

"You have heard it said" **Tom Arthur**, CUC 23 February 2025

Five years ago this month, the annual Congressional prayer breakfast took place only one day after the conclusion of Donald Trump's first impeachment trial. The atmosphere was tense. The annual prayer breakfast is supposed to be a time when people of all parties can put their contentious differences behind them. They can leave their politics at the door and meet as colleagues.

Arthur Brooks had been invited to give the keynote address. Brooks had taught public policy for ten years before he was appointed head of a non-partisan public think tank, and he had just written a book entitled "Love Your Enemies".

In his address, Brooks said, "Some people say we need more civility and tolerance. I say, nonsense. Why? Because civility and tolerance are a low standard. Jesus didn't say, 'tolerate your enemies.' He said, 'love your enemies. 'Answer hatred with love.'

Brooks said he hoped his remarks would be a moment of healing for the country after the divisive House impeachment and the Senate acquittal of President Trump.

The healing lasted about two minutes. Immediately after Brooks spoke, Trump took the podium. With an irritated look, he said, "Arthur, I don't know if I agree with you."

Trump started by criticizing those he called the "dishonest and corrupt people" who "badly hurt our nation" – an apparent reference to Democrats who pursued his impeachment. "So many people have been hurt, and we can't let that go on."

The president said he prefers another part of the Bible, where it talks about taking "an eye for an eye".

Trump's defenders say this is only common sense, conventional wisdom. Loving one's enemies is not just a hard challenge to follow. It just doesn't make sense.

So set these two ways of living side by side, a life that extends its love even to its enemies, and life that extends its love only to those who are loyal to you, loyal to your values of nationalism, white supremacy, greed.

Set these two ways of living side by side, one centred in the needs of others that everyone knows is basically nonsense, and the other, the sensible one centred in the self.

Each one of us here is or should be an evangelist, someone who invites others to experience the good news of Jesus Christ. Which way of life would that be? One that is at odds with common sense, or one that conforms to conventional wisdom?

The Bible says, when Jesus calls someone, he calls that person to a life that is nonsense, a life that in the eyes of the world is nothing but baloney. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:

23 We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are the called, . . . Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. . . God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise.

If we wish to understand the good news of Jesus Christ, we need to be clear about this. We are talking about a very different way of seeing things.

Here the poor, the hungry and those who weep are blessed; the billionaires, the over-stuffed and those with a cauterized conscience are scorned.

This is especially true in the gospel of Luke. Matthew's Jesus had said 'blessed are the poor in spirit and blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness', Luke has Jesus say 'good for those who are just plain poor, and those who hunger are not said to hunger for righteousness but simply hunger, hunger for bread'.

Maybe the Bible says the poor, the hungry and those who weep are blessed because they can teach this selfie-culture, the rich and the over-stuffed and the smiley faces what the world is really like, what they don't see. Self-focus blinds us, cripples us, impoverishes us.

Remember what David Dean said last week, that the crowd that came to hear Jesus was the blind, the crippled and the impoverished who came to be healed. Their healing was to open their eyes, enable them to stand up as witnesses and celebrate the richness of life together. The invitation we as evangelists extend to our neighbours is an invitation to be healed. Amazing grace. I was blind but now I see.

A significant part of that healing will be an invitation to discipleship.

What do you understand by the word "discipleship"?

Yes, to be a disciple is, first of all, to be a student, one who is learning a new way of life, that is an upside-down way of life where our teachers are those our world has scorned, the poor and the dispossessed.

Disciples must learn to hear the voice from below as if it were the voice of God from above. In the 1930s the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "We have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled – in short, from the perspective of those who suffer."

Keep in mind that we are still choosing between the ways of Trump and the ways of those he condemns, and that in my home country these are rival voices between the conservative and progressive wings of the Church. I say the Christian life means, inescapably, learning from the reviled, the shunned and excluded, and sharing their lives just as Jesus shared their lives.

"If any wish to follow me," Jesus says, Luke 9:23, "let them deny themselves, let them take up their cross and follow me."

The Christian life is nothing without discipleship, and discipleship is nothing if it is not the way of the cross. That means loving your enemies:

22 "Blessed are you when people hate you," Jesus says, "and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. 23 Rejoice!

The astounding thing is that we ordinary Christians have been called out of our very ordinary neighbourhoods to live by an exceptionally alternative wisdom, an alternative to that of the selfie-obsessed masses, an alternative wisdom that turns the world upside down. Each one of us is called, with no exception.

We are called to stand out from the crowd. When we as Christians are exposed to public insult and rejection, Christ is visible in the Church where our life reveals the face of Christ crucified. The Church, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, is the fellowship of the crucified.

This is what Bonhoeffer means when in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, that, "When Christ calls someone, he bids them to come and die."

Of course, "to die" means, to stand up and live with authenticity and integrity that death cannot conquer. "To die" means, paradoxically, to live for once.

Does that sound frightening? It should. The Bible says "Do not be afraid" as often as it does because there is much to fear. Responding to our call demands courage and intentionality.

The Church must stand out from the crowd, courageously. In the 1930s the German government sought to unify the Protestant denominations under the Nazi ideology. Dietrich Bonhoeffer and other organized 'Confessing Church' movements that refused to participate in this effort. The Church, he said, must be visible, visible as those who have been called out from the herd, from the marketplace, from mindless populism to bear the sins of their neighbours, to be the fellowship of the crucified.

This is a new kind of evangelism. Here, to be an evangelist is not to offer the cheap grace of a repetition of a dry checklist of Christian doctrine like having Jesus Christ as your personal saviour or the cheap grace of a once-a-week forgiveness releasing you to go your own way the rest of the week. To be an evangelist is to offer a new way of living, the costly grace of a life-transformed by Jesus Christ's call to step out of the crowd, an experience that can only be described nonsensically as dying and being born again.

Do you remember how such transformation forms the plot of the musical *Sister Act*? Our Leo starred in the Bishop of Llandaff High School production last week. The lounge-singer girlfriend of a mobster discovers a new life filled with purpose and service as she in turn brings that to a community of nuns who renew their sense of purpose and service that brings new life to their community.

In the movie version of *Sister Act* you remember the nuns sing, "I will follow him / Follow him wherever he may go!" with a joy that Christians must never forget to share with the world.

The core proclamation of the gospel rarely surfaces because there are too many, like Trump, who never seem to have heard it, so they live in fear and insecurity, so they have to wear the mask of playground bullies among the tyrants and oligarchs of our time. Unconsciously, they feel unworthy, isolated, unloved and hungering for a conversion. They hunger for the joy that comes when merchants spend all they have to buy the pearl of great price. They need an evangelist, a new kind of evangelist.

The new life is good news to those who have heard the call and responded, and it is paradoxically joyful. The good news of Jesus Christ is the cross as a way of life.

Share that. Let's be proper evangelists.
Amen