

It's time to demand St Paul's open its doors to Occupy ...

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The 'occupy' movement is, I think here to stay. Of course I may be wrong; it may just be a fad that will fade but it doesn't feel like that to me. It [doesn't feel like that to people like Paul Mason either](#).

One dimension of this occurred to me last night when hearing from people who had tried to reach the London demonstration, and had been turned back, or had been there and been shocked by the way they had been treated. And all that happened at the foot of the steps outside St Paul's Cathedral - the cathedral of the City of London. It was that connection that surprised me.

St Paul's was not, of course, meant to be the focus of the occupation. Perhaps a little unrealistically that was always hoped to be the London Stock Exchange. But like it or not, the focus is now St Paul's. What's the relevance of that? Well, I think it raises another serious agenda, which I would welcome being brought into the open.

I make little of it on this site, but I am a Christian, being both an Anglican and a regular Quaker attender, the latter being overall more telling of my sentiments about faith, as well as explaining my absence of evangelical zeal - Quakers just don't do such things. But the significance for the current situation is that I do not see role of St Paul's in the situation in which it finds itself as a neutral one.

The canon chancellor of St Paul's and regular Thought for the Day commentator, Reverend Giles Fraser, [told the BBC](#) he was happy for people to "exercise their right to protest peacefully" outside the cathedral. But that's not good enough, I say. I think it was his job to have opened the cathedral to those protesting last night to provide them with shelter and facilities, a place to eat and a secure place away from the risk of harassment in which they could stage their protest and explain it to the world. That's what places of sanctuary do. But the Cathedral locked its doors.

Fraser didn't even say he supported what the protesters were doing according to the BBC report, and I am sure they would have quoted him saying so if he had.

And I say he should have done: I say it was his duty to be out there with the protestors.

I say it was and is his duty to welcome them into his church. Why? To answer that turn to Luke Chapter 4.18 where Jesus explained the purpose of his mission, about which he said:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me,
to bring good news to the poor,
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.*

For those in doubt about the economic relevance of this the phrase 'the year of the Lord's favour' refers to a Jubilee - a forgiveness of debt that happened in Jewish law every fifty years. How relevant is that for the present time?

Now, I stress, I'm not asking you to believe that statement, or to take action on it. That's not my style on this issue. But Fraser and the entire church has taken a position on this issue. He and it says they believe in Jesus and his mission. I'm asking them to stand by that commitment.

Right now the representatives of the poor and the oppressed are camped outside their door. And St Paul's is saying that's OK. Well, it's not OK. It's their duty to welcome them in as fellow pilgrims in the ministry of declaring good news for the poor and freedom for the oppressed. It's time for the church - every church in the UK - to say where it stands on this issue - and declare it has, in the words of the late Rt Rev David Shepherd, '[A Bias to the Poor](#)' (a phrase that irritated Thatcher so much - as Shepherd intended it should).

And if the church means that is bringing good news to the poor (as I think it both should, and must) and if the faith of those attending those churches is to mean anything then it has to welcome those campaigning on its steps into its churches.

That means it has to provide them with shelter when the police attack protestors.

And that ministers have to stand beside protestors if they are under threat of arrest.

And that the church to attest that what is happening in our society is wrong.

And the challenge is especially appropriate not just for the Church of England - the establishment church - which must show that establishment or not its loyalty is to those in need in this country when they are oppressed by that establishment as they are, deliberately, at present -but most especially this is a challenge for St Pauls which now has a duty to turn to its neighbours in the City and say they have done wrong and it is time for them to change their behaviour and make amends.

If the Church of England fails on this now it deserves to be treated as irrelevant. Faith that cannot speak its name; faith that does not deliver on the promise to the poor and faith that cowers from speaking the truth is faith not worth having.

You cannot be a Christian and not take a position. That's not an option granted to Christians, or their ministers. Giles Fraser cannot be happy with protest by those seeking to defend the poor outside his door but not welcome them in, Not if his preaching on Radio 4 is to have any meaning at all.

It's time to get off the fence Giles. It's time to make your church the centre of resistance in the City. Or to admit instead that you're just running a tourists attraction. That's your choice. And there's only one right answer if you really believe why you wear that dog collar.

So open those doors wide - especially when the police are nearby. It's your job to provide a place of sanctuary or frankly that building you tend is of no relevance at all and nor is your faith.

It's time for the establishment church to tell the establishment enough is enough. The time for the poor is now. And for that church to demand action on their behalf.

St Paul's may not have been planned as the focus of this protest. But as the epitome of establishment power in the City I think it should be. And I hope it will be.