

This talk was given on 3 December 2016 at 'Truth Telling & Politics', a conference held by Las Casas Institute, Blackfriars, Oxford (www.lascasainstitute.org) at The Saïd Business School, Oxford.

The theme of the conference was: Is the truth being squeezed out of contemporary politics by social media and other pressures? How do we advance a culture where truth enables mature participation in the political process?

The speakers were Lord Patten of Barnes, Anneliese Dodds MEP, Jenny Sinclair, Lord Shinkwin of Balham, Samuel Burke OP, Rt Hon John Battle.

Jenny Sinclair

FOR OUR COMMON GOOD, TELL EACH OTHER THE TRUTH

Thank you very much for such generosity of spirit: inviting someone like me, not an academic or a politician - it's really an honour to be here. I'm going to take a rather different angle. I feel there is a need to be challenging - and I don't expect you to agree with everything I say.

Telling the truth: our impoverished relationships

The phrase 'post-truth politics' makes me uncomfortable. It has an arrogant, self-righteous feel to it.

The implication is that the 'decent' Remainer or Hillary supporter has access to a truth that the 'ignorant' Leaver or Trump voter does not.

You might say 'but it's obvious where the truth lies'.

But the term 'post-truth' makes it more difficult to listen to others. It elevates statistics over feeling, raises evidence (so easy to spin) over conviction. It can use and abuse the language of rights to obscure what is right.

In this climate how on earth are we going to build a common life together?

In the next 30 minutes I'm going to explore how our relationships have become so impoverished that we cannot hear each other, and outline some stepping stones that might take us to a better place. I'll suggest that people across the churches are well-placed to be part of the solution, and share a little of what I've learned since starting *Together for the Common Good*.

So where better to start than with Ephesians chapter 4, verse 25:

"Tell each other the truth, because we all belong to each other in the same body"

In these times God seems determined that we should tell one another the truth and dissolve our self-deceptions about the kind of world we've allowed to develop.

A time of geo-political turbulence offers us an opportunity: for honesty, for each of us to make an examination of conscience; to investigate what models of human identity we've been working with; to listen to those whose experiences are different from ours.

Whether we like it or not: we all belong to each other.

For some of us the Brexit and Trump votes were not surprising. They are symptoms of our broken body, of a weakening of our democracy.

For too long, a 'progressive' agenda has held communities with traditional views *in contempt*.

They have been ridiculed and ignored. They feel patronised and insulted.

And when people from proud, inherited cultures experience *humiliation and powerlessness* they will eventually respond.

The Remain and Clinton campaigns were predicated on economics, indeed the same liberal economic model that has been dominant for years. This is why their offer was meaningless for those who were left behind. For them, more of the same was the last thing they wanted. They wanted something more meaningful.

Having been overlooked for so long, when a rare opportunity came to be heard, they took it, even if they knew the campaigns and protagonists were deeply flawed.

They were tired of being served up statistics by a remote technocratic elite, sick of being offered choices between being a few pounds worse or better off.

They were suspicious of 'the truth' which never rang true *to them* while their infrastructure was in a state of degradation and the dignity that work can offer was fast becoming a memory.

They lost patience as social norms were changed without their consent, as the liberal agenda turned away from their concerns and its bland, smooth language became more and more dominant. They feel exiled in their own country.

The pollsters and media missed what was happening – they were blind to this because this 'basket of deplorables' had been *shamed* into hiding their views.

How could the media (including the BBC) be so incapable of seeing an alternative outcome? Why would it tell only the story that confirmed its own view?

Not so easy to get to the truth when large sections of society are silenced.

No wonder a rough, sensationalist, reality TV vernacular broke through the political permafrost. The wavelength of genuine anger felt authentic. The medium *was* the message, even if the ideas were outlandish and brutish. Finally people felt what they have been living through was noticed.

We're now seeing the consequences of a self-righteous brand of liberalism. With hindsight, these seismic democratic gestures seem an inevitable response.

Could it be true that a focus on diversity has distracted us from economic inequality?

Could it be true that the free movement of people *has* been in the interests of big business, commodifying labour, keeping wages low, running roughshod over the fragility of local cultures? Sucking the brightest and strongest away from their place of belonging, adding further strength to the dynamic metropolitan centres but also entrenching communities of the left behind?

Could it be true that the EU's founding principle of subsidiarity has been allowed to drift?

Could it be true that the culture of political correctness has made people afraid to speak the truth?

Could it be true that liberal opinion has gone *a bit too far* and alienated people with traditional views to the extent that they feel estranged from their own country?

Professor Arlie Hochschild of Berkeley has researched what she calls a 'deep story' that captures how people who have been overlooked felt as globalisation took hold. A deep story is how life feels, what *feels* true. I paraphrase:

"You're waiting in a queue, like in a pilgrimage, and you're facing up a hill, at the top of which is your aspiration. And you've been waiting there for a long time. Your feet are tired. You have a tremendous sense of deserving. You've done everything right: you've followed the rules and worked hard. But the queue is not moving. And then you begin to see some people cutting in ahead of you. Who are they? Well, they're people from other countries who now have access to jobs that traditionally were reserved for your neighbours and relatives. Not only that, but you can see ahead of you women who now have access to jobs that used to be typically for men. Even the rights of the hunted fox gets attention before you. And then, you see Cameron, Blair, Obama, Clinton, in this deep story, beckoning to the queue jumpers – in fact, they're sponsoring them. Aren't they queue jumpers, too? How did they get to Harvard/Oxford/Columbia? Something is rigged here.

And so the very idea of government came to seem like an instrument of your own marginalisation. Then, in this deep story, someone who is ahead of you in the queue, turns around and says: 'You bigots, you backward rednecks.'

Some of Hochschild's colleagues scorned her approach. "You better watch out and not empathise too much, *it might change you.*" As if listening to another perspective could infect your orthodoxy.

Actually this is how we get closer to the truth.

And this mocking attitude betrays *exactly* why we are where we are now.

Healing our broken body

So now that the fragmented, unequal and divided reality is laid bare (even if some still refuse to face it), we need to work out *what we can do* to build back the broken body.

And before judging the political class or anybody else, we should start with our own examination of conscience.

Examination of conscience

We should ask if, in the churches, there has been a tendency to rank the needs of some over others.

Let me tell you about Ann Marie, who I know through my friend Cathi. Ann Marie lives with her four children on a run-down estate. She used to spend most of her time in her flat watching TV, going out

only to get the kids from school. She said she didn't have the confidence and there was nothing to do round where she lives.

She felt the church people she'd come across were more interested in campaigning about 'justice' or raising money for overseas charities than in people like her right on their doorstep.

This is how Anne Marie experienced the Church.

Let me be blunt: have some of us in the Church been swept along by liberal received wisdom and, inadvertently perhaps, focused *more* on the needs and interests of the destitute or of refugees or migrants or other minority groups, and *overlooked the interests* of the struggling white working class families in their own neighbourhood?

The relationship of the Church with 'the poor'

Faith in the City, the Church of England's commission published over a generation ago, *spoke truth to power* and focused on "communities of the left behind." It said:

"Poverty is not only about shortage of money. It is about relationships; about how people are treated and how they regard themselves; about powerlessness, exclusion and loss of dignity."

But if speaking truth to power becomes a way of avoiding personal relationships with people who are excluded, then we might as well pack up and go home.

30 years on from *Faith in the City*, Philip North, Bishop of Burnley says:

"We are hooked on an out-dated Temple model: thinking we are doing good by shouting at government from on high rather than seeking locally-based solutions. I am sick and tired of hearing pompous tosh about the 'Church's prophetic voice' or the 'Church in the public square' whilst at the same time we are busy abandoning the people we purport to represent."

We hear a lot about giving a *voice to the voiceless*; less about giving them the space and support to speak for themselves.

Well they have spoken.

Social justice was originally thought of as people's belonging, and their duties, to each other.

Has our notion of justice become so thin that it has come down to handing out bits of money?

In any case, what and who do we mean by 'the poor'?

In Pope Francis' theological tradition, sometimes called the Theology of the People, the term 'poor' refers to people who live with the experience of *non-power*. This can be economic but also social, material, relational, educational, spiritual.

Someone who is living with the experience of non-power has a sense of their need for other human beings. The awareness of needing others. The opposite of individualism. That is a very profound truth and a beautiful thing, which is why Francis says the church must be not only *for* the poor, but *of* the poor.

He says if the Holy Spirit is set free among the poor, this is how the Church itself will be transformed.

Vulnerability and humility are qualities to be treasured: these are qualities often found in people who are excluded and ignored.

Estranged from those who experience non-power, we are all impoverished, less human. Ignoring their interests is to exclude the possibility of what they have to contribute.

But people who are poor don't always fit into a neat category and not all appear to be 'deserving'. The traditions, opinions and cultures of some people who are poor may be out of kilter with mainstream liberal norms.

Can the church welcome everyone who is experiencing non power? Even people who vote UKIP? Or those with tattoos, and fighting dogs? Or will it prioritise minority groups, refugees and the destitute?

A truly common good approach would recognise there are people across many groups, ethnic and social, who experience non power. The common good offers a methodology to balance those interests, not to rank them. It is not a zero sum game.

Jean Vanier understands that to be fully human, we need to be in a relationship with the excluded, no matter how difficult that may be. Who are we called to love?

Jean's experience has taught him that humiliation can lead to anger, and to violence.

He talks about the 'gift of the poor'. He says it is often they who are free enough to see with the greatest clarity the needs, beauty and pain of the community.

Those with no power may well be angry.

Given how many people now feel powerless, this is a lot of people.

But making the majority feel like a threatened minority is now having very dangerous consequences.

From crisis to opportunity

Whether we like it or not, we are all members of one body.

The major theme of that letter to the Ephesians is the unity and reconciliation of the whole of creation through the agency of the Church.

The challenge of St Paul brings with it the potential for the healing of that broken body into convergence with the mission of the Church.

This moment of political turmoil is also an opportunity. A new politics is being formed.

But if it's not founded on a relationship with, and respect for, the poor, then we are destined for a sterile internal conversation and the mission will fail. And our democracy will remain in crisis.

This is why we believe the Common Good is an idea whose time has come.

The Common Good

We all think we know what it means. The idea resonates from Aristotle, to Ubuntu, Shalom, across humanist, Jewish, Christian and other traditions.

We draw from across all the Judeo Christian traditions and in particular, from Catholic social teaching.

So the classic definition goes: “the Common Good is the set of conditions in which every individual in the community can flourish.” Yes.

But what is missed by the liberal left and by the libertarian right is that the Common Good is not a utopian ideal to be imposed by one enlightened group upon another.

It’s about a balance of interests.

I cannot create the Common Good on my own, neither can you: I can’t create it by just talking with my friends, nor with my own special interest group. It’s a kind of alchemy.

It requires unlikely partnerships.

It’s *how* that set of conditions is created that is the crucial question – the conditions need to be built *by us, working together across our differences.*

To build a Common Good requires people who may seriously disagree, and whose interests and circumstances are different, to tell each other the truth, to encounter each other in *relationship*, to negotiate a balance of interests.

Simply put, ‘it is in my interests that you thrive.’

It’s no easy task. But the principles of Catholic social teaching are very helpful here.

We talk about applying those principles as the *practice of the Common Good.*

Catholic Social Teaching

The great strength of CST is its maturity. It rejects ideology, both individualist and collectivist. Both big business and big government tend to dehumanise. CST offers a constructive process of discernment, not a protest narrative.

Its principles - ‘human dignity, the dignity of work, the common good, equality, respect for life, reconciliation, subsidiarity, solidarity, participation, association, and the preferential option for the poor’, and the importance of intermediate institutions. These principles are universal.

It makes for a powerful recipe for building a common life.

But outside the Catholic Church it is little known. Even within the Church it’s poorly understood. While this is the case its energy cannot be released. And it will only secure credibility as widely as it should if it is clearly understood to transcend party politics.

We want it to be more accessible and get it out of the academy. So in an ecumenical and broader context, we talk about CST as ‘Common Good Thinking’ and at entry level we use the broad headings of: ‘The Common Good; The Person; Relationship; Stewardship and Everyone is included, no one is left behind.’

We want to see it more widely applied, from the grassroots to the boardroom.

Our inspiration for this comes from an unlikely partnership.

Together for the Common Good

Together for the Common Good began as an idea in 2011. I thought, in the context of increasing social division, that the partnership between my late father Bishop David Sheppard and Archbishop Derek Worlock might still have currency, not just for church leaders - but now, for all of us.

They learned from each other, realising that each had different gifts to bring. Gifts like Catholic social teaching, the see-judge-act methodology, Anglican hospitality to the whole community, courage and negotiating skills.

For twenty years they worked together across *their* differences, putting the city of Liverpool first in a time of polarisation and division.

If they could do it, so can we.

They encouraged *local leadership* among 'communities of the left behind.'

Built bridges between mutually suspicious groups.

Listening to all sides, and interpreting between them – business, unions, Catholic, Protestant, the affluent, the left behind, the police, the black community, the Militant Tendency, the Thatcher government...

...their method for building Common Good was *reconciliation*.

So now, those who stay tribal – contemptuous or self-righteous, politically, religiously or culturally, will be poorly prepared.

The goal of totalitarianism, as Orwell said, is to destroy our 'common basis of agreement.'

A shared sense of the truth will be found within reconciled relationships.

So we want people of good will to work together, across their beliefs and political differences for the common good.

So for *Together for the Common Good*, that means acting as a catalyst, being firmly non-partisan and ecumenical, building relationships, promoting Common Good Thinking and practice, encouraging Common Good conversations; assisting others, incubating ideas, developing resources and publications, holding public debates, sharing information via our website and our newsletter which now goes to several thousand subscribers. With only a tiny core team we punch above our weight thanks to many pro bono associates, partnerships and alliances.

Following the Sheppard-Worlock tradition we want to see relationships of shared purpose flourish between the many different and estranged Christian traditions, and with other faith communities and non-religious organisations too. We want a generous outward-facing church releasing the potential of the laity, equipped with the civic capacity to empower communities.

An honest people, honest brokers

So - we've had Brexit, then Trump – symptoms of a realignment still unfolding, and we anticipate more coming down the track. The old left and right orthodoxies are shifting. This is a challenge to take the people seriously. Everything is changing super fast and we need to be ready.

Reconciliation is very important now.

This is too big a task for politicians. If we are to heal this broken body, everyone of good will is needed.

As Justin Welby says, the truth is complex. In a recent address he said:

“At this point we cannot say that the rebirth of the nation-state is a good or bad thing. If it is a reality, then it is one that we must put to good use. If we allow our national and international political contexts to define our values and virtues, then we will be disappointed. Values emerge from histories of interaction and are rooted in stories of virtue, above all in Europe the stories of the Judeo Christian tradition.”

What is needed is a people capable of listening, and capable of telling the truth, with a narrative deeper and more mature than the story shaped by the politics of our day.

So what will it take to be such a people?

Well, one thing's for sure: if we're not looking for common ground, we're not going to find it.

That's why I shared Hochschild's deep story with you earlier. She has that reconciliatory instinct I am talking about. She is a left-winger who had the humility and curiosity - and courage - to get to know intentionally, right-wingers who she thought she had nothing in common with. She found that empathy bridged the divide, they had quite a bit of common ground, indeed she found the experience enlarging and enriching. In spite of the scorn of her colleagues.

The churches and their people are well-placed to do this too, to foster a culture of encounter.

But often they don't understand what is going on, are confused by misinformation - they lack civic capacity.

This is why Together for the Common Good exists. We encourage people to get out of their silos and build relationships across local institutions and between estranged groups. Beyond party loyalties.

Those of us in the metropolitan bubble should get out more, and listen to those who have been overlooked for so long: get to know them.

We need to make the effort, and have the courage, to listen to unfamiliar voices. (That includes the likes of Breitbart, Trump's advisers like Steve Bannon and UKIP people by the way).

We'd do well to understand how social media algorithms drive us into deeper niches and dangerously make interaction *less* likely with people different from ourselves. Not easy to have a shared sense of truth in the echo chamber era, unless we actively subvert it.

Can we be the ones with the courage, who are prepared to 'stay in the room', negotiate and keep the dialogue going, recognising the humanity in everyone, affirming the legitimacy of what they have to say?

At the end of the Year of Mercy what have we learned?

What sociologists call empathy, we know as love or mercy. It can be a very effective tool for entering a different worldview, at the bottom of which, are human feelings.

We are being called to heal the broken body, to stand in the fractures.

Do you know the feeling of being totally forgiven? Totally loved by God?

This is what the church is meant to do, through us – to convey that feeling. To everyone, especially the hard to love. Not just our favourite people.

This is the kind of church Pope Francis has been asking us to be since *Evangelii Gaudium*.

This is the kind of outward-facing church Sheppard and Worlock embodied a generation ago.

They were effective honest brokers between mutually suspicious and hostile groups, allowing people to speak: there was no politically correct silencing going on there.

They were branded statist by the Thatcherite right. And as traitors by the hard left.

They worked with business, encouraging their crucial role for the common good.

They empowered local leadership in ‘communities of the left behind’, affirming their cultures. They worked alongside people, not doing *to* but working *with*, building up their capacity.

They were ‘responsive to context’ – not obsessed by the church, or by politics, but more concerned with the reality of human life.

They were not socialists, but radical traditionalists for whom poverty and exclusion was an affront to the body politic.

They resisted being sidetracked by doctrinal differences. But loyal to their own traditions: no syncretism there. Their partnership demonstrated they were not in it for self-aggrandisement or institutional self-interest.

They rolled up their sleeves and enjoyed, as Pope Francis says, ‘smelling like sheep’.

This is some of what it might take to be such a people.

To build a common life

Looking across the silos, we can see that instinct to build a *common life* is present among Christians of many traditions:

People with this instinct are in the ‘hard to reach’ areas others gave up on a long time ago, so for them, the Brexit and Trump votes were not a surprise.

They are in the outer estates, the abandoned towns, choosing to stay and build the kingdom within ‘communities of the left behind.’ Embedded, raising their kids and *choosing not to leave* when promotion or metropolitan temptations beckon;

Such a people understand the importance of working *alongside*, rather than *speaking for* the poor; moving from handouts to a hand up; re-orienting the church to face outwards, re-purposing church land and buildings to provide affordable housing and community land trusts and space for local start-ups;

We can see it in the thousands doing the unglamorous work in food banks, debt counselling: they know people in the struggling communities personally;

But that reconciliatory instinct can go much further and address structural injustice too.

We can see it at work in those who sustain the 'intermediate institutions' - the local clubs and associations - and build the bonds between them;

We can see it at work in those who are active in reshaping the economy - through financial inclusion, credit union networks, cleaning supply chains, in the ethical investment firms and the fast-growing impact investment sector: they are showing it's possible to make the market work for social good by participation;

There are the entrepreneurs driving the 'mission-led business' agenda, proving it's possible to be successful and create jobs as well as honouring the dignity of their workforce;

We can see it at work in those bravely challenging managerialism and over-regulation in the social care sector;

We can see it at work in those turning whole networks of failing schools around and cultivating the leadership of young people in challenging neighbourhoods;

We can see it at work in those making interventions in the higher education system which has so dishonoured the poor and driven a division between the educated and the uneducated; and those courageously telling the truth, challenging the tyranny of identity politics in universities;

And we can see that reconciling instinct in those working to overcome the blight of loneliness and bringing tenderness and kindness into systems that have lost their soul.

Our calling

In all the examples I have given, Christians of different denominations are leading the way, working with other faith communities and those of no faith. (Of course a great deal is going on in other sectors: for the purposes of today I am focusing on the churches).

This is why I say such a people can be found across the churches and why they're well placed to be part of the solution. This is what I mean by agents of change for the common good. A role for everyone, not just the activists. It's not party political. And it's a positive narrative.

Our values of love, hope, responsibility, human dignity, family, community, relationships – and rootedness in place - are sorely needed now.

The political landscape is changing hour by hour. But our tradition doesn't change. It's mature. Transcends left and right. Is radically inclusive. We can help to create the conditions in which a new politics of the common good can grow.

What will the church be known for? Rituals or relationships? I am not advocating a triumphalist Christianity. The common good is not showy.

The Trinity is our centre of gravity and our model.

Each of us is invited to enter into a relationship with the Father, with Jesus Christ and with the Holy Spirit. Being part of this is what makes us human. God needs us to participate, according to our vocation, in his great creative plan.

We can begin by telling each other the truth. We know we are all one body, whether we like it or not.

It's our job to be such a people: a people capable of showing how humanity can recover a proper view of the human person.

Not through the lens of money or unfettered personal liberalism, nor through extremist political positioning, nor through a dehumanising lens of technocratic efficiency.

But through one human person's relations with another.

Jenny Sinclair

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A video of this talk can be accessed here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Am2tt8QYjlo>

The Las Casas Institute examines issues concerned with human dignity in the light of Catholic Social teaching. It is part of the life of Blackfriars Hall which continues the historic mission of the Dominicans, a religious order of the Catholic Church, to engage with contemporary thought by participation in the life and work of a modern university.