

# The Parish Church of St Anne, Kew

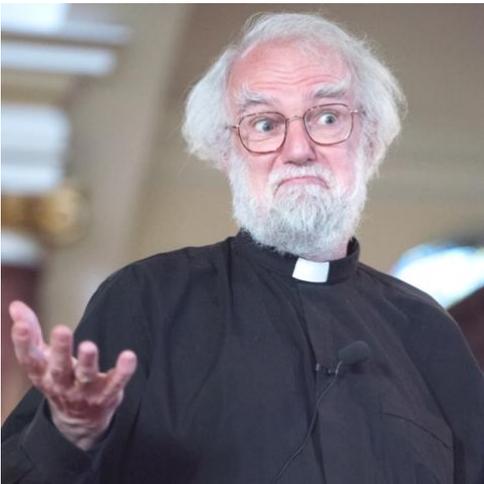
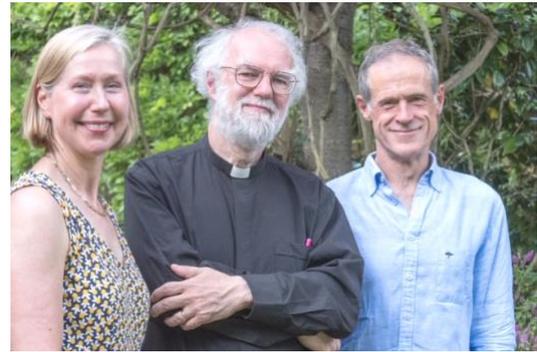
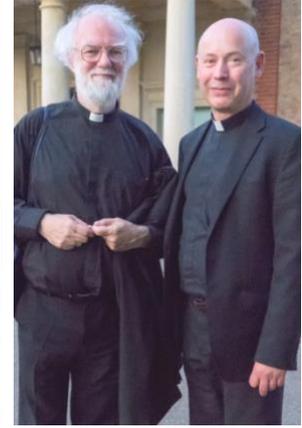
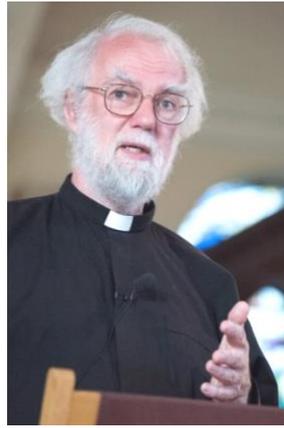


Dr. Rowan Williams: *The challenge of affluence: lessons for a parish from the life of Conrad Noel.*

Lecture given on 12 July 2019,  
150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Conrad Noel  
in Royal Cottage, Kew Green  
on 12 July 1869.







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Thank you for the invitation to speak about somebody who has excited my interest and enthusiasm since I was a teenager.

I begin with a quote: “the alternative stands before us: socialism or heresy. We are involved in one or the other.” Now over the years, I have become reasonably expert in the sort of things you probably ought not to say if you want to be Archbishop of Canterbury, so you might be surprised to hear that these words were spoken by William Temple in 1908, the future Archbishop of Canterbury, arguably the greatest archbishop of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Temple’s expression tells us something about the mood in the Church of England on the eve of the First World War. Rather surprisingly, something like Christian Socialism was bidding fair to be the default setting for a great many of the younger leaders and future leaders of the Church of England. William Temple’s remark was not so wildly eccentric as immediately to define him as an out-lyer in the Church of England.

However, the Christian Socialism of that time was on the whole a pretty vague affair. Temple was reminded later in life, as Archbishops of Canterbury are often reminded by their kind friends, that he was not an expert on economics. And one of the strange things about Christian Socialism - so called – in the pre-First World War period, is that it said almost nothing about economics. It was mostly a way of talking about how the prosperous could be nicer to the not- so- prosperous, how the massively unjust and unequal conditions of late Victorian industrialism could be humanized. To some extent, it was about how we could avoid, rather than pursue, Revolution. Economic theory and the reconstruction of social patterns was not very high on the agenda. But a generous -hearted enthusiasm for improving the lot of the poor was certainly very much on the radar for a lot of people.

One of the features of Conrad Noel’s extraordinary life is that somewhere around this period, the first decade and a half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he moved decisively from that kind of Christian Socialism to something much more marked - much more concerned with global, international issues - much more theologically rooted. Adrian Hastings, in his wonderful History of English Christianity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, notes that, for Conrad Noel, as for many others, the First World War proved to be something of a watershed period in their thinking about their relationship to the society around. The benevolent, but still rather patriarchal, mindset of the young William Temple, for whom the socialism or heresy alternative was probably not translated all that rapidly into political terms, became less possible to sustain. Classical liberalism, Lloyd George’s early ventures into the Welfare State seemed, to rather more people than before the War, an

inadequate response; and Adrian Hastings traces with great skill, the way in which people, who had generally been sitting in the same halls and singing from the same hymn sheet before 1914, drifted apart.

He speaks of Charles Masterman, a prominent figure in leftish High Church Anglican circles before the War, and Conrad Noel, as standing at opposite ends of the spectrum. I quote: "Charles Masterman had turned Liberal politician, working closely with Lloyd George, and was really the creator of unemployment insurance, but had been damned by GK Chesterton's friends, in no uncertain terms, for dirtying his hands in practical politics." If Masterman had moved one way into the political mainstream under the Liberal banner, Conrad Noel moved another, into the clear-sighted, if slightly batty, wilderness of the far left. Well, the clear-sighted, if slightly batty, wilderness is still very much with us these days, but that I think pin points some of what was happening in Conrad Noel's career after the war.

Whether he made his name locally, or nationally, as vicar of Thaxted in Essex, as you will see shortly, some of his own policies and shifts of emphasis during the War, tell us something about the direction in which he was going.

But I suspect I'm running ahead of myself. Not all of you will know very much about Conrad Noel, the details of his life and his ministry. And I don't intend to spend the whole evening giving you a potted biography, but it may help to run over a few of the basics of his life. He was sent down from Cambridge without taking his degree and never went back to graduate. At the last moment before his ordination as a deacon, the bishop decided that his political views made him unsuitable as a candidate for ordination. He managed to find another bishop and left his first curacy within a few months. But a little later, he left a second curacy in much the same circumstances. As you can see, he wouldn't have lasted five minutes in the modern Church of England but the unenlightened pre-war Church of England could be remarkably creative in its attitude to eccentrics.

And so Noel ended up as an unpaid curate in St. Mary's, Primrose Hill in North London, curate of the great Percy Dearmer, hymn writer, liturgical scholar and Christian Socialist of the rather pre-war variety. Dearmer himself records his experience of meeting Noel for the first time when a rather Byronic young man wearing a velvet jacket, and a bright red neckerchief, simply knocked on his door and asked if he might have a job for him. From that background Noel continued to develop his thoughts, not only about politics, but about theology and liturgy. As most of you will know, he spent decades as Vicar of Thaxted in Essex, inheriting one of the most beautiful churches in the region and making it a fit setting for a wonderfully reconstructed neo-medieval liturgy of great solemnity and beauty, music specially composed and ceremonial which Noel would insist was not at all an imitation of decadent Roman Catholic practice, but was an attempt to excavate

the authentic native tradition of liturgy as extinguished by the Reformation. Noel had no opinion whatever of the Reformation or King Henry VIII or of Queen Elizabeth I but that's another story.

In his time at Thaxted Noel was notorious for a number of public interventions and stands which he took, not least the so-called Battle of the Flags. In the Parish Church of Thaxted, the flag of Sinn Fein, the Irish revolutionary movement, and the red flag of International Socialism were draped on the walls. A group of devoted conservative undergraduates from Cambridge motored out to Thaxted in the 1920s and removed the flags. A long story which I won't go into the details of, but one of the ways in which Noel made his name known, let us say. But there are a number of aspects of Noel's ministry and practice which I want to pick out and reflect on in relation to the Church today, the Parish today, and, I hope with your help, this particular Parish today.

Noel, as I've said, was interested in liturgy. When the notorious Dean Inge of St Paul's was asked at one time if he was interested in liturgy, he is said to have replied 'no, neither do I collect postage stamps.' That tells you a great deal about where people were in the Church of England in the first few decades of the 20th century. For the Dean, liturgy was a mark of basically artificial, superstitious, religious sensibility. The advanced sensitive progressive Christian should long since have emancipated himself, and I do mean **himself**, from the need to observe anything so constrained as liturgy. For people like Percy Dearmer and Conrad Noel, however, liturgy was a worked example of redeemed community. **A worked example of redeemed community.** Getting liturgy right was an essential part of getting Christian life right, because it was in the liturgy that the Christian Community declared what it was. And when the Christian Community declared what it was, then the human Community would see what it might be.

As we look back on the liturgical practice of people like Dearmer or Noel, Percy Widdrington and others, we may now feel that it was an extraordinarily archaeological enterprise. There were those who unkindly called it British Museum religion. But at the time, what people like Dearmer and Noel were attempting, was to set out in formal ritual shape something of the interdependence of the Christian Community, something of the solemnity and beauty that properly belonged to human beings gathered in the name of Jesus Christ. So far from being artificial, a matter of cold externalities, liturgy, you might say, uncovered something. It uncovered a dignity and a celebratory energy in a human community. Which is why though it may seem a slightly anticlimactic comparison, people like Noel also liked Morris dancing. Or, to put it another way, when human beings are doing their human business, they don't just solve problems and perform tasks, they celebrate, and they celebrate by making exuberant, delightful

and complex patterns. Morris dancing is, for those who like it, an exuberant, complex and delightful pattern, and liturgy is rather more than that. It is an exuberant and complex pattern in which something very deep is uncovered.

So Noel's liturgical enthusiasms are not just a personal eccentricity bolted on to a fundamental political agenda. For him, liturgy was a form of politics. To show what the Christian Community was in this interwoven pattern where many different people were involved in performance and public ritual, was to show a community in which people were taken with deep seriousness. It's no accident, of course, that part of the liturgical pattern involved lots of people: lots of people serving and swinging incense, carrying candles, walking processions - Morris dancing but slightly subdued. I'll come back to liturgy in a moment. But, just before leaving it now, I'll note one last point, which I've touched in passing. Noel, as I've indicated, like Percy Dearmer, and like many of that particular group within the high church and Anglo-Catholic circles of the time, Noel was very anti Roman Catholic. He was anti Roman Catholic, not for historical English patriotic reasons, papists being unreliable foreigners, but because papists were committed to tyranny, to centralized ecclesiastical government, to authoritarian rule, and as the 20th century unfolded, Noel was among those who pointed out that it was Roman Catholic countries that had generated totalitarianism -not an entirely accurate perception when you think about Germany between the Wars, but Noel was never one to be held back by entirely accurate perceptions. But once again his passion for a liturgy that had some claim to represent local tradition, English identity over against simply importing 19th century continental Roman Catholic practice into the Church of England, as many other Anglo-Catholics did, that was not a bit of personal taste, it was of a piece with his entire approach.

The second area of Noel's enthusiasm worth picking up is perhaps rather unlikely at first blush. He was a great enthusiast for the Nicene Creed and indeed for the Athanasian Creed. The Athanasian creed, as you all remember, has the verse within it 'None is afore or after another'. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity, as set out in the Nicene Creed and as elaborated in the Athanasian creed, is a doctrine which affirms that at the very heart of being there is equality. Difference in equality, difference in equality. And so Noel could look at the controversies that shaped the doctrine of the Trinity in the fourth Christian Century as fundamentally about something far more than technicalities for professional theologians. This was for him a vision of God which challenged and transfigured a vision of humanity. He wrote quite often about this. He wrote very eloquently about the way in which the heretics of the fourth century were not simply people who refused to believe in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, but people who were subservient to the hierarchical patterns of the Roman Empire. And he loved to

remind himself - and others - that Athanasius, the great champion of Trinitarian orthodoxy in the fourth century, was someone who was almost as often in trouble with the Roman Empire as Conrad Noel was with the Bishop of Chelmsford.

So the creedal and theological vision that Noel adopted, and passionately advocated, pivoted around that sense that the fundamental vision of God with which Christians worked was something which pushed back against hierarchy, unexamined hierarchy, top-down patterns. It's a style of Trinitarian theology which has been very popular in some parts of the world of the later 20th century. And many theologians, myself included, would say that the transition made from talking about God to talking about human society is probably a bit too rapid for comfort. But for Noel, it was a moment of transforming revelatory force to realize that the doctrine of the Trinity comes into focus in the fourth century as a way of fighting back against a picture of the world, heavenly and earthly, in which hierarchy is taken as basic, hierarchy, that is, in the sense of power dripped down from above, trickling very very gradually down towards a relatively powerless humanity. On the contrary, the doctrine he believed had been formulated in the fourth century was the doctrine in which God's own very paternal life is conceived differently, and in which, of course, God's unconditional embrace of, and identification with, all aspects of fleshly humanity in the Incarnation affirmed what Noel himself wanted to affirm about the dignity and the depth and the sheer interestingness of ordinary human life.

The notion of God embracing the entirety of human experience made Noel the very opposite of a Puritan. You can, if you like, call Noel the very first of the champagne socialists because there is no doubt at all that he profoundly enjoyed the good things of life. He had benefited from the attentions of the patron of the parish of Thaxted, the Countess of Warwick, a devotedly left-wing socialist, who saw no reason for her politics to interfere with her lifestyle. Noel very much enjoyed country house weekends. He would, I think, have come back to any criticism on that by saying, what exactly is wrong with champagne? What exactly is wrong with comfort, and beauty, and the delights of conversation? Surely what we are saying is, not that these ought to be denied everyone because not everyone has them, but ask 'What can we do in order to bring that kind of enhancement to the lives of all?' You may quarrel, but that's what he would have said, I believe, quite unashamedly.

So liturgy, creed, Trinitarianism, the Christological model and, thirdly, something which is a little difficult to draw, to focus quite so clearly. It is worth pinpointing in relation to some others in his circle at the time and in relation to some of what I've already said about his ecclesiastical views. It is what I would call a kind of localism. I have already mentioned that he is very concerned that the liturgy

should be grounded in the life of this country, this culture, and that is the point at which of course his interests converge with those of his friends Vaughan Williams, Gustav Holst and Martin Shaw. Martin Shaw's beautiful folk mass was written for Noel's Thaxted, and Vaughan Williams and Gustav Holst were of course, like Noel, people committed to the renewal and extension of a deep vigorous English folk tradition in music and the arts as part of a broader programme of political and social renewal. Vaughan Williams and Holst, although neither of them would have identified as a believing Anglican, Vaughan Williams and Holst certainly were committed to the idea that the imaginative and spiritual renewal of the life of this country depended on taking seriously the popular traditions, the folk identities that people worked with. And, for them, that meant a reworking of those themes in their own music as well as the various kinds of activism in which they were involved - promoting the arts for what we would now call disadvantaged communities.

And that localism also is reflected in what I have already said about Noel's suspicion of Roman Catholics' centralism. He would have agreed with a point very forcefully made by perhaps one of the greatest theoreticians of Anglo-Catholic socialism in that era, John Neville Figgis, a member of the Mirfield Community of the Resurrection. Figgis, a formidable professional academic historian, had given up his university position in Cambridge to join the young monastic community of Mirfield under the guidance of Charles Gore and had put his great intellectual gifts to work in a series of lectures and sermons delivered between, let's say, 1904 and 1914, in which he sketched out a picture of the state and the church in the light of a fully and robustly communitarian approach. He famously said that the state is a community of communities. The state is not an all-powerful hierarchically superior, exhaustively resourced, fountainhead of all that happens in society. The state, the central part of the state, looks around and identifies, respects, works with, equips and co-ordinates the life of already existing communities and networks that are around. Figgis might have invented community organizing. The point is that what he sees is a primary level of human association being local and cooperative and very much face to face, rather than everyone being corralled into large political units administered from the top. It is why the kind of socialism Noel was involved in was not particularly friendly to the socialism of the Fabian Society with its planning for the organized and administered society.

And Figgis notes at one point that if that's what we believe about political authority and social structure, then we must believe that about the church. We must be very suspicious of any doctrine of authority in the church where everything flows from on high. We must take seriously the absolute Integrity of local churches

whose relation to one another is what needs to be fed and fostered by authority, rather than replaced by authority. To paraphrase what Figgis is effectively saying is: you cannot be a liberal communitarian in politics and a fascist in theology. You have to make connections between the kinds of community you work for in society, and the kind of community you believe the church is, and should be becoming. Noel would have agreed entirely with that, and in his work, various works on theology, that is the kind of picture he is taking for granted. So, those three dimensions of Noel's vision of priorities which he foregrounded - concern with liturgy, the concern of creedal Orthodoxy, the concern with what I've called localism in society, in church - those shape his practice, his writing and his witness in all kinds of ways. And I would say they suggest a number of trails to follow as we think about Noel's legacy.

Before moving on, just one or two more things about his interests and concerns and the telling points in his career at which some of these come into the headlights. I've noted the First World War was significant for him and it was largely because he believed that the First World War was or could be a war against tyranny. Like many Englishmen of his generation, he saw Prussianism, the authoritarian style of the German state, especially under Wilhelm II, as the antithesis of what the Catholic commonwealth of the church should be. And that is why, during the First World War, he placed a group of Allied Flags in one aisle of the church at Thaxted, grouped around a picture of St. George slaying the dragon. Kneelers and votive candles completed the wartime shrine. In 1916 he added a Red Flag, symbol of world socialism and internationalism. The old Irish flag was replaced with the Sinn Fein emblem. These are the days, of course, when the struggle for Irish Independence was coming very much into focus and you won't be surprised that later on, as discussion of Indian independence from imperial rule is coming up the agenda, Noel responded in the same way to the liberation movements. So, he was not a pacifist. He believed that the First War was genuinely a war for international righteousness. When in difficult days in 1916, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York launched a national mission of repentance and hope, Noel was scathing about it. He said that what the Church and state needed was not a set of platitudes about national repentance and national humiliation, but a rallying call to revolution. From that point on he would say repeatedly that what the British state needed was not reconstruction but revolution. It wouldn't do simply at the end of the war to treat the outcome of the war as simply the restoration of a comfortable 1914 pattern of social relationships, the re-inscription of the massive inequalities and injustices of Edwardian society.

Well, you may by now be getting something of a picture of Noel. Yes, the battier reaches, you might say, of the left; at the same time beneath, a great many, I

would say, highly questionable judgments, like his utterly uncritical support of Trotsky. Beneath all that, there is a tough and consistent theological and liturgical vision. A.N. Wilson notes, in one of his books about 20th century history, what he calls the 'heroic silliness' of a great many of the Anglo-Catholic giants of the first half of the 20th century and, knowing A.N. Wilson, I think he does mean us to give equal weight to the two parts of that judgment. Yes, silliness - like W H Auden writing about W B Yeats – 'he was silly like us.' Heroic nonetheless. And Noel's courage and consistency in standing by his principles, facing the cost in terms of opprobrium, sometimes even of violence, is emphatically at the heart of his character.

But if we are to ask of Noel's legacy - what now? What now for an affluent church? What now for a church, not only affluent, but frequently in our own day deeply lacking in self-confidence and in liturgical literacy. What now? I won't offer you a neat five-point programme. But I'd like to pick out some of the ways in which Noel's vision is still pertinent for a church like yours and mine. Maybe for other churches, too.

It is always a good question to ask: **what is the Liturgy saying?**

Whether in an affluent or not so affluent parish, the question is the same: does the action that we share at weekends, we hope not just at weekends, does that action speak of a community that is not simply reducible to what we see around us? Does it speak of an alternative way of being human together - an alternative way of being human together?

And that comes into focus, I suppose, in a number of different ways. Certainly it raises questions about who one is next to and a question about who is not there. I have occasionally said that the most important question any group can ask is who is not here and why? And churches regularly need to be asking that. But in the movement, the wording, the style of a liturgical action, are we in any sense communicating the sense, communicating the recognition, that we stand together here on a different basis from the way in which we stand together in other contexts. Is there any sense in which the local church generally functions as a space which does not belong to any one interest group but is actually for the community? If there is one thing that can be said in favour of the establishment of the Church of England, it is that a probably unintended consequence of its legal position is that it can in many communities give that message, even now, that what makes it trusted, insofar as it is trusted, is that sense that this is not an interest group pursuing the agenda of one particular subset of the population.

That then is the question that Noel's legacy might prompt us to ask in any liturgical setting we find ourselves. Who is not here? And is this giving some message about a level of human solidarity which does not depend on sheer sameness, identity of interest, identity of background, whatever. And to be autobiographical for a moment, I can recall very vividly a visit in my old job to a parish in East London where I suddenly looked around, and thought, I'm not sure that there is anywhere else for miles around where I would see the mix of race, age, background, education, sexuality etc that I see here - I'm not sure there is anywhere else around that would have that kind of profile. And I came away thinking: so the Church is alive. It can provide a solidarity in its worship, which is not to be found elsewhere.

And in terms of how liturgy works, well, we can perhaps learn a number of things about liturgical actions which reinforce or deepen that sense of a different kind of solidarity. Is this a context in which, as Noel would have wanted, we actually see different kinds of people not just present but active, actively contributing? Or is this a context in which what we see is one person making all the decisions and setting the entire tone of the event? I do realize that there are several different answers for that in different congregations. But that is the question. Again, is this an event in which we are held together by the sense that we are all of us receivers as well as givers? That we all stand on the same basis of need or hunger in the presence of God? Does liturgy tell us that? Because that is one of the most egalitarian points we could possibly articulate about a good liturgical action. It tells us that we all stand in need of love, grace, welcome and homecoming, never mind where we come from or what our interest or agenda is.

And does our liturgical action suggest a real investment in, engagement with, commitment to the material world? Does this look, sound and feel a context for human imagination and human delight? Because if it doesn't, we really are fake. Noel attempted to provide what you might call a benign and healing spectacle in liturgy, where the senses were addressed in a positive and a celebratory way. The church would smell good. Noel, like Percy Dearmer, was very happy with the use of incense, but didn't use it ceremonially for liturgy. He swung it around the church beforehand, just to make the place smell a bit nicer, which, of course, was how it was originally used. It looked good, it sounded good, you could join in the music, with a bit of practice, the senses were engaged.

So what are we doing with that in our liturgy? Because all of that, if Noel is right, all of that is something with some real social and political implications. Not just having a nice aesthetic experience in church but discovering something about your own humanity which is transforming. It doesn't kill you to be receptive. It doesn't kill you to open your hands to recognize your need. It doesn't kill you to

be dependent. You don't have to be in charge of everything to be good, human or successful. What you need to do is open your hands. And it tells you something about your identity, as in flesh to Spirit. You are not just parking your body in a pew while your mind does the work. You are here as the person you actually are, carrying your fleshly memory, your fleshly sensibility with you. And what you take from that liturgical experience needs, urgently needs, translating into the world of work, family, responsibility, relationship, wherever. What the Russian Orthodox theologian, Alexander Schmemmann, calls the liturgy after the liturgy.

And that, of course, now as then, relates to what Noel has to say about theology. I have said that there are those who would quarrel with the detail of how he approaches the 4th century of Christian doctrinal controversy. Yet when all is said and done, the core of what he is saying is something like this -that the twofold revelation that the Creed gives us is a revelation which is genuinely revolutionary for our own sense of the world we are in. It tells us that difference is not fatal or threatening or competitive. Whether it is the difference between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit or the difference between the Creator and the Creation, difference is not a zero-sum game. Difference is not winners and losers. What theology says about the relation within the Divine Life, and the relation of the Divine Life to the world, hammers in the message that difference is not lethal, is not evil, is not dangerous or destructive. And the second bit of the revelation is that this Divine Life, which is itself not competitive or threatened or threatening but is everywhere within creation, this Divine Life comes to its clearest, fullest and unique focus in an unequivocally human life where the Divine pervades every aspect of an ordinary fleshly human being like ourselves. That sends us out to look at a fleshly material world in a new way. So, something there too about how we approach our sense of solidarity with the world we are in, not only solidarity with those who don't share our good fortune, or our success, but solidarity with the entire created order where God is at work, where our reception of God's gifts in the life of our fleshly senses is simply one aspect of living as a creature in a world of matter and time, of stuff waiting to be transfigured.

But perhaps the shoe pinches most tightly when we come to the third area of Noel's thinking that I touched on, what I call the localism business. Because this is where the challenge is fundamentally about how our life as a community, a national community as well as a local community, is the life in which power is given, not simply exercised. Can we think of a political world nationally and locally, oriented not towards the exercise of power, power over, but the giving of power, that is the setting free of every agent to be themselves a giver and a creator? For that I think is what Noel's theology takes us to and I would say the entire theology of the body of Christ in the New Testament and the theology of St.

Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Calvin and everybody else you might want to think of, it all boils down to that. It is not about power exercised, but power given, power created, that is there in the first chapter of Saint John's Gospel: 'To those who believed in his name He gave power to become the children of God.' That is what is said of Christ's work. And the question therefore for Christ's body is: do we give power to become the children of God? And that means analyzing the inequalities, the injustices and the sufferings of our society locally and globally in terms of what it is that prevents people growing into being the children of God.

You heard reference to the work of Christian Aid, and our own sense of what we are doing worldwide as a development agency is constantly to try to break through the sense that we are doing good to other people into the conviction that we are by God's grace some small part of what will bring empowerment, and liberty and the capacity to give, in others, the very opposite of what creates dependence. So, in terms of how our society is envisaged and imagined, that is the question. How do we **give** power? And that unleashes a long string of subsidiary questions about practical politics. It raises all kinds of issues about our approach to welfare and taxation, our approach to say, national sovereignty, to take a rather sore point these days, our understanding of problems of homelessness and unemployment. What stands in the way of people receiving the power to become the children of God? And what can we as individuals and believing communities do to share and to give power?

There is one more thing to say about that which I would trace back in my own thinking, not so much to Conrad Noel, as to the first time I visited South Africa in the 1980s in the very, very bad old days. And I recall a conversation with a white priest in South Africa about how a white person in South Africa could with any integrity be alongside the black population. Wasn't any white sympathizer simply another well-meaning white liberal who was actually making things worse rather than better so as to make themselves feel better? And my South African friend who was someone with quite a good track record in standing alongside the vulnerable said something like this. 'It's only when we are able to take risks alongside people that we have any credibility'. It is only when we are able to take risks alongside people that we have credibility. In other words, if you always have a safe place to retreat to, your benevolence is perhaps rather easy. But if you are in some sense and in some way ready to stand alongside, taking the risk in its fullness, then maybe you have some claim to be part of the conversation and even part of the transformation and the solution. And when in the same visit, I spoke to a white activist in Pietermaritzburg who had indeed been arrested and interrogated because of her support for community activists in the townships, that

is what came into focus for me. Here is someone who is trusted, and talked to, and listened to in the black community she works with because she has taken a risk alongside them and they know that.

So perhaps the two ways in which Noel's localism come alive might be those. What are you doing to give the power to become the children of God? What are the risks we're prepared to take alongside the vulnerable? Now we don't live in apartheid South Africa, thank God, and the decisions are a lot less dramatic and we mustn't dramatize our own action and our own involvement in unhelpful ways. But speaking for myself, as an affluent and secure white person, in an insecure and diverse society, that is I suppose what keeps me awake at night from time to time. What are the risks I am prepared to take alongside those who don't share the privilege? And if Noel is right, that we don't look for top-down solutions to these questions, then something about that particular transformation of local and personal relations is an indispensable ingredient in thinking about how we witness to and work for God's kingdom or, as Noel would have preferred, God's Commonwealth.

Well, you've listened very patiently and I'm very grateful. All I wanted to do this evening is introduce you a bit to a quite extraordinary figure - flawed, contradictory and in Andrew Wilson's words, heroically silly. But like so many of the Saints, heroic silliness is not necessarily an obstacle to recognizing the grandeur and the challenge of a person. Somebody who understood theology, liturgy, action and witness as bound together as tightly and closely as any activist in Latin America in the '70s or '80s or wherever you want to look. Someone worth remembering, worth celebrating, someone who travelled a fair way from the house across the road, but who travelled with a consistency, a courage and above all a level of joyful flair, which I think is admirable in some way.

Thank you.

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