

An Invitation to run the Human Race

St. John 1:10-12: “he was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”

In his last sermon for Christmas before demitting office as Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr. Rowan Williams challenged members of the Anglican Communion to engage in running the human race. Though this is a race being run by all human beings he is mindful of the fact that Christians run the race from a particular standpoint or perspective. Using today’s reading from St. John 1:1-14, as well as recent statistics on Church attendance in the United Kingdom (UK), the Archbishop notes that the concern about declining Church attendance is not as surprising as some persons are making it out to be. Noting that data from a recent survey in the UK points to the fact that 59% of those polled indicated they still attended Church, or believe in God, the Archbishop is of the view this is a very good indication of the Church’s witness. Though the data points to a 10% decline in the number of persons attending Church over the past year, and, with the increased celebrations of the humanist movement, a movement which glorifies intellect over faith, the Archbishop says there is no reason to be alarmed. In his view, the fact that a significant number of people are still of the view that faith is important for their lives means the Church is still relevant wherever human beings exist. The question he raises, which is relevant to our context is, what is the relevance of faith for our time?

From the text of St. John 1:1-14, with specific reference to verse 10-12, the Archbishop points to two relevant issues concerning running the human race from a Christian perspective. First he says, **running the human race, from a Christian perspective, takes it for granted that there are some persons who will not easily come to faith.** To this end he repeats v.10 which says, **“he was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”** Using the interpretive principles that what applied at the time the passage was written also applies at present, the Archbishop says one thing the writer notes at the time was the existence of people who did not believe in Jesus. “He came to his own and his own people did not receive him.” Making a similar reference to the movement in the UK, where the humanist movement, led by a number of atheists, is still very strong, the Archbishop notes that humanism and faith are not as opposed to each other as the humanist movement is making it out to be. On the contrary he says, if we see ourselves as running the human race in faith then we will know we are on the same track as every other human being even though we are viewing things from different perspectives.

Running the human race from a Christian perspective requires faith in Jesus Christ as God present with us (St. John 1:14). Christians run the human race like all other human beings, however, we run with the conviction that every human life matters. Viewed from this perspective, Christians are quite at home with those who do not necessarily share our perspective. We know when people do not share our views because we recognize we are seeing through different lens, and, we are using scripts that are strange to them. It is only if people who do not share our perspectives are converted to the way of life we have adopted that they will come to understand, appreciate and celebrate the perspective from which we look at, as

well as appreciate, life. While as Christians we recognize the different perspective through which we look at life we nevertheless pray for, and enter into conversation with everyone in the human race, looking forward to the time when the Holy Spirit will convert everyone to the way of faith. Confident it is the Holy Spirit doing the converting and not we ourselves we persist in the human race with the affirmation that God who began a good work in us will bring it to completion.

Christians persist in the human race, not anxious that people are not seeing and understanding things the way we do. On the contrary, we persist in in the race by faith confident in the fact that it is God the Holy Spirit doing the work of converting, and, all that is required of us is faithfulness in the race. In this respect, though there are two sets of people in the race, those who believe and those who don't, we treat no one less than a human being since together we are participants and not competitors in the race. In this human race there are persons who will not recognize Jesus. This is not strange for, as the Archbishop notes, throughout human history it is not unknown for human beings not to recognize our common or shared humanity. Failure to recognize the humanity in the homeless, the sick, those in prison, those who are raped and generally victims of violence, is an indication that in the human race we do not always recognize nor respect each other's humanity. The great thing about the Christian claim, however, is the call for each person of faith to recognize and celebrate each other's humanity in the human race. In this race God chose to live or tabernacle among us and join us in the race of life.

Second, **running the human race, from a Christian perspective, means belief in Jesus Christ is an invitation to stop and look at each other differently.** Let me use the local boys and girls athletics championships to illustrate the point. The boys and girls championship is a world renowned, annual track and field

competition among high schools in the country. Some years ago the competition was held separately for boys and for girls. For various reasons the two competitions were combined into one. Overtime tension among what's known as the traditional or older schools has proven problematic for school administrations, parents and the police alike. Such tensions have resulted in physical violence among patrons and students, especially the boys. In a move to address the challenges stringent rules and regulations have been put in place to change the behaviour of students and patrons. At the staging of the completion earlier this year there was no reported incident of violence. The reason is that all were able to recognize that even though they were in the same competition there is no reason to fight each other for status and prestige.

Similarly, in the human race we are invited to keep running without the accompanying violence, physical or otherwise, that we often unleash on each other. I felt it was a good sign for example, to see Church leaders at the centre of the process of reconciliation between the factions. A number of the schools involved in the tensions described earlier are Church schools; meaning they are owned by Churches and sponsored by government. Such involvement by the Church leaders demonstrates what the outgoing Archbishop of Canterbury describes as joining the human race. Whether or not the persons involved in the tension are Church members is irrelevant; the fact is they are all running the human race. Church leaders and Christians generally, represent the people of God who see through the eyes of faith. They see a human race with Jesus at its centre. In this respect all life is sacred and is to be respected and cared for. In celebration of every life in the human race Christians are called by God to run the race with perseverance, looking to God the creator and sustainer of the race. As I said earlier, this is a race not so much as competitors but as participants together for the goal of

life together with God. Though there are some who do not share this view Christians persist in the race by faith confident that God will convert others to his way of running the race.

What of those who already have faith, what is their role in the human race? Here are the concluding words of the Archbishop's sermon which I believe help to put things in perspective. He says,

“... if we can let go of our conviction that our questions, our priorities and worries, achievements and failures aren't after all the most important thing in the universe; if we find the freedom to stop and turn aside, then the world itself begins to turn into renewal. ‘O come, let us adore him’, says the carol. That adoration, that wondering gaze at the child in the manger, is where faith is born; and where faith is born, so is the new world of Jesus and his Spirit.”

The suggestion by the Archbishop is that it's not in the intellectual realm only that we will find the meaning of faith and the meaning of life. This is the path being traversed by the British humanists. While we cannot easily discard the central role of the intellect in the life of faith the Archbishop's point is that with 59% of people in the UK saying they still believe in God it means there is a significant percentage of persons who are not just relying on their intellect for a reason to have faith.

In addition to the intellect the Archbishop suggest turning to a life of faith by re-focusing our attention on the manger. He suggests we re-focus on the manger and sing that well known Christmas hymn, “O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord.” It is in the realm of worship, born out of faith in God, that we will find the ultimate meaning of life. It is in this realm of faith that the human race will find new value for those who run with the eyes of faith. The fact that people in the UK continue to have faith is evidence that there is a place for faith in the race through life. This

position cannot be easily dismissed since the evidence suggests that for a significant amount of persons faith still has a central place in their lives. Similarly, we who continue the race of life through faith can sing with the song writer:

My faith looks up to thee, thou lamb of Calvary

Saviour divine

Now hear me while I pray, take all my guilt away

O let me from this day be wholly thine.

Finally, therefore, running the human race, from a Christian perspective, takes it for granted that there are some persons who will not easily come to faith.

Nevertheless, running the human race, from a Christian perspective, means belief in Jesus Christ is an invitation to stop and look at each other differently. Our conviction for the race is the field is ripe for harvest; central to our mission as Christians is respect for others, and, exercising care and support for all people as our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. In the name...