and out of the cathedral, until he was prevented, bringing out the colours of the regiments that had left their colours with him before they went off to war. When asked why, this is incidental, he said, "Oh, I promised I'd look after them." He went in and out, and the cathedral burned. As it burned, the beams burned, and the nails in the beams fell from the beams and fell to the floor, and lay in heaps. And the following morning, with Coventry smoking around him, hundreds of dead, the place a shambles, he went and took some burnt wood and wrote behind the high altar: 'Father, forgive.' One of his colleagues, one of the canons, said: "You mean, 'Father, forgive *them*?'". He said: "No, *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Extraordinary prophetic moment. [21:19]

And from that moment he began a movement of reconciliation. On December 25th 1940 he preached on the BBC at the main Christmas service, and said once the war is over and the Nazis defeated, we will create a more Christ-like world, a peaceful world. And from the end of the war he started sending teams from Coventry to help rebuild the cities we'd flattened in Germany. Earlier this year I was in Dresden, and there, on the high altar, was a cross of nails,

on the Frauenkirche, a cross made from those nails that had fallen from the roof in Coventry. This [Archbishop Justin's cross] is one of the last of the original ones, it's my pectoral cross. Because the answer to sin, and to the failures of the Church, is not, because of the grace of God, mere judgement, for that takes us back to law. It's easy to say, 'Father, forgive them or curse them'. But it is the offer of grace, and that's what Howard saw. And he started what he called Communities of the Cross of Nails. And they have a discipline, a discipline of reconciliation. And it's used by communities around the world. In other words, his answer to the sin that surrounded him, to the devastation of a world at war, in which tens of millions died, far more than now, his answer was not condemnation but to form community, to form Religious community and to call for repentance. One of the greatest, and possibly less known, prophetic moments of the Church of England. [23:20]

We are, in the Church and above all in the Religious communities, to be lifeboats for a sinking ship, not merely to provide lessons in swimming better or ship design and management (despite what people think). Which is where we look to the past. We all know that there is nothing new in the grace and goodness of God towards us. Our sins are pervasive, but no more than at many times, and in some ways less. But in each of our eras the treasure has been found and its riches have blessed the church, which is why we are still here and full of hope. God is good. He renews the treasures constantly, as he is doing today, so evidently, among us. Within the life of the Church, the incarnational explanation of the call of Christ has always been seen most clearly in the renewal of the Religious life, which is why the Church cannot hope for renewal without renewal in religion. That was true in the 6th century with Benedict, in the 13th century with Francis, in the 18th century, moreover, with Wesley, in the 19th century with the Oxford Movement, and we see it in so many other places around the world.

Imagine the 6th Century, with the beginnings of the Benedictine monasteries. A Lombard king, perhaps in the early 7th Century, goes to Monte Cassino en route to somewhere else. Why does he stay at a monastery? Probably wasn't a Christian, or if he was he's an Aryan, as the Lombards typically were. He goes there because he'll be loved and treated as Christ himself, because that's what the Rule of St Benedict says. Because there is knowledge and care if he or his group is sick. Because there is knowledge and beauty. Because in the chaos of the world, he finds a group of people seeking to grow closer to a God who will judge and whose judgement is experienced now, in the holiness of community, with all its faults.

He goes there because it's something different. It's a bunch of people who are converted, and who are drawing closer to Christ, and in them he finds the reality of Christ.

Look at the new communities of the 18th Century and Methodism, amidst the degradation of life in the tin mines of Cornwall, or the ill-treated suffered from the landlords, and from the Church of England in Norfolk. Here is a gathering of people, the Methodists, who confess to each other, seek to draw each other more closely to Christ, care for the poorest, welcome the stranger, and live out a life that shows that God is indifferent to status and to class. They were a form of religious community.

Look at Sacre Coeur in Paris, from the time of the revival of Religious life in post-imperial France after the Franco-Prussian War at the end of the 19th Century. The communities of Religious grew and developed because their country, France, with all its secularism, saw a response to its defeats in war and its failures internationally. There it saw a non-materialist dream of life lived, and they saw it in reality.

And so down in a rather dreary – forgive me, Chemin Neuf – bitterly cold, exceptionally damp part of central southern France, not that far from Lyon, at a place called Dombes, I went there two years ago in my pre-installation at Canterbury retreat. I took plenty of changes of clothes and didn't change my clothes all week, because I wore all the changes simultaneously [laughter]. The journey from the bathroom back to my bedroom and under the eiderdown – thin eiderdown – was a race between hypothermia and getting back to the room.

But why on the earth did the Cistercians in the 19th Century go there? I know they like it tough but there are limits... The reason was the local prefect asked them to go there. Because the place was such a shambles, so full of malaria, the only answer he could see was to get a Religious community in there because they'd sort it out – and they did. And you can ask the Chemin Neuf folk how they ended up there, because it's another wonderful story.

Whether it's from Benedict or Cluny, Francis or Ignatius, Wesley or the White Fathers, there is treasure from our past to be found and valued.

And then there is the hiding. I'm always a bit querulous about this parable. It sounds a little bit like manipulative, to put it mildly. "I've found some treasure, I'll put it in a valley-less field that I can buy at low price, and then I've got the treasure in the field." But the aim is clear; the field is incidental. The issue in the parable is the treasure of the kingdom, and the treasure makes the field worthwhile – a fact of immense value.

When we talk about the Religious life, what are we talking about? Well, let me start by saying what it's not. It's not a substitute for the prayers of others. It's not a sort of collective expression of that old favourite in the street, in the parish, "Say one for me, vicar". To which a friend of mine invariably replied, "Say one for yourself".

There is sometimes a sense that the church isn't too worried about praying inadequately because *you* folk are doing it properly and that makes up for it.

If only.

It seems to me that if you want to make prayer yet more difficult, stick people together in community, where the most spiritual start to an office can be ruined by the person sitting next to you or opposite *again* losing their place, reading out of rhythm, sniffing so annoyingly as they do every morning, or not seeing that he or she spilt soup on themselves at lunch... am I right? It sends you crackers. And I don't even belong to one... [Laughter]

In a community there will be the too loud, the too quiet, the passive aggressive, the merely passive or the merely aggressive, and so on and so forth [laughter]. And if you want to make it yet more difficult, be by yourself, go and be a hermit – where everything about yourself crowds in and accuses you.

The church cannot assume that a reservoir of holiness exists in the Religious communities. It often does, of course – very often. But it cannot be assumed without neglecting our own responsibilities.

So what are religious communities? Well, someone recently, when we had 24 hours away to talk about this, someone in community described them as five things:

The church's special forces (I think he was talking about the Jesuits there).

A laboratory for new ideas. (He'd met Ian Mobsby.)

Voicing the critical, the counter-cultural, and the prophetic.

Embodying the signs of God.

Praying for church and society.

The Religious life is of infinite wealth and value. That treasure has been found; it's always been there – we draw on its past but it is of surpassing value today as well. It is not merely treasure for the museum; some kind of spiritual museum where it sits behind glass cases and every now and then we go and look and say, "Oh how nice, how pretty..."

I want to pick out two things about the treasure's value today. It says to the church that Christ is worth everything. At the heart of what we learn from Jesus is that nothing is worth anything except him. It truly is all about Jesus. It is easy to get comfort, and a sort of vague sense of reassurance and self-importance, from being an archbishop – I presume, although I've not found it. But some of the smug faces looking down at me from the walls of Lambeth Palace seem to say so. [Laughter]

Yet when one allows oneself a little more thought, the idea that we can be comfortable because of anything we've done or are, or any office we hold, is utterly insane if God exists. If he does not, then of course a few years in nice surroundings is marvellous, especially when surrounded by wonderful people – which I am – and with plenty of pomp, which I don't much like... all in return for having to put up with quite a lot of religion.

In the absence of God, the esthetic Medici, Pope Leo X (1513 – 1521), who said that since God has given us the papacy let us enjoy it... changes from villain to radical antihero. But if God exists then all is reversed. Archbishops become a mere quirk of history; not indispensable to the church, let alone to the Kingdom. What we are now will be changed. What matters is to meet and live with Christ, to be part of the Kingdom, both a representation and an extension of its life.

In Religion, that is demonstrated. With all its complexities and ups and downs and trials and difficulties, we demonstrate that in Religious communities. All is gone, on a good day, save the desire for Christ – that's Benedict. The routines and rationales of life are about the Kingdom, and its struggles are confessed and acknowledged.

There is open reconciliation, a willingness to be transparent. This is not a substitute for the secular life of the church, but Religious life becomes a prophetic call to make it more coherent with what we know to be true. Its renewal is an essential for the life of the church.

Someone recently discussing this compared it to the way the heart beats. Systolic and diastolic. Systolic involves contraction, concentration – i.e. back to the tradition for re-centring. It's very unusual to invent a brand new spirituality, which is why Fresh Expressions need grounding in the tradition as well as liberating into the world. They're wonderful, but they do need that systolic aspect.

And the diastolic – the renewal from the systolic reaches out to cross boundaries. And so is today a moment which is right for renewal in the Religious life. Our secular society is like early medieval Europe. Based on what information we have about the north-east of England in the time of St Cuthbert, it's likely that the percentage of the population that are actively involved in Christian life and activities today is not much higher now than it was then. And monasteries were the answer – the need for strong spiritual centres that enabled the parish system to develop. Being counter-cultural is back in, especially around consumerism and the environment. And we need multinational and multi-generational living together. These are the weak points in our society, and precisely one of the signs of the Religious life.

If Religious life can embody the signs of reconciliation, then they are demonstrating the final overcoming of all boundaries in Christ. Until that happens in the reality of the grace of God and the return of Christ, we need signs and institutions to point to the Kingdom. And the Religious life is one of those key areas.

One of the reasons we have so little power so often is because our parishes struggle so much to embody life – hampered as they are with ancient buildings with demands that are greater than any reasonable person can expect them to meet, in many cases – because of that we preach a disembodied gospel. The Religious put a body around it.

The gap between what we proclaim and what we live comes from two things. First is an over-realised eschatology, which turns prayer into manipulating God into doing what we want, and the church into a playground for our adolescent politics, because we convince ourselves that if we get the church right it'll work out as we want. Then if one group wins, we find that new problems arise. The life of Religious communities, whether resident or not and in whatever tradition, challenges the church not to focus on manipulation for the future, and strategy, but the reality of the now, the living with each other today. Being faithful to Christ where we are, not merely where we'd like to be.

The Religious life, curiously, the treasure in the field, takes the field seriously as the place purchased within which it exists. So you look at the Melanesian martyrs and you see them taking seriously the pain and struggle of the Solomon Islands fifteen years ago in their civil war. You see them full of the life of the Spirit of God, that extraordinary community, going out – first of all, two of them – to a warlord, because they took the field seriously. So they went with the treasure, and they didn't return. So five others went, and they didn't return. And out of that sacrifice the people were so shocked that the warlord lost his support. He was arrested and is imprisoned to this day, and the civil war ended.

The treasure paid out.

Secondly, the gap between what we talk about and what we experience comes from so many other things crowding in. Matthew has just spoken of the Parable of the Sower, and people say “Oh we need to get certain things right and then everything will be fine...” – goodness me, the number of letters I get saying, “You really need to focus on this, that or the other, because if you get that right, there’ll be no problems with the church...”. If only we could get the liturgy better, or the preaching... if only we were inclusive, or not as the case may be... why don’t you focus on environmental issues, or war and violence? (Actually I do that one.) How do we manage money ethically, speak truth to power, run our own operations well and reach young people all at once, before lunch? The list goes on and on.

And of course the Religious communities do all this... but they start with Jesus Christ. They remember the field, but they also remember that the field is only valuable because of the treasure, so the treasure is what matters. Another group of not-that-long-ago martyrs, the monks who were killed in Algeria some years back, focused on the living reality of Jesus Christ – oh, with all their problems, we know the stories... but in the Religious life the field is taken seriously, and the treasure is valued.

And that brings us to an overlooked word, which is joy. . .

[Michel] Houellebecq, in his peculiarly unpleasant series of novels, takes French noir to a darker hue. In ‘Atomised’, his heroes become more and more isolated in the nature of life. All love in that novel is without long-term future. All human relationship is vain. It’s not merely pessimistic in many views of the world. It lies behind the desire for assisted dying, or controls so that when the inevitable evil arrives we may escape.

It is very much the place of those in Corinth who denied the resurrection and to whom Paul said, “Well, eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die...”

Joy, by contrast, is collective. It is the gift of the community that carries the sorrowing and celebrates truth, because there are always enough who know it and can lift the hopes of the suffering. Joy is the fruit of a solid confidence in the treasure. It is easily overlooked and usually forgotten, but is central to the life of Christ and the great call to the church to be full of joy that comes from the hope of the treasure hidden in the mud and dust of the field. And in Religion, as I say, the field is taken seriously – but the treasure is still precious. We’re not obsessed with the field, or ignoring it and only thinking of the treasure.

Where is the joy? It is in Christ alone, and it’s not manufactured but tripped-over when we’re finding Christ. Joy is a by-product. Where Religious communities are renewed it infects the church, which is why they are so essential, and prophetically calls us back to seeing what it is we exist for.

But it cannot be ‘fixed’ – there’s no magic button. It depends on a Benedict or a Francis or many others, but the conditions that permit that to happen can be nurtured. [Louis] Pasteur said at one point, ‘Chance favours the attentive mind.’

A challenge for bishops is to let these 'special forces' follow their call, not merely operate at the bishop's behest. Because every step in the Religious life is both Kingdom of God and Cross; joy and vulnerability. They are inextricably held together. We have to structure our institutions so they are poised for God's renewal. We can't deliver the renewal, but we can make sure we're not getting in the way, and that we don't put up with things that will.

Note that those finding techniques to survive are the ones who will die in the church. It's not about maintaining the structures, but about permitting charisms to flourish. Charism is something lived in the first instance for its own sake; that's its primary purpose. Because it will be attractive it has assigned value, but the evangelistic potential is a consequence. The charism is not there as a recruitment vehicle; we can't instrumentalise the Spirit of God. Yet where you see the charism, you bless it.

Does the Spirit of God strategise, have planning groups, mission action planning...? (All of which I'm in favour of, just before I get into more trouble.) The Spirit does have a strategy, which is to work in and with and through us – if we respond. The problem with strategy is that we use it to try to foretell the future.

Joyful communities do not foretell the future; they live with Christ in the present and that entrance of the Kingdom that is the consequence, that revealing of the treasure, makes the future. The future is not set; it's created.

A friend of mine in Switzerland is the founder of a new community called [La fraternité] Eucharistein, a Catholic community. It's an amazing place. .. at the heart of it is the adoration of the sacrament, which is the whole time, there's always someone praying there. And their particular call seems to be with people who have been in ultra-long psychiatric care. Fifteen years or more is their normal benchmark – so many of the people there are very fragile, inevitably.

I remember going there once for a retreat and there was a man who was very near the end of his life. He was very ill. Two or three of them were sitting with him, holding his hand, making sure he was alright, that his breathing was okay, caring for him. The prayer went on, the joy surrounded him, and in all my life I have never seen a better place to die – a place that was more full of the Spirit of God, that was making his future, because they were living in the present, in the reality of the Christ who was among them.

Let me conclude. Religious life is inescapably tied up with the renewal of the church, because it is the place where field and treasure meet, and where they are held in proper relationship. It adores Christ and says he is beyond all adoration. And it accepts human frailty and sin and offers a life of reconciliation. It is no wonder that when it comes back, when the treasure – hidden, lost, stolen or forgotten – is found again, that joy springs up, the church is challenged, and once again we find ourselves being shaped to shape our society and our future.

Thank you.