

Sermon preached for the Feast of Peter the Apostle by The Revd Canon Tricia Hillas, Canon Pastor of St Paul's Cathedral on Sunday 26 June 2016

Father, take frail human words and through them point us to your Son, the Living Word. Amen.

On Friday most of us awoke to the news that, of the millions of people who voted in the Referendum, the majority had expressed their view that Britain should leave the European Union.

Walking back from taking the early morning communion at the Cathedral, I called in at the bakery to pick up pastries for a shared breakfast. The relevant shelf was empty – to the consternation of myself and two other would-be purchasers.

“No Croissants?” I asked the man behind the counter...“is this an early effect of Brexit?” I quipped.

He stared back at me blankly. I understood; it wasn't really a very funny joke.

Now that the result is in – and I would not for a moment presume to know how you voted, if you were indeed entitled to vote, so I speak with no assumptions...

But now that the results are in – now that so-called Project Fear and so-called Project Hate have given way to the self-reflection and search for understanding – to what Project are we called?

To what project are you – as members of this community of faith here at St Peters, on this your patronal festival, members of this wider community, of this city, this nation and of the community of nations across the world called?

In all this, what might we can take from the example of Peter

A few years ago I received an email forwarded by a friend. The email set out, in the most alarming way, the threats unknown assailants posed to women driving alone. It made for terrifying reading – an impression only made stronger by the recurring chorus – in block capitals – ‘BETTER PARANOID THAN DEAD’.

In summary the advice was:

‘You are not safe, even if you think you are. Don't trust anyone – especially a stranger.’

The originator of that email was reflecting something of our adaptive propensity to stick with what seems familiar. Evolution may have had a hand in hardwiring us to be cautious and self-protective.

However, when we perceive something (or someone) as a threat, neurobiology suggests that we start thinking less clearly, we have difficulty receiving and assimilating new information. We are *more* likely to reach false deductions and *less* likely to take necessary risks.

Fear then, is the poorest context in which to respond questions about our future, our identity and our engagement with one another.

In this extraordinary period, when clear thinking, creative and just solutions to the challenges and opportunities which lie ahead, for us and not just for us but for our neighbours near and far, then responses based on fear and hate, even if they are an apparently more sophisticated rendering of 'better paranoid than dead', simply won't do.

If we are that afraid, it's as if we are already dead inside.

But there is an alternative refrain, a command which runs through the scriptures: the command to love. Lest we think this too fluffy, too lightweight for these times, we do well to recall just how challenging this is:

Peter, your patron, the follower of this Jesus slept one afternoon and work up to a different world – the book of Acts tells of how he slept one afternoon on a roof top and in his sleep experienced a vision which would revolutionise his personal world – and which would go on to shape our world too. Peter's God-given vision directed him to reach out towards the other – to those who inhabited a space that was a cultural, religious, social chasm away. And it was then that he would see God.

Former Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sachs explains: 'The supreme challenge is to see God's image in the one who is NOT in our image...only then can we see past our own reflection to the God we did not make up'.

In this time, where blame is everywhere, whatever our views during the campaign, it is fairly obvious that our country needs to work towards the common task of being forward looking, courageous and generous. Ensuring that what is built next will attend to the frustration, anger, hopes and aspirations of all and especially of those who are most vulnerable here and across the world. To do that we need the skills and talents that I believe God shares amongst all peoples.

In the Cathedral in which I serve – YOUR Cathedral, we are enriched by the presence and dedication of a wonderfully diverse range of people, staff and volunteers who have roots here in this country and around the globe.

We are also privileged to welcome visitors from across the world and chose to refer to ourselves as 'a house of prayer for all nations'. The Cathedral has been and will continue to be a place of hospitality and of welcome. During 2015 alone 29,000 children and young

people from all kinds of backgrounds came as our special guests to the Cathedral as part of school groups from diverse communities across London and further afield.

And this is our hope that those young people and others will know that we adults will work together in a new Project for a country where people listen to the concerns of all, where people are enfranchised, that we recognise the real problems which would keep us apart and put our energy into combatting those not fighting or scapegoating each other.

A man called Rob Hay has written about the young people of our country and the way in which they may be a cause for hope as we seek to address our collective future and to do so as people of faith. Hay writes:

‘The country we are becoming (not measured in demographic numbers but in generational terms) is a more gracious, diverse place that sees difference defined more by have and have-nots than any other measure such as race, ethnicity and the place where you were born. We are raising a generation of global citizens who see human life as sacred and unifying and everything else as secondary.

As a community of faith here in Ealing you are shaping and raising those young people.

Throughout Friday, at our hourly prayers the following prayer was used in the Cathedral:

*Eternal God, Light of the nations,
in Christ you make all things new:
guide our nation in the coming days through the inspiration of your Spirit,
that understanding may put an end to discord and all bitterness.
Give us grace to rebuild bonds of trust
that together we may work for the dignity and flourishing of all;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

As individuals, as a faith community, as a constituency, a borough a city and a nation we have a part to play.

None least than you our elected representatives – thank you for what you have done, and for what we now need you to do for us and with us in the days ahead.

May we commit to work and to pray for ourselves, you and for all whose task it will be to help to shape our shared future.

As it is written in the first letter attributed to Peter, patron of this Church:

“Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.” (1 Pet 4:8)