

DURHAM MINERS FESTIVAL SERVICE IN DURHAM CATHEDRAL

8TH July 2023

Not so long ago I was asked to speak at a School Prizegiving. I was nervous. In spite of having children and grandchildren I felt the chasm of decades between me and the young people. I feared I had little in common with their view of the world.

I began by saying, "I've not come here to tell you to follow your dreams; I'm not here to tell you to become the best possible person you can be. What I'm about to say might not make you rich or famous. It might even go against you. But as you go through life, "Be Fair in all your dealings, and in so doing make the world a fairer place." To my great surprise the young people burst into applause. I came away feeling there's hope for the world.

One of the first sentences that a child comes out with is, "That's not fair!". Woe betide any adult who shares out a box of Smarties unevenly or misses a child's turn in a game! There'll be howls of protest! Whether that's something we're born with or something we learn, be it nature or nurture, there seems to be a universal moral instinct from a very early age that we should live in a fair or, at least, a fairer world.

Jesus hated hypocrisy. People who said one thing and did the opposite. We heard it from the Bible. He was scathing about the leaders of his day and called them 'fools' because they 'neglected justice and the love of God'.

It's one of the signs that God loves us that he's given us a conscience and put it into our hearts that we should treat each other fairly. It's his way of making the human family think about how we can care for each other.

Here today in this Cathedral the mining community stands in our history as an outstanding example of fighting for a fairer world. For over 150 years the Big Meeting, whose Bands and Banners have processed from every colliery, has gathered as if in response to that call of Jesus “not to neglect justice and the love of God.”

Your struggles down the years for fair wages and conditions are an expression of that moral instinct for justice put into our hearts by God. And your remembering of loved ones, thousands of men and boys, who suffered and died in pit disasters, shows an enduring love for those you have lost also put into our hearts by God.

When I chaired the Hillsborough Independent Panel I saw that when such grief was met with lies and injustice it inflicted a wound that would remain forever open and sore until the ointment of truth could be applied. Healing was impossible until the truth could be told and those responsible for the unlawful killings held to account.

And even then ‘closure’ seemed the wrong word for as many of you will know from your own experience there can never be closure to the love you have for those you have lost and will forever cherish. And I imagine that there might even be some here today who will say ‘amen’ to that.

So this Festival Service is for the banging of the drum for both Love and Justice.

Yet, my friends, this gathering is not just about the past and the present – the drum beat which we hear today should be the accompaniment to our march into the future.

We mustn’t forget that coal was and continues to be about energy and wealth even though we now know the climate-damaging effects of carbon. The history of the mining industry has been about fuelling an economy to create wealth.

And the history of trade unionism was and continues to be about doing all that justly; about treating people fairly; and about sharing wealth more justly.

And it is the producing of energy justly that is exactly the issue facing the world today. How will we harness the sources of energy that allow us all to tread the Earth lightly? How will we produce energy that treats all the Earth's inhabitants with fairness and kindness both now and into the future?

Just as miners and their families have borne the brunt of the dangers of mining for energy so others today are now suffering and even losing their own livelihoods through our climate-disturbing pursuit of energy.

So, my friends, think not that today is simply about your history; know that your struggles for justice shape the present and the future.

Don't be daunted by the global size of the challenge. A climate of justice is made up of countless particles of small acts of fairness.

Think of the applause of those young people when they heard the mantra, "Be Fair in all your dealings, and so make the world a fairer place". And take to heart the voice of Jesus and his call 'not to neglect justice and the love of God'.

Amen.

The Right Reverend Bishop James Jones KBE