

COLUMNIST JUSTIN WELBY

Finding our way

I know smoke detectors are literally vital. No house should be without them. But when they start failing, they drive me spare, so the last time they were replaced I was delighted when the technician proudly told me these new ones didn't need batteries.



Photo © Jaqui J Sze

After a couple of years, however, it started chirping, every 30 seconds, interminably. I couldn't see the problem with it: I was baffled.

The technician from the alarm company couldn't find the problem either, so we stood on the landing and listened together, hunting for the source of the noise. After 15 minutes, we found it – an old smoke detector, in a basket above the bookcase, which had been taken down but not dismantled.

When we change things, we can't only think about generalities. We need to consider the specifics – what actually needs changing – so we don't change the wrong thing by accident.

These days few people notice overstatement – we are so used to our attention being sought by grand claims, hyperbole and dramatic gestures. But in recent years, it seems it is hard to overstate how controversial it is to put the two words 'church' and 'change' together.

There are as many opinions on this as there are people within (and of course without) the church.

And now, since lockdown, even more has been asked of the relationship between these two words.

THE STATE WE ARE IN

The terrible pandemic we are enduring will be regarded as a watershed by future generations. Much has changed, much must change and much needs to change.

The bungee rope will not simply go back into the shape it previously held. Things will not simply return to the way they were – such is the extreme stress on national and international economies, systems and the corporate realisation of who and what we have that matters. Much must change – there are cracks in the walls of society that have been exposed, and it will not be possible to paper over them again. Some of these things were already known but have now reached the point of no return – climate emergency, the spectre of racism. When everything has been overturned, as it has this year, we must work out how to rebuild it afresh.

We who follow the Lord Jesus Christ and know that to be inseparable from belonging to his body, the church, have tasted the challenge of change. We have changed because we had to, because we needed to, in order to do the things that make us who we are. Change has been part of how we remain faithful to Christ, and now we must look again at what needs to change.

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WELL-PLACED

My unapologetic position is that we, the church of Jesus Christ, have more to enable this process than any: our faith gives us every resource to consider well and step into the future that God is calling us into.

On the one hand we stand on solid ground – our faith in the unchanging God. What we know of him, what he has done and what he promises. Whilst much around us might be shifting, the ground beneath our feet is not. We build securely on the rock of God's loving kindness, the gift of our salvation in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the sure and certain hope of his coming Kingdom. Pause for a moment, and call to mind all there is which is ours through his eternal faithfulness.

On the other hand, the church has always had every cause to be open and alert to change as we seek to live out

our vocation of being faithful witnesses in every generation. We do this not to be relevant or keep up with the times, but because of the place we are given to stand in our confessed, received faith, in the incarnation of Christ, in the gift of the Spirit and in the providential and sovereign work of God to bring all things together in Jesus. To follow Christ is to change – think of those words that are so familiar to us – ‘repent’, ‘be transformed’, ‘renewal of our minds’. Jesus is the ultimate revolutionary, of minds and hearts, of churches and Christians as well as societies.

Consider the scope of this change by the time the New Testament was written. Jesus taught and conversed in Aramaic. But his words are preserved and faithfully passed on to future generations in Greek, because this was the language of the known world. Within a generation, churches throughout the Mediterranean had things in common, and things that were unique to them. The Christian faith is an historic lived faith. It is a faith rooted in God’s actions in history in the Word become flesh, but lived and proclaimed in specific localities, in particular dialects at distinct times.

One of the main reasons for change is love – love for others. The history of change in the church is most profound when the change happens in faithfulness to the proclamation of the good news of Christ. Each of us will have different dispositions on change. Some can’t get enough, and others don’t want any. And the trouble is rather than working it through together, we simply gather with those who are likeminded. Each of us needs to be self-aware enough to wonder what it is that

we are so committed to, that causes us to embrace or resist change. And then we need to apply the call of Jesus to put others before ourselves. To love others is to change. And the church is all together misguided if we seek simply to live for ourselves.

AND NOW?

The church has sought to live out this faith over the past year; living out of our history but seeking to be alert to all that God is calling us to do and be in the present troubling times.

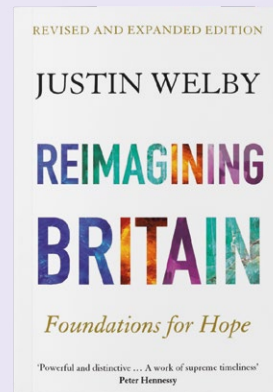
Of course, there is much we have learned and much we might do differently. But time and time again in these last 12 months, I have been astonished at the willingness and capability across the church to adapt in our worship and witness. Consider online services, prayer meetings, webinars, Bible studies, Alpha courses, marriage courses, licensing and church meetings. Think of the pastoral care, food banks, adapting funeral ministry, personal prayer and work with refugees and in homelessness. At this point, there are over 20,000 worship services offered online each week across the Church of England. Who could have ever conceived that would be possible? Could this last 12 months be among the most concentrated time of radical change in the church’s history?

Change is disorientating; I know that. But I do believe we have more to be hopeful for than any other people. For we know God is for us not against us, and he himself goes before us to will and to act according to his good pleasure. We stand certain not on ourselves, our own ability or wisdom, but on the gifts of his grace and presence.

CHANGE WE CAN BELIEVE IN

I remember once hearing the answer my wonderful predecessor Rowan Williams gave to a question, which I have forgotten in light of his genius answer, about the practice of the ‘Early Church’. He replied, ‘Well, for all we know, we still are the Early Church...’.

My prayer is that we take our place in exercising the responsibility we have in these days as faithful witnesses. I’m sure it requires deeper and more profound change than we have yet to grasp, and deeper and stronger commitment to the faith that has yet to grasp us. It requires imagination and creativity, tenacity and insistence, openness and unswerving commitment. Most of all it requires obedience to the Word and the Spirit. Which means, in the face of this challenge, we can have hope and joy, for in him – who was and is and is to come – and only in him, we have all we need.



REIMAGINING BRITAIN: Foundations for Hope

Justin Welby
Bloomsbury Continuum, 2nd edition is now available in paperback and audiobook.

Justin Welby

The Most Revd and Rt Hon Justin Welby has been the Archbishop of Canterbury since 2013. He has three main priorities for his ministry – Evangelism and Witness; Prayer and the Renewal of Religious life; and Reconciliation.

Before he began training for ministry in 1989, Archbishop Justin worked in the oil industry for 11 years. He is married to Caroline and they have five children and four grandchildren.



WE HAVE CHANGED BECAUSE WE HAD TO, BECAUSE WE NEEDED TO, IN ORDER TO DO THE THINGS THAT MAKE US WHO WE ARE.



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