

{ CHRISTMAS MESSAGE }

JUSTIN WELBY

The hazards of always seeing things the same way as others

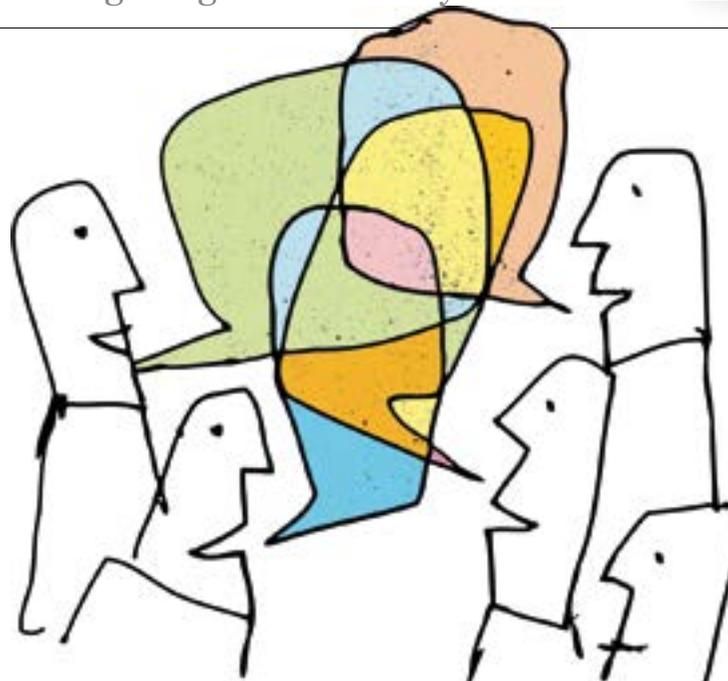


The Most Reverend Justin Welby
Hon FCT is the Archbishop of Canterbury and confidential adviser to ACT members on ethical and personal issues

One of the biggest dangers most of us face is being within a bubble of those who think like us, or see the world as we do. When that happens, we cease to be able to hear clearly what other people are thinking and saying, and, as a result, we start making foolish mistakes.

It can be as personal as understanding one's role in life. At the time of the centenary of the Battle of the Somme, I went to France for the ceremony. As is usual in this job, there was a bit of an entourage, and the general (mistaken) assumption that the Archbishop of Canterbury is probably quite important. In my terms, to think such a thing is just begging for God to intervene, usually in a humorous way. As we came out of our hotel one of my colleagues heard someone say: "Isn't that the Archbishop of Canterbury?" His colleague answered: "No, too short."

The danger of being surrounded by those who look at things in the same way as we ourselves do is that we become convinced that that is the view of the whole world. Received wisdom is as often as not received foolishness (apart from the old adage: 'buy low, sell high', or the old saying that 'if something looks too good to be true in the financial markets, it almost always is'). When we look back at the year, there were very few of us who would have forecast



the result of the referendum, or the impact that it would make. Those among my friends who are in favour of exit were convinced they were going to lose, and those among my friends who were going to vote remain were convinced they were going to win. Everybody round them told them they were right – and we all agreed. That is one of the reasons that the impact of the vote was so considerable psychologically.

In the markets, received wisdom is especially dangerous. It causes us to hunt with the herd, and to rationalise, even when markets have gone the other way, that they were wrong and we were right – it's just

not enough people saw it that way. When we look back at the events of 2008, the fallout from which still has an impact on institutions and attitudes, we see that there was an enormous bubble, not only in asset prices, but also in attitudes and consciences. Pre-2008, the bubble protected certain groups from thinking that there might be something fundamentally wrong in the way they were looking at the world, and in the approach they took to risk and reward.

What is the answer to group think? Part of it is setting up systems to avoid it. Here at Lambeth Palace, for big decisions we quite often set up two individuals or groups whose job is to argue for opposite decisions, so that we have a chance to hear both sides challenging the weaknesses of the other.

SHUTTERSTOCK

Given the kinds of decisions that are mostly made in the markets, or here for that matter, few questions yield easy answers, but at least insisting issues are debated ensures that we've looked at things hard. Looking back over my time in this job in the past three and a half years, the biggest mistakes I've made have occurred when we have failed to do that.

Christians believe that our assumptions about how the world works and where we're all going are most distinctly challenged, and all bubbles burst, by the events of what theologians call the incarnation, and the rest of us call Christmas. That is to say the moment when, as Christians believe, God was born, not in strength and terrifying appearance, but in weakness with the poor and the marginalised, so that the world might know that God offered them freedom to choose their way or his, and his hope or their despair.

For me, Christmas is a moment of immense joy, celebrating with family and having a good time. That is always the case. Yet it is far more than that. In the services – huge ones at Canterbury Cathedral or small ones in rural parish churches – I am reminded that there is no one in this world who is unimportant to God, and that there is no horror in this world, or threat to our future, or worry about our lives, that is beyond his reach. A God who chooses to be born as a baby is greater than all the threats that can face us. ♥

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