

The Silence is Deafening

Sermon by Very Rev. John da Costa, Anglican Dean of Salisbury

Clergymen, I am frequently told, should keep out of politics. I thoroughly agree. For this reason, I will not allow politics to be preached in this cathedral. Clergy have to be reconcilers. That is no easy job. A minister of religion who has well-known political views, and allows them to come to the fore, cannot reconcile, but will alienate others, and fail in the chief part of his ministry.

For this reason, I personally am surprised at there being two clergymen in the Executive Council. It is my sincere prayer that they can act as Christ's ambassadors of reconciliation.

My own ministry began in Ghana, where Kwame Nkrumah preached: "Seek ye first the political kingdom and all these things will be added to you." We know what became of Kwame Nkrumah. We are not to preach a political kingdom, but the kingdom of God.

Clergy are usually in the middle, shot at from both sides. It is not an enviable role. Yet times come when it is necessary to speak out, and in direct and forthright terms, like trumpets with unmistakable notes. I believe that this is one such time.

Nobody who holds sacred the dignity of human life can be anything but sickened at the events attending the crash of the Viscount Hunyani. Survivors have the greatest call on the sympathy and assistance of every other human being. The horror of the crash was bad enough, but that this should have been compounded by murder of the most savage and treacherous sort leaves us stunned with disbelief and brings revulsion in the minds of anyone deserving the name "human."

This bestiality, worse than anything in recent history, stinks in the nostrils of Heaven. But are we deafened with the voice of protest from nations which call themselves "civilised"? We are not. Like men in the story of the Good Samaritan, they "pass by, on the other side."

One listens for loud condemnation by Dr. David Owen, himself a medical doctor, trained to extend mercy and help to all in need.

One listens and the silence is deafening.

One listens for loud condemnation by the President of the United States, himself a man from the Bible-Baptist belt, and again the silence is deafening.

One listens for loud condemnation by the Pope, by the Chief Rabbi, by the Archbishop of Canterbury, by all who love the name of God.

Again the silence is deafening.

I do not believe in white supremacy. I do not believe in black supremacy either. I do not believe that anyone is better than another, until he has proved himself to be so. I believe that those who govern or who seek to govern must prove themselves worthy of the trust that will be placed in them.

One looks for real leadership One finds little in the Western world: how much less in Africa?

Who is to be blamed for this ghastly episode?

Like Pontius Pilate, the world may ask "What is truth?" What is to be believed? That depends on what your prejudices will allow you to believe, for then no evidence will convince you otherwise.

So who is to be blamed?

First, those who fired the guns. Who were they? Youths and men who, as likely as not, were until recently in church schools. This is the first terrible fact. Men who went over to the other side in a few months were so indoctrinated that all they had previously learned was obliterated. How could this happen if they had been given a truly Christian education?

Second, it is common knowledge that in large parts of the world violence is paraded on TV and cinema screens as entertainment. Films about war, murder, violence, rape devil-possession and the like are "good box-office". Peak viewing time is set aside for murderers from Belfast, Palestine, Europe, Africa and the rest, to speak before an audience of tens of millions. Thugs are given full treatment, as if deserving of respect.

Not so the victims' relations.

Who else is to be blamed?

The United Nations and their church equivalent, the WCC. I am sure they both bear blame in this. Each parade a pseudo-morality which, like all half-truths, is more dangerous than the lie direct. From the safety and comfort of New York and Geneva, high moral attitudes can safely be struck. For us in the sweat, the blood, the suffering, it is somewhat different.

Who else? The churches? Oh yes, I fear so.

For too long, too many people have been allowed to call themselves "believers" when they have been nothing of the kind. Those who believe must act. If you believe the car is going to crash, you attempt to get out. If you believe the house is on fire, you try to get help and move things quickly. If you believe a child has drunk poison, you rush him to the doctor. Belief must bring about action.

Yet churches, even in our own dangerous times, are more than half-empty all the time. We are surrounded by heathens who equate belief in God with the Western way of life. In many war areas, Africans are told to "burn their Bibles". If this call was made to us, what sort of Bibles would be handed in? Would they be dog-eared from constant use; well-thumbed and marked? Would they be pristine in their virgin loveliness, in the same box in which they were first received?

There are tens of millions of all races who call themselves believers, who never enter any house of prayer and praise. Many are folk who scream loudest against communism, yet do not themselves help to defeat these Satanic forces by means of prayer, and praise and religious witness.

For, make no mistake, if our witness were as it ought to be, men would flock to join our ranks. As it is, we are by-passed by the world, as if irrelevant.

Is anyone else to be blamed for this ghastly episode near Kariba? I think so.

Politicians throughout the world have made opportunist speeches from time to time. These add to the heap of blameworthiness, for a speech can cause wounds which may take years to heal.

The ghastliness of this ill-fated flight from Kariba will be burned upon our memories for years to come. For others, far from our borders, it is an intellectual matter, not one which affects them deeply. Here is the tragedy!

The especial danger of Marxism is its teaching that human life is cheap, expendable, of less importance than the well-being of the State. But there are men who call themselves Christians who have the same contempt for other human beings, and who treat them as being expendable.

Had we, who claim to love God, shown more real love and understanding, more patience, more trust of others, the churches would not be vilified as they are today. I have nothing but sympathy with those who are here today and whose grief we share. I have nothing but revulsion for the less-than-human act of murder which has so horrified us all.

I have nothing but amazement at the silence of so many of the political leaders of the world. I have nothing but sadness that our churches have failed so badly to practise what we preach. May God forgive us all, and may he bring all those who died so suddenly and unprepared into the light of His glorious presence.

Amen