Courageous Anglicans

Session: Courage – The Missing Link in Social Justice and Solidarity – Dr Selina Stone

Introduction

Courage seems to be such an important theme at the moment, as we face complex times, panic and confusion in the church and in the world at large. Courage because we have to face it all, and in many contexts as leaders we are expected to enable others to keep going against the odds. We are often expected — and sometimes expect ourselves to respond in the moment before we have given ourselves time to think things through. We need to teach others while we are processing things ourselves, and lead others when we are unsure of the destination.

This is one of the purposes of theological education — to give students the chance to peel back the lid and take a look at the complexity that marks our world and our lives and to think about them, with the help of the scriptures, the Holy Spirit and those who have gone before us. And so theological education must be continuous for those of us whose ministry includes teaching, preaching and speaking about God and ourselves and our lives in the light of the reality of God who is made known to us in Jesus.

Instead of giving ourselves sufficiently to reasoning with God, what we can be tempted to do, is adopt a strategy that has worked for someone or some group somewhere, in hopes that it will offer us some route to success. We like strategies and visions and plans I think because they give us the feeling that we can manage and have control of what is in reality uncontrollable. The kingdom of God is not in our hands, what we build by our own hands often results in empires to ourselves even when we have the best intentions. Taking control can give us a feeling of stability in the midst of a changing world but the problem is our human strategies - even when we sprinkle some prayers on top - are really just that, human strategies. They are limited by our lack of imagination, our own agendas mixed in with godly objectives, and often undermined because we don’t have the courage to do what it takes. This is a deeply human problem.

The overall problem is that God doesn’t give us a strategy, God gives us Godself, clothed in the flesh of a man called Jesus, who sends the Spirit as a friend and guide who leads us. There is no formula or strategic plan from the heavens that is bound to succeed. Instead, God speaks to us, in the scriptures, in the testimonies of our siblings who are made in the image of God and in the lives of those who are being formed in Christlikeness.

I want to begin today by saying that the world has always been changing and yet it has I think been the same. The world has never been stable, static and calm, a place where we can all just peacefully go along without being disturbed. The church has never known such an era either, it has always had to discern its role in uncertain times and often with a lot less resources and access to comfort and power — if we talk of the church in the West. The church has also had to debate and discuss what it means to be faithful to Christ and to witness to the Gospel in their day at time. This constant change has always been the same. It is also true that the world has always been a chaotic place for some more than for others. There are groups of people whose right to exist has been taken for granted, who have
always felt able to trust in leaders and institutions or structures, because they have never
been bruised by them. For such a group, those known as leaders often look like them, come
from similar areas and schools, and share their interests and perspectives. While others
have found ways of surviving the chaos meted out against them by those who have power
but lack empathy. These people have had to find ways to live their God-given lives within
boxes made by other people, or else have broken through them, often painfully. It is this,
which has always been the same, since the days of Cain and Abel, violence and force have
separated siblings, friends, communities when one person’s thriving can only be imagined as
coming at the expense of another. This is how the chaos ensues.

But in the midst of this change and ongoing strife, what is required of those of us who claim
Christ as our Lord and friend? What does it mean to be ministers of Christ and carriers of
the Gospel in this moment?

I want to begin today with a biblical reflection to get us into the theme for today.

Luke 13:10-17 Jesus Heals a Crippled Woman on the Sabbath (NIV)

10 On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, 11 and a woman was
there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and
could not straighten up at all. 12 When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said
to her, “Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.” 13 Then he put his hands on
her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God. 14 Indignant because
Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader said to the people, “There are
six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.” 15 The
Lord answered him, “You hypocrites! Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath untie your
ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? 16 Then should not this
woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long
years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?” 17 When he said this, all
his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful
things he was doing.

What might we notice about this passage? The first thing is where it takes place: Jesus was
in the synagogue. On the one hand we might read this as instructive, that Jesus was a good
synagogue-goer. Or that he found value in being gathered in the place of worship even
though he had issues with how the leaders behaved in relation to the people. All valid
points. To me, I see that Jesus was where he knew the people would be. He knew it was the
day when people went for teaching and to offer sacrifices and he went there, to teach and
even to be taught, to encounter the community.

But though He is there, he is not uncritical - he is aware of the dynamics at play. Jesus is not
seduced by the power it offers, so that he will seek to please the synagogue leaders who
lack love and integrity. He is not caught up in the theatrics of the moment, the performance
and the time sheet which would talk all of his attention. He is present enough to notice the
woman who sneaks in at the back.

Jesus sees this woman who is hunched over and invisible to most people because he has the
time. When he sees her, he sees her particularity. She is not like everyone else, she has
unique needs, and he notices this. She is on the edge, potentially in pain, but living with the
kind of disability that makes participation in the social life of her community almost
impossible. She may have been considered cursed by God with her sickness, and ostracised.
But Jesus centres her, by calling her forward out of the shadows into the heart of the community. He frees her from everything that has been making her sick and isolated – in this she meets God.

The religious leaders are angry because in order to bring this woman healing and freedom Jesus has broken the law of ‘keeping the sabbath’. Their love for the law surpasses their love for this woman – if they have any love for her at all. Jesus exposes their hypocrisy saying – you all find your way around the rules when it suits your own interests, but you are unwilling to do it when it will help another human being. He embarrasses them but the people are pleased.

This has become to me, one of the core texts as I have sought to understand the ministry of Jesus and the cause of justice. The temptation when we hear this kind of story is to put ourselves in the place of Jesus – but we forget that we believe Jesus was raised from the dead and is present by the Holy Spirit, so we do not need to think we are here to replace him. What we want to do is recognise that Jesus is in the business of solidarity and ensure we do not get in the way of the work of God, but instead participate in this work of God in the church and the wider world. This is the perspective I come to this conversation with. Our talk about being the hands and feet of Jesus has ended up in some ways, with Jesus in the corner I think while we perform as little gods, and this is not of course, what is supposed to happen. Let us remember that Jesus lives and continues not only to empower us by the gift of the Spirit but also to teach and guide us.

I understand justice to be a matter of repentance - a turning away from sin. Sin I understand to be personal and communal, rooted in history and tradition but continuing and evolving, brought about and maintained by action and inaction, by the creation and the upholding of structures which dehumanise and abuse. It is sin which undermines the intention of God for all of creation: life and flourishing, formation in Christlikeness and the establishment of God’s goodness and righteousness, God’s reign in the earth.

There is so much to be said on the themes of courage, justice, and ministry which I have been asked to explore with you today. But I have felt led to focus on solidarity as the core theme. Solidarity is the theme I think, of the passage I opened up with, it is costly, it takes courage and demands integrity. Principally, it requires a reordering of our desire, our loves, and our priorities and so lays out a challenge for all of us who seek to be disciples of Jesus before we seek anything else. Solidarity is in my estimation, a spiritual discipline, not solely social action or a political activity.

**What is Solidarity?**

Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz is a mujerista theologian, a person whose theological reflection is borne out of and occupied with the presence and work of God among and within the lives of poor Latin American women, first and foremost. It is from this vantage point that she explores the questions of life, faith and justice, and so she offers some important critical reflections on the ministry of the church in light of the life and ministry of Christ.

Isasi-Diaz writes within the liberation tradition, in which justice includes action which uplifts those living in poverty and seeks a reordering of power so that their dignity is recognised, and their existence is not stifled. It is from this perspective that we will ask what solidarity is
and must be, not from the perspective of the powerful and the privileged who can be
tempted to define justice in ways which suit their interests, even in theology.

So, what is solidarity? Isasi-Díaz does not provide us with examples of solidarity, but a
framework for examining what solidarity, just action is about. This means that wherever we
are, we might imagine and reimagine what solidarity might look like in our ministry as we
see to align our thoughts about justice with our behaviour.

- **Solidarity is action not feeling:**

  ‘What worries me most is that solidarity is understood as a disposition: one can have it for a
  while, put it aside for whatever reason, and then pick it up again...’ solidarity” has come to
  mean “agreement with” and that it is given an ephemeral sense of supporting others that
  has little or nothing to do with liberative praxis.’ If the true meaning of solidarity was
  understood and intended visible radical change would be happening in the lives of all of us
  who endorse it with our applause. Solidarity is not a matter of agreeing with, of supporting,
  liking or being inspired by the cause of a group of people. Though all of these might be part
  of solidarity, solidarity goes beyond all of them.¹

  Solidarity is born from the love of God whose love for us goes beyond sentiment and affinity
towards us, but is demonstrated in that while we were sinners, Christ died for us...Human
notions of love which are emotion, a sense of supporting others, a ‘disposition’ is not the
standard by which we know God’s love. God does not have loving feelings, God is love itself,
embodied and realised. We are not aligned with justice because we agree with principles or
ideas but because we are willing to take the necessary action to do what is right and bring
about goodness.

- **Solidarity demands critical reflection on who the excluded are among us**

  ‘Understanding the interconnections that exist between oppression and privilege, between
  the rich and the poor, the oppressed and the oppressors’²

  First a word on exclusion: there are forms of exclusion which masquerade as inclusion, and
  it is important we can discern the difference. Inclusion that requires people to adopt
cultural norms, behaviours and even values which are not their own but belong to the
dominating group means that they must be what they are not in order to be included. Put in
theological terms, it means a person, or a groups inherent God-given dignity is denied, and
they are included only to the extent that they can conform to an identity that is not theirs.
This is inclusion on the terms of the dominating group, and it is really assimilation –
exclusion masquerading as inclusion.

  There are two important dynamics to the analysis of power, oppression etc for Isasi-Diaz:
primarily she highlights the need to analyse power and name who has what kind of power
and who does not, and then there is also the recognition that communities which lack
power need places of solidarity together.

  In terms of the former, the need for analysing power and privilege should be obvious to us
by now. I would resist the simplification of the oppressor v oppressed language here
though, in that while this might be a clear line in Isasi Diaz context, it is less clear in ours. We
have multiple forms of exclusion going on that must all be taken seriously and held

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² Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 89.
together. Exploring the interconnections this theologian highlights, involves being willing to face the cold hard facts of which kinds of people have access to positions and resources to make things happen in the way they want, and which people do not. It is about asking which voices and perspectives dominate discussions and outcomes and who is silenced. It means asking who is trusted with power because of their identity: class, race or ethnicity, sexuality, marital status, gender and who is viewed with suspicion? Who is seen as belonging, and who is seen as exceptional if they are in the space?

But in global terms, solidarity means recognising the global relationships that we are died into whether in Britain or in the Anglican church. In what ways are those dynamics reinscribing old colonial orders in which Europe is superior and trustworthy while global communities are infantilised? How might those relationships be reordered in ways which repair the harm of the past? In order to discuss solidarity in real terms, we have to name the multiple forms of exclusion and oppression that can take place. The multiple groups who might be like the woman in the temple, overlooked and unseen, even in the place of worship and community.

Solidarity is about taking action to reorder those dynamics of power and exclusion.

- **Solidarity includes the development of support by/among groups facing mistreatment:**

  ‘It also refers to the cohesiveness that needs to exist among communities of struggle.’

  Cohesiveness among communities of struggle is the second aspect of solidarity, which is crucial to sustaining the wellbeing of minorities or those marginalised within structures and organisations. We see these communities form in a range of spaces, including in the Church and can view them with concern when we find ourselves on the outside. Theologically speaking this hope for spaces of solidarity is not a contradiction with Paul’s image of the church being a body. To be part of the Body of Christ is to be part of a mystical union which is a work of the Holy Spirit not of human will and determination. The groups of people among us who experience forms of marginalisation, should be considered not the weaker parts but the weakened parts – which require additional care to bring them back to health.

  The existence of spaces of solidarity for minoritized groups, is an indictment on the exclusionary nature of the mainstream space they find themselves in. They speak of the lack of health of the body as a whole. The answer is not to attempt to close down such spaces, but to make them obsolete by ensuring the wellbeing and flourishing of all is taken seriously in the main body of the Church and society. Survival for these groups at the moment, can depend on informal networks of support and community where stories can be shared without fear of them being critiqued or suppressed, where learning can be passed on to others, wounds can be nursed, and plans can be formed. Solidarity in this case, is a healing practice.

  These spaces are important not only for the healing of those who continually face pain and abuse because of individual behaviour and structured mistreatment, but for the discernment of solutions. Within liberation theory – and this is from work in education – Paulo Freire speaks of the importance of conscientisation, whereby communities become awakened to see what is happening to them and why. It is this awareness, which African Americans were referring to, when they would remind each other to ‘stay woke’ in the

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3 Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 89.
midst of extreme racial violence. The term ‘woke’ has now been co-opted by the mainstream, so it has lost its significance and is now used as a way of deriding people concerned with social justice. But spaces of solidarity have been crucial throughout history, for awakenings and survival of working-class people, women and ethnic and sexual minorities. They continue to be essential.

- **Solidarity must replace charity as the primary expression of neighbour love:**

  ‘Charity, the word used most often when talking about love of neighbour, has been implemented mainly through a one-sided giving, a donation almost always of what we have in abundance...giving is an ethical behaviour today only if it is understood and carried out within the context of solidarity.’

  Isasi-Díaz does not deny here that charitable giving has value. In the face of so many crises, the act of giving what we have plenty of is a basic act of kindness we should not have to stretch too much to understand. But charity, the act of giving out of abundance can be unethical. It is unethical when giving is one-sided, meaning that the giver assumes that they have something the other needs, but fails to recognise that the person in material need might have something to teach them. This assumption betrays a feeling that people with more money are somehow better people – more skilled, wiser, more disciplined, better stewards, more trustworthy to lead. This resides in the public imagination I suspect even if many of us would never admit this out loud. I suspect this also seeps into our assumptions about who can lead in church, and who should be led, who can be trusted to speak and who should be quiet, whose perspectives we want on the team and whose we do not want. But giving and charity from this perspective, lacks integrity and cannot be said to be done in love, since the driver is the feelings, interests and desire of the giver, not those who are expected to receive.

  Giving, for Isasi-Díaz must be done within the context of solidarity. What might this mean? Solidarity is the commitment to the championing of the dignity of the overlooked and the elevating of their voices, it includes the active reordering of unjust relationships whether between individuals, between or within groups and organisations, or between individuals and wider systems and structures. This is the kind of action that is needed for justice within the biblical imagination. It is the kind of justice we have seen in Jesus who sees the woman whose spine is deformed standing at the back, then calls her into the centre as her need speaks louder to him, than the voices of the religious leaders. In this moment he reorders the power dynamic in ways which provoke the Pharisees to anger. Charity within this broader commitment is ethical because it is part of a wider commitment to the long-term life and wellbeing of those being overlooked. It is not centred on the need of the giver to be seen as charitable while not actually having any meaningful impact beyond the immediate.

  Since solidarity is core to neighbour love, it is worth noting that as with all forms of love, it is transformative to the lover as well as the loved. We often think about injustice or oppression as giving certain privileges to some over others. But Paulo Freire again, causes us to rethink this when he argues that systems of exploitation and oppression dehumanise those who gain certain advantages, though in different ways to those we think of as ‘oppressed.’ Think about the unbearable mental health pressure which afflicts men due to the socialisation which says men cannot be human, by speaking about and sharing emotion

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and anxiety, they must ‘man up’ to maintain their position of power in the home and society, in the church maybe. Or the ways that idolising white European philosophy and culture has impoverished the Church in Europe and America which has denied the rich gifts of global perspectives on God, spirituality and faith. Justice and solidarity benefits all, including those seen as ‘privileged.’

**Courage: The Missing Link**

So why don’t we do this? Why don’t we practice solidarity? It seems to me what we lack often is the courage to act in line with what we claim to believe. It takes courage to be the Church not just to talk about it, but to be it. It takes the courage of the Christ we are called to follow.

1. **Courage and Vulnerability**

Jesus’ first act of courage is not his willingness to face the cross, but his openness to laying aside his glory and taking on human flesh, in the form of a servant. We read about this in the great hymn of Philippians 2, where Jesus is described as someone who did not grasp onto his position but was willing to be obedient to God even when it led to his death. Jesus’ courage is seen in his decision to be among us, with all of the vulnerability that meant. He was brave enough to be vulnerable – to put himself in a position to be harmed, to love even if it meant that love might put him at risk. Jesus did not seek out harm, but he did recognise that he would not be able to fulfil his mission if he sought to avoid harm at all costs.

This kind of courage, a willingness to be at risk our status and position for a greater cause, for the cause of the Gospel is something we are all called to at some level. It is the courage to act in line with what we preach and say we believe no matter the consequences. The courage depends on our willingness to tell the truth to ourselves about we really desire, and then confess it to God even if we are not yet ready to confess it to another, a trusted person – which it is helpful to do, for our own formation.

The courage to tell the truth about ourselves can be the most difficult - whether to God or to another. Admitting that we do not trust that person, that we have prejudged, that we do not want to give room to that group, that we long for recognition, that we long for approval, that we desire elevation and success, that we want others to think of us as good and likeable, that we love the power that comes with leadership. Saying it out loud, ensures we are no longer deceiving ourselves, and this is the first step in giving room to God to transform us.

We practice courage in relationships when we tell the truth, and when we love without certainty that love will be returned. It is the courage of welcoming someone into your home or church who has complex needs, but who needs community and care. It is, I suspect the courage that many of you model every day. It takes courage to be open to your own broken heartedness and to that of other people as you accompany them as priests.

2. **Courage and Resistance**

Jesus’ courage is not only marked by his willingness to embrace vulnerability but by his resistance to evil in all of its forms. Jesus does not only come to be among us, but he lives a life of love and truth which challenged the status quo. Jesus is not born as a powerful and rich man with access to all he needed in economic, social and political terms - but as a poor Jewish man living under Roman occupation. He belonged to all those people throughout
history who Howard Thurman describes as ‘having their backs against the wall.’ He does not have many options; in the body he inhabits. He is living in a world, in systems and structures which have been determined by others. He is born in the wrong neighbourhood (can anything good come out of Nazareth!?), he does not have the right connections (how can he be the Messiah, isn’t he Joseph’s kid!?) and he is always among the wrong crowd (he hangs around with prostitutes, lepers and tax collectors).

For this kind of person to resist the religious and political powers of his day, is to invite the full weight of the religious-political system down on his own head. And this is what he does. While the religious leaders try to hold him to religious laws which are unjust and lead to more suffering and oppression, he exposes their futility and hypocrisy. He breaks the law of not working on the sabbath in order to heal numerous people because to his mind, the law is supposed to enable human beings to flourish, it is not there to control people or cause harm. Jesus is able to see when tradition and culture have got in the way of the true purpose of the law, and to inspire people to understand what it really means to live a good and righteous life.

It is at this point that courage can often fail us the task of being a prophetic presence can be overwhelming. It can be so challenging when we feel we must use our voices to speak up about what is wrong or unjust or evil, especially to those who have the power to destroy or uplift us. The voice of pragmatism speaks up saying - “but if you keep quiet, you can keep your position and carry on doing good for longer” and maybe the voice of self-interest - “you need people to like you and keep you in your role so don’t rock the boat!” And slowly the voice of courage and justice is silenced. But we might take courage from knowing that when we choose courage we are acting with the one who has taken the path before us. This path leads first to death, but then to resurrection.

3. **Courage, Trust and Joy**

Jesus’ courage was reinforced by faith, that what he is doing, and what is done to him, was one scene in a much bigger story that is being held in the hands of God. It is important to remember the connection between courage and trust since they can often be pitted against each other. Trust in God can be seen as one choice, while our courageous actions can be separated as another option. But our ministry and work are enlivened when we recognise the need for us to take courageous action because we trust God. We trust God who has called us, even when what we are called to do seems small, ineffective and insignificant. We trust that in God’s economy, what we sow might be watered down the road by someone else, in some other place. It is this trust, which enables us to keep on going - it is ultimately the trust that we are not alone, that we are co-labourers with God.

But the call to be courageous can feel brutal when we are exhausted. And so, courage and trust are also linked, when we trust that God is holding all things even when we need to rest. Courage does not always mean buckling down and giving or doing more - sometimes it means stepping back, pausing, stopping, leaving. It can take courage to take a break when we feel our reputation is on the line or our sense of status and value.

But God who models this courage to pause and to stop, right from the beginning when in Genesis God looks at what God has made every day and says, this is good, and once it is done, God spends a day just enjoying it. We find Jesus wondering off alone up mountains to pray or be with his friends even with so many people to heal, to speak to and to teach. Rather than feeling guilty or worrying about his reputation, he pauses regardless. This
courage was rooted in a deep trust I think, that God the source of all life, continued to be so even while he slept and rested. Pausing and resting is an act of faith.

We know that our courage is marked by trust, because our courageous acts contain within them, a thread of joy. Joy is a sign that though we might feel afraid or unsure, these are temporary discomforts on the path to a place where goodness, justice and righteousness are established anew. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews puts it this way, that ‘for the joy set before him’ Jesus endured the pain of the cross. It was joy that gave him the strength to act courageously: joy is knowing the pain would not last forever, joy in knowing that the reward is worth the struggle, joy in trusting that his labour was not in vain.

Conclusion

Let us go back now to the passage we started with. What might we carry forward especially after these reflections on solidarity and courage:

Pharisees: there are risks to being in positions of power – all of us in the room have positions of power whether or not we feel like it. In these positions, there are many temptations: the pharisees use their authority to dictate what kind of life others must have (don’t heal her, come back another day). They desire to control God himself in the person of Jesus and to control outcomes. Solidarity demands a particular posture to power where it is held lightly, shared where possible and treated with caution and awareness.

Jesus: solidarity is costly: in Jesus case it meant that the structures of power saw him as a threat and sought to control and silence him. Standing up for righteousness and justice can create enemies for you, even in the Church. We must remember that the Romans might have found Jesus annoying at some level, but it was the religious authorities who set it in their hearts to kill him.

The woman: often seen as a subject in the story, simply acted upon. But she exhibits a commitment to God that is deep and even miraculous. She is faithful in coming to the synagogue though she is severely disabled, she remains open to Jesus and is willing to hear his voice and walk to him when he calls. She was freer than the Pharisees although she was bound and hurt. She embodies the faithfulness which can be found in the unexpected places - not in the people on the stage, with the robes and the theological training but sometimes those who are hovering at the back, somewhat out of sight who plod on in the faith. It is their solidarity with us, which may change our lives and the world.

Questions for the small groups:

- What kind(s) of courage is/are required for our ministry at this time?
- What barriers might be standing in the way of courageous action?
- How might those barriers be overcome?