

In Black & White With Milinda Moragoda

Posted on



His Grace Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury in discussion with Milinda Moragoda.

Milinda Moragoda discusses the latest global issues and their relevance to Sri Lanka in 'In Black & White', telecast on TV One (MTV) every alternating Sunday. In this episode Milinda Moragoda (MM) meets with His Grace Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury.

MM: Your Grace, welcome to Sri Lanka, and welcome to Black & White. Your story is inspiring and it is a journey which can inspire all of us easily – from an oil company executive to the Archbishop of Canterbury. If I were to discuss that aspect of your life, I think we will spend the whole half an hour on that. If I were to ask for the short version, it

would be offensive. What inspired you to make this journey? Was there a moment when you said, 'this is what I'm going to do, this is what I'm going to be'?

His Grace Justin Welby: Certainly never a moment where I said, 'I am going to be the Archbishop of Canterbury' until I was offered the position. There was a moment a very long time ago now, about thirty years ago, back in 1987, when at a church service in London, I had a clear sense of vocation, which I was unable to escape from, and which led me to exploring the idea of ordination. Led me to the first Bishop I saw saying that he had interviewed more than a thousand potential clergy, and I was not in the top thousand and that I had no future in the church. But in the end, he accepted me for ordination and I became a curate and was a parish priest in the normal way. I then worked in conflict management and mitigation work based in Coventry. The cross that I still wear is the cross that is symbolic of Coventry Cathedral, a great center of reconciliation. And then onto Liverpool and Durham in northeast England and then to Canterbury.

MM: If I may ask, at what age were you ordained?

His Grace Justin Welby: I was ordained in 1992, therefore I must have been 36.

MM: What is it to be an Anglican? What is Anglicanism?

His Grace Justin Welby: Anglicanism is the result of the breakdown in relations between the king of England at the time, King Henry VIII in the 16th century and the Pope. At the same time, there was a great religious movement across Europe called the Reformation. Anglicanism ended up as a combination of Catholicism - it is Catholic in its view of the church and the fact it has Bishops - and it is reformed in the sense it has close links to the Reformation.

It believes in the development of our relationship with God. That every layperson is called to follow Jesus Christ and it has the Bible as central. But it has a strong link all around the world to the parish system, to working with local communities, to reaching out to those who are not Christians and loving and caring for them, for education and health, and is linked historically to the places where the British in the past had an empire.

MM: I know about the connection between Empire and Anglicanism. But have we moved past that? You have 85 million Anglicans across the world and that is a strong community. Do you think we have now moved past the idea of the empire?

His Grace Justin Welby: I hope so, very much. In fact, I believe there is further to go. But the

average Anglican is a woman in an area of extreme poverty, probably Sub Saharan Africa, on less than four dollars a day and likely to be in a zone of conflict or civil war or post-conflict. And so, they are not an English man, it's not the typical Anglican by any means. Rich is not typical. We are post-imperial, thank goodness, I am delighted.

MM: As the spiritual head of the Anglican Church, what are your responsibilities?

His Grace Justin Welby: The most important feature is that Anglicanism has no equivalent to the Pope. Within the oversight of Anglican churches, there are 40 provinces in 165 countries around the world, in the oversight of those, each province is autonomous, but we are interdependent. We are like a family of grown-up children. There are parents and children – but the children are grown up and make their own decisions. They are autonomous, but they are interdependent; they are linked by history, and above all, by faith in Christ. And so the role of the Archbishop is technically – it always amuses me – I am described as an instrument of communion, not a focus of unity. In no document am I described as a human being, is what I am saying. My role is to be a way of focusing Anglicans around the world. But I cannot come into another province and say 'Do this' and everyone to say 'Oh yes, Sir, we will do it'. They will just say 'Lie down, and have a cup of tea's

MM: Then on the domestic side, within the UK there is a history to your role. What are your responsibilities there?

His Grace Justin Welby: First of all, it's in England, not the whole UK. Scotland has a separate Anglican Church, as does Wales and Ireland, including North of Ireland. It is worth remembering that the first Archbishop of Canterbury was in 597 AD, and England was not united as a country till the 10th century. The Archbishops have been there longer than the country. But historically – technically in protocol terms – the Archbishop is the senior most person in the country after the Royal Family, and has a dignified role. As it would have been in the 19th century, they were called for the crowning of the Monarch; baptizing the Monarch's children, grandchildren; of marrying members of the Royal Family; of being in the House of Votes – the Upper House of the Parliament, together with 25 other Bishops; and of being in one sense, the Chaplain to the State.

But he is also the leader of 41 parish dioceses, and almost 15,000 parishes with 8,000 clergy which cover every single square inch of England. But in that role, again, we do not have the equivalent of the Pope. If I want a Bishop to do something, I can suggest it, we can discuss it, my view has some moral weight, but they can say no.

MM: Multiculturalism, multi-religion, these words are now coming under stress across the

globe. Even in our country, we have this debate. How can spiritual leaders act as bridges, and mediate between communities?

His Grace Justin Welby: That is one of the great questions today. In much of Europe and North America, people think that religion is declining. But 85 percent of the world's population belong to some faith or another, and it's going up, not down. Even from a purely worldly point of view, ignoring the reality of God – a reality in which I believe passionately – but ignoring that, the need for interfaith dialogue, which covers almost nine in every ten human beings, is essential. How can it happen? I want to be very clear. The first step is that religious leaders must take responsibility. There has been a history, both for Christians and for other faiths. But I will talk about Christians so I do not criticize other faiths in that way – when something terrible happens, say the massacre at Srebrenica 20 years ago, where 8,000 Muslim men and boys were murdered in the Bosnian War, where the Christians needed to say that the people who did that were not real Christians. That alone would not do. They may not be good Christians, they may be terrible – they are very wicked people, indeed. But something within the faith in which they grew up made them feel that somehow it was all right to do this utterly inhumane, deeply evil act.

Christians just needed to say, 'What is it about the history of Christianity, how we spoke, how we thought, that has made it possible for people to think in that way? What do we do to change that?' And I would say the same about Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu leaders and all the great world faiths, because in all the great world faiths in the last 30-40 years, we have seen a growth in fundamentalism, which is rejected.

MM: Any particular initiatives that you have taken in this direction?

His Grace Justin Welby: Most of the work is done behind the scenes. But we are working harder and harder, talking together and doing projects together. The partnership of action is better than the partnership of endless talking because action speaks to other people. For instance, both Christians and Muslims supported the Muslims caught in the floods and earthquakes in the Himalayas a few years ago. Muslims have supported Christians when they have been caught in natural disasters. After the killings in Christchurch in New Zealand a few months back, we had a gathering at one of the great mosques of London, of Christian and Muslim leaders, to be honest with each other. What we do not want is what I have been referring to here as 'team cake' interfaith dialogue – that means, we get together, we have a nice piece of cake, and we all say 'this was a nice piece of cake', and we have a cup of tea and we say 'ah, Sri Lankan tea is just wonderful, this is nice tea'. And then we say to the press 'we agreed with everything'. We agreed on team cake, we were not in agreement over other things which we did not speak about. Interfaith dialogue must be

honest; it must take responsibility.

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MM: How do you break through that? Because what you are saying, this lip-service, I also find it almost cynical sometimes. How do you break through to ensure that you are getting to the reality?

His Grace Justin Welby: Well, as they say, that is the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question. First, you will have to build relationships. Secondly, you have to be willing in private to have tough conversations. I recently got better at that. I have to confess, be honest with you, I do not like confrontation in private or public. I am not a confrontational kind of person. Therefore, if I am sitting with someone I like, I do not want to say, 'look, I'm really worried; I think this is wrong'. But when learning to do that, which I did a couple of years back, it caused some tension. We had a meeting with Muslim leaders in England, and they expressed themselves very clearly, quite properly and forcefully, and I expressed myself clearly and I believe we got closer as a result, not further apart

MM: Do you think that it is better to do this behind the scenes?

His Grace Justin Welby: Usually. Much as I admire genuinely – I am not being cynical – much as I genuinely admire and respect the media, doing things in public is not always the best way. When you humiliate someone by challenging them, and perhaps by them not having a good answer at the time, it damages relationships. The partnership of action is better than the partnership of endless talking because action speaks to other people.
businesstoday.lk OCTOBER 2019 BUSINESS TODAY 71 MM: I hope you had this conversation in Sri Lanka as well with your counterparts. His Grace Justin Welby: We have had a similar conversation about the need for honesty and taking on responsibility

MM: Then comes the issue of the next generation. Because sometimes I feel that our generation, maybe it is too late to change things. It is the future generations that have to make the difference. How does one make religion as a whole – I mean, in your case obviously Anglicanism – relevant to the youth today and hopefully change some of these prejudices that we seem to have with our generation?

His Grace Justin Welby: You are being very kind because I think you are quite a lot younger

than I am. But I would not say, 'How do we make –' well, I am going to talk as a Christian. How do we make Christian faith relevant to the younger generation? How do we stop making it irrelevant? Of course, the Christian faith is deeply relevant to young people. It's about purpose in life, about being loved, the formation of community, the care of creation, the most adventurous exciting life you could have. What in the past, too often, many churches have done is to turn that extraordinarily exciting package that is the gift of God to human beings into something that sound like only 'You must be good, turn up for church and be quiet until you are in your 60s and then we might listen to you'. My kids would say to me, 'Dad, dream on, that isn't going to happen' if I took that line. I have found in England – which is one of the most secular countries on earth – in the last few years, when I unpack with the young people with honesty and say that I do not know, the excitement of Christian discipleship. They are leaning forward in their seats, and particularly when you talk about community and the environment. Because they look ahead 40-50 years, they will be the people who deal with future rising sea levels and war, storms and greater pollution and plastic oceans. They will have to deal with the reality even more than we do.

MM: The social media and technology, does it help or hinder these discussions?

His Grace Justin Welby: Both. Where it helps is, it enables us to know what is going on, to stay in relationships with people. With a Facebook or WhatsApp group, with Twitter, when used well, it can be a way of conveying information. Resisting tyranny – we have seen that in many places, of standing up for the dignity of the human being, of bringing to people's attention the sorrows that some people suffer, in a powerful way.

But when it is used badly, it is a great tool for terrorism. It enables people to have information about people, but not relationships with them. All you need is what you see in your smartphone or on your screen. What you don't know is what that person is really like. When you see a politician you think 'Oh, he is a terrible man'. Everyone freaks when whatever-their-name-is has just made the most terrible statement on television. You may not know that the day before their doctor told them they had a fatal disease. You may not know that their wife is very ill, that one of their children is sick; you do not know them. It does not mean that they are right to say bad things. But when a friend does it, you think 'That was stupid, but he's having such a tough time'. And so, social media can tell us about something, but it can not give us a relationship.



MM: Have you had this conversation with social media companies?

His Grace Justin Welby: Yes, I have indeed, particularly Facebook. And they see the point. I am sure they do not agree with me, but they do see the point that I am making. Finding ways of, well, stopping its abuse. But there's an old saying that the answer to abuse is not no use, but the right use.



With A Facebook Or WhatsApp Group, With Twitter, When Used Well, It Can Be A Way Of Conveying Information.

MM: Internationally, there is a sense of despair at what we are going through at the moment. And you mentioned also the bigger issues like climate change, but we are also looking at relationships among us as human beings increasingly coming under stress, whether it's race or religion or any other way we want to differentiate ourselves these days. Are you an optimist or a pessimist on these issues?

His Grace Justin Welby: You will find that I have said this before; I am neither. I do not put

a lot of weight on pessimism, which is my natural inclination – or optimism. I am a Christian, and that means that I believe that in history Jesus Christ rose from the dead and conquered death and evil. That means that I am always full of hope. That however bad things are, there is no cause for ultimate despair.

MM: There's another debate that we have in Sri Lanka, but I think internationally also. Church and State, if you will, I mean historically in each religion these things have got mixed. But in modern society where do you draw the line in your view? How do you draw the line?

His Grace Justin Welby: You draw the line quite broadly. I would say that Aristotle, the ancient classical Greek philosopher, spoke of the 'polis'. A Greek word from which we get the word politics, and that every citizen and organization is part of the polis. Everybody is in politics. They may not choose to be. But every time they buy something, they make a political decision because supply and demand affect politics. The moment the church – so the church can't escape from politics. Religious leaders just can't escape from politics. Merely by existing, they are in politics. But that does not mean that we are in party politics. And it is very rare – it does happen – but religious leaders should rarely take a party political view.

You go back to the 1930s. The Christian leaders in Germany should have stood up against Hitler. That would have been party political and right. But those circumstances are very unusual. And they are only in great crises. Most of the time, the churches and I think other religious leaders too, we are voices for the poor. It is an occasion that I do not like, but am now going to use, you speak truth to power.

Reconciliation Is A Generational Process. Be Courageous, Shine The Light, Meet Up With Other Communities, Use Education, Love And Serve The Poor And Sri Lanka Will Be An Example To The World.

MM: To be a conscience, I suppose

His Grace Justin Welby: To be conscience, to model integrity and transparency. Not pretend they are better than anyone else, but to model being honest about failure, and willing to change.

MM: Coming to the end of our program, you are in Sri Lanka. We are a resilient country, we have gone through a lot as you know, our history especially our post-independence history.

We experienced a massive tragedy on Easter Sunday. What is your message before you leave, to the Sri Lankan people?

His Grace Justin Welby: I would like to say two things. First of all, that the tragedy is not only post-imperial. I think imperialism – many good people served in imperial civil services – but the idea of imperialism is a tragedy for its victims. We must be honest about that as British people. The second thing is, from where you are now, do not allow the darkness of those who want to create divisions with terrorism, through ethnicity, violent division – do not allow that darkness to overcome the light of your courage and resilience. To live in a post-conflict country requires courage. It requires vision, the recognition that reconciliation – the issue of reconciliation in a post-conflict country is one that takes generations. Even in Europe, where the last great war in western Europe was in 1945. We have made one of the best examples of reconciliation anywhere in the world after one of the worst examples of war. But yet, there are still things that have to be dealt with. Reconciliation is a generational process. Be courageous, shine the light, meet up with other communities, use education, love and serve the poor and Sri Lanka will be an example to the world. But it can only be that when it is remorselessly focused on the common good, on reconciliation and the care for the vulnerable and the weak.