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Most Reverend Justin Welby
ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY

AM: Welcome Archbishop. You have a special service at Westminster Abbey on Tuesday where you’re going to be talking about the plight of Christians abroad. Particularly in the Middle East and in that direction. Why are you focusing on that now?

JW: It’s a service that’s been organised by the Prince of Wales whose long been committed to the support of Christians in the Middle East, and I’ve travelled there a lot. I’ve been with Christians around the Middle East for many, many years but in different countries. And the plight of Christians there has become more and more acute as the years have gone by. Not everywhere. There are places where they are flourishing and doing very, very well. But the total proportion of Christians in countries like Iraq has dropped from 10 percent to about two percent, two or three percent, and in other countries similar.

AM: So almost vanished in some areas.
JW: They have vanished in some areas. They’ve been driven out or they’ve been killed. And so it seems a good time, as we approach Christmas, this season of Advent when we’re focused on the Middle East, on Bethlehem, to talk about the reality of the situation today.

AM: And as you said in the Sunday Telegraph this morning these are communities some of which go back almost to the time of Christ. There’s one man who I think you quoted who said that his family had been Christians more or less since St Paul.
JW: Yes. In fact they do back to the time of Christ. They were the first Christians. They are the foundational communities of the Christian faith, of the more than two billion Christians worldwide.

AM: Now this will make a lot of people think of the case of Asia Bibi, the Christian labourer in Pakistan who in a row over a glass of water faced at one point the death penalty and was jailed for eight years. Were you disappointed and saddened that Britain didn't offer her asylum?

JW: Well I think there are two things to say here. First of all a lot goes on behind the scenes that we don't know about and these situations are not usually helped by megaphone diplomacy. Secondly, I know that there is a great deal of work being done and I think we need to stop talking about her and listen to her. What does she want? Where does she want to go and I hope that our government and other governments will make it possible either for her to come here, if that’s what she wants and her family wants and her supporters want, or for her to go somewhere else if that’s what she prefers. It has to be focused on her.

AM: Pakistan is I think the biggest single recipient of British aid at the moment. It seems a little odd that we can't put a little more have a little more influences on the very, very anti-Christian atmosphere in the country.

JW: Well I think at government level there’s been very significant influence. I mean the Supreme Court of Pakistan with considerable courage upheld her freedom and that puts them at some risk. Imran Khan has personally supported her and since that Supreme Court judgement. But the mood in Pakistan, again a country I’ve visited several times, is very, very complicated and very volatile. And remember there are about 800,000 even Anglican Christians in Pakistan. There are many more people –

AM: 800,000?
JW: Yes. We have a large church. We’ve lost more than 200 people killed in the last few years. So it is a very dangerous and volatile situation and we need to measure our words rather carefully.

AM: Well let’s come closer to home now. You have spoken out very vociferously about poverty in Britain and we’d just had this highly controversial UN report which suggested I think that one and a half million people in Britain are destitute and millions and millions more are living in real poverty, about a fifth of the country. How did you react when you read that report?

JW: Well, I read it carefully. I think it’s important to go through its arguments point by point. I think it’s really important for the government to respond carefully to that, not to dismiss it. It’s by a very distinguished UN rapporteur. Certainly there are parts of the country where there is huge deprivation. I see that in my own diocese of Canterbury, around the Isle of Thanet. A real hardship and people struggling enormously and the BBC has reported on that very extensively. And we see – I was up in Lowestoft, Great Yarmouth the other day on a visit to Norwich diocese and there again one saw communities caught in a poverty trap. Now the economy has improved very much in many places, but there is a significant group of people who just seem trapped and the system doesn’t help them. And I think that’s what the UN Rapporteur was getting at.

AM: You’ve spoken out about inequality and wealthy and poverty in the country as is I guess your duty as Archbishop of Canterbury, but you’ve gone a lot further than that. You’ve talked about zero hours contract and some people kind of mock you as the Anglican wing of Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party. Do you think you might have gone a little far in terms of the specific nature of your interventions?
JW: Well, if I was happy to tear out large chunks of the Bible and put them in the bin, yes, then I would have gone a bit too far. But if I really want to read the Bible and the prophets and what Jesus said, then no I haven’t gone too far and I am not party political. I’m not a member of any political party. I don’t support the Labour Party or the Conservative Party or anyone else, I simply try and speak from the Christian scriptures about the values that Jesus put forward himself.

AM: But you go to the TUC and you talk for instance about zero hours contracts and some people in your own communion recoil and flinch a little bit about that.

JW: No doubt. I can’t remember the last time an Archbishop of Canterbury said anything including good morning, which every Anglican agreed with. And I think I was the seventh Archbishop to go to the TUC, the first one was in the mid-19th century. It’s not unusual or new. I also have written in the Daily Telegraph this morning or Sunday Telegraph this morning, there will be something in the Daily Mail tomorrow. You know it’s –

AM: It’s not exactly the Morning Star is it?

JW: No, it’s not exactly the Morning Star.

AM: Right at the beginning I mentioned that poll of Anglicans which showed that two thirds of Anglicans who attend church and then voted in the referendum voted for Brexit. The Anglican community seems to be pretty pro-Brexit and yet their leader is a Remainer. Again, do you think – what do you think the reaction in the pews is going to be to the fact that you have been such a prominent Remainer?

JW: Oh I don’t think I’ve been prominent at all. I voted Remain. I didn’t make a big thing about it. I was writing an article about how we have a Christian duty to participate in politics and for the
point of transparency, declared my own interest. But I’ve said many times since that we voted, that’s the decision we’ve taken and now we must make it work for the common good, in the national interest and so that Britain has a deep sense of commitment around the world, is a global force for good.

AM: This feels like a real moment of national or certainly parliamentary crisis around this and no one’s quite sure of the way forward. What do you think about going back and having a second referendum, the so called people’s vote?

JW: Well, that’s going to be a matter for parliament. I’m a religious leader not a political one. Let’s just be clear about that.

At this time of year we’re in Advent. This is the time when we look forward to the first coming of Jesus Christ, where God came as a vulnerable baby to live among us, to grow up, to be crucified and we remember also the second coming, the judgement of God at the end of all time. At this time, between those two times, we have hope. Whatever the situation, whatever the crisis: there is hope. Because of the faithfulness of God, the goodness of Jesus Christ, so as a religious leader I say yes, this is a crisis, but let’s make it a crisis where we restrain our language, we don’t use – I would love politicians to be restrained in their language.

AM: I was about to come on and ask you about the fact that we seem to be very angry and divided as a country over all of this and what is the way forward, but I think you’ve just given it to me.

JW: I think the way forward is there needs to be a reluctance to treat the other as an enemy, but to say we are one nation, one people, and I hope and request that political leaders will be moderate in their language in the next few months. That we will calm down the hatreds that have arisen over the last few years. That we will move towards reconciliation. We are one nation under God. Let us act as that. And in that we will find hope
through the greatest crisis. We’ve been through much worse crises in the past, in wartime, even in peacetime. We’ve been through equal crises. This is a moment for hope, for confidence and for moving forward.

AM: I’m not usually allowed to say Amen after an interview but Amen to that Archbishop, thank you very much indeed.
JW: Thank you.

Ends