

After the Riots: From Blame to Positive Action, held on 1 February 2012 in London, organised by Initiatives of Change UK, The Cordoba Foundation, Burning2Learn and the Civil Society Forum.

“Live again by a system of regard”

Extracts of the keynote speech by Dr Peter Selby, President of the National Council of Independent Monitoring Boards. He was previously Bishop of Worcester, Bishop to HM Prisons and a Church Commissioner. His book, *Grace and Mortgage*, opens people's eyes to the corrosive effect of debt on the poor and the environment.

Thank you very much.

As you've just been told I'm a retired clergy person – and it shows! My contribution today is called the keynote address. That wasn't my word: I need to explain that I'm here by accident. That is to say I had come here for a meeting, because I hadn't checked my emails that day and didn't know that the meeting was cancelled. So the moral of that story is: do check your emails before you go out in the morning or you too might find yourself having to give a keynote speech! We started with music this morning, and keynote is of course a musical term. So what's the keynote that we need today?



Dr Peter Selby

In this amazing gathering, we – I want to say 'you' but we all are an amazing gathering – it's a huge tribute to the steering group, really, that such an amazing gathering has been brought together.

What's going to be the keynote? That was the task that was given to me, and the musical keynote I would like to suggest for today, is *Honesty*.

The slogan that governs that keynote is 'Get Real'. Let's be real with each other. We have had amazingly clear messages from speakers who had direct personal involvement with the people we are talking about.

So I thought, how could I sound the keynote? Now you've been asked to get out a piece of paper of your packs. It's actually called After the Riots Forum.

What make this rage and spite? Can you see that? That's the piece of paper – it has some notes in the front.

The best bit on the piece of paper is on the back; if you turn it over you'll see that there is a remarkable thing on the back and that's a completely creative blank space! And I'm going to give you an exercise now and we are going to take about two minutes silence to do this exercise.

Please take a pencil and on the page that's blank please write in not more than five words, why you did not join in the riots. If there is anybody here who did and the question here doesn't apply, write why you did, but I think nearly everybody here can answer the question.

Why did you not join in the riots? Five words and remember the keynote is honesty. OK, I'm not going to ask you to bare your souls to one another, but if I may suggest it you should keep before you what you've written in the rest of today what I hope is an honest statement why you didn't join in.

In preparing to come to you, I put down five words for myself and then I didn't actually think they were right so I did another five words and another five and I've got four lots of five words and I'll tell you what they are:

"It never entered my head"

"I'd be far too scared"

"My anger is frightening enough" (meaning, without having to get alongside all the other angry people)

And last I put, "I might lose self control"

So those were some reasons that went through my mind as to why I didn't join in the riots. Does anybody think they have five really significant words they want to shout out now? [A number of the participants shared their five words.]

That might give us some sense and I think, since there might be journalist present, I need to place on the record, one always has to on these occasions, which is dreary, but you do, I'm not in favour of the riots. I just need to say that, because I'm anxious about that head line that says "Bishop Urges Rioting"! I speak from experience. About a week after I was appointed as Bishop of Worcester, a pamphlet came out from the Christian Socialist Movement who had asked me to write an introduction about prayer. My introduction dealt with the question, 'Is it proper for a believer to pray for election victory?' and my article was on this. It could have been on the Conservative manifesto, LibDem manifesto, whatever. The next day the headline was "Bishop Says, Pray For A Labour Victory". It didn't help my entry into Worcestershire!

So I'd just like to say, as a matter of fact, I am not in favour of riots. However, I think we need to be rather clearer about riots than simply not being in favour of them. I have been deeply impressed both by the briefing paper, you have, about the riots, which is a really very comprehensive summary of what other people have said about the riots. It was a really fine piece of work, to collect all that together and I'm really impressed again by the speakers we had this morning, who have given really searching accounts of what this phenomenon was. I had moments where – I'll be quite candid – in listening to people who are really on the front line on this I felt pretty redundant and that you don't really need me.

But I think if I'm to strike the keynote of honesty, of getting real, there are some things we need to look at. I'll also tell you – and this might be controversial, and I hope it is in a way, because we need to argue it out – I incline to the *systemic* explanation of things. That's my personal inclination. That means that I do not believe that the world would be cured by every individual becoming a better person. I'm not against, by the way – I must say this too – journalists please write this down – I am not against people becoming better people. I think it's a good idea. However, I think there are some other things we need to notice, some of which have been mentioned, and they are systemic. And on your piece of paper you will see three little paragraphs each of which ends with the words "a system of disregard".

And how does that system manifest itself? Here we have individual acts of looting and robbery, resistance to authority and ultimately violence against persons, add up to a system of disregard. And what is a system of disregard? What do I mean by that strange set of words, perhaps you might not think of very explanatory. What do I mean? I mean a system under which what you can have now is more important than the long term consideration of

the consequences. And every time we hit a problem, somebody comes up with a proposal for how we are going to deal with it *now* and disregards the longer term.

Let me give an example from my book (*Grace and Mortgage*) that's been mentioned. I got into writing about debt because at the point at which student debt started to become an issue I had a son at university. That's the best reason for thinking about things, when they affect you. I then did some research about students in universities and debt. What I discovered was that most students went into university thinking that it was wrong to get into debt. By the end of the first year – this was before we had upfront payments – by the end of the first year they thought; actually I'm in debt so it must be OK. You cannot spend your whole life thinking that something you can't avoid is wrong.

At the end of the second year, the debt was bigger and they were more convinced that debt was OK. And by the last year they had completely changed their attitude – which was very fortunate because when they left university and wanted somewhere to live, the ideal that was held out to them was another means of getting further into debt.

And my point was that we think that we are getting students an education and we don't notice that we are actually getting them two educations at once. They learn about physics or French or politics or philosophy or all the things they get their degree in, but they learn something else too, which is how to be a debtor. And they learn that and they learn that's OK. We don't think about the morality that we are teaching by the systems that we adopt.

That's what I mean by a system of disregard. We have already had mention of this, but I'd like to emphasise it. The background to the riots was that we have had lived with, lived through individual acts of over-indulgence at the top. You know what I mean: the expenses, crisis and so forth. People, who did it big time and were told it was OK, if they gave it back, which is not what was said to the people, who looted last August. People, who committed acts, that they thought were OK, that is in most cases not against the rules, just the best way to bend the rules to your interest, and that was a system of disregard. Because quite apart from whatever an individual might do, what they did not think about was what was the morality they were propagating by acting in this way. So the long term consequences were not in their heads. That is a system of disregard. Now, if you listen to the political debates about what is going to put our world economy to right, you will hear that we cannot possibly regulate or tax successful people, otherwise they will go and do what they do in the Caymen Islands or somewhere else. That is what we are hearing. In the process, we are not thinking about, the long-term consequences of a system that went completely out of control, and achieved the near breakdown of the economic civilization, such as that we had, and has damaged, in some cases irrevocably, the lives of the poorest people. That is a system of disregard. It allows people to make high-flown moral pronouncements, without noticing that the system, which they erect, actually propagate the reverse of that morality. So, that is the background.

It has been mentioned that I preside over the National Council of Independent Monitoring Boards. These monitoring boards exist in every prison and place of immigration custody. Our task is to monitor fairness and respect for people in custody, which I sometimes, in my worst moments, think is a contradiction in terms. But if it is not a contradiction in terms, the one thing that is absolutely clear, is that our society, is bent on a course, which in the long run, means more and more people will be imprisoned. When I working as a Bishop in London, sometime ago, there were 41,400 people in prison. The numbers are going up. Now, we are well over double that figure. That's a system of disregard. It is not just a system of disregard

about those people, to whom we say we are sending a strong signal, it is a system of disregard of all of us. We are all paying for it. We are all deciding that this is the way the way forward, and we are all propagating punitive responses to people, in disregard, of what that actually does not just to them, but to us. The great attraction of prison is that you can put numbers on it. When somebody gets four years, it means that the person has done something worse than somebody, who gets two years. It's got numbers. But the numbers don't actually tell you anything. What they are is a system indulgent of punitive attitudes, in disregard of what those punitive attitudes will do, to the future and well-being of our society, and our children's society. By the way, I want to say, quite rightly and helpfully, there has been a strong focus today on young people and our attitudes to young people. But it is really quite important that we don't forget that a lot of the people involved in the riots weren't young people at all. It is possible to delude ourselves, that the problem doesn't exist among people, who are as old as me or younger. This is not a just a problem of youth. What do I want to say in relation to the keynote of today? As I am a clergyman and a theologian, my mind goes back to the part of the inheritance that I deal with all the time. It is actually the shared inheritance of the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, of Christianity and of Islam. It is a Psalm. Whether you joined in, like most of us didn't, or whether you did join in, riots are us. Riots are the world we inhabit. Riots are the economy of disregard, we have created. Riots are all those things. Whilst I am behind practical steps, such as those that are taken by people, representing various organisations, in this room, they must go alongside, a reflection on what are the systemic dimensions of the disregard, which we have actually built in to our society. The Psalm, I present before you, is an ancient poem, from time when people didn't think that there was one God, but thought there were several, but that there was one in charge.

The setting is a courtroom scene, in which the one who is really in charge calls the others to account. And what He says to the others is, you represent systems of disregard. You represent, for example, in our world, money. You represent growth. All the idols, before which our civilization bows. That is who you represent, you gods. What you don't do is that you do not look after the poor, the fatherless and the widowed. And since you don't do that, you have not got what it takes to be a god and I am declaring you to be sentenced to death. In words that could well describe the riots of last August, but also the financial crisis of two years ago that is still with us. It says that the foundations of the Earth will be shaken. My point in this. It is, of course, really important, that we attune our moral consciences.

Psalm 82

God has taken his place in the divine council;
in the midst of the gods he holds judgement:
'How long will you judge unjustly
and show partiality to the wicked?
Give justice to the weak and the orphan;
maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.
Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.
They have neither knowledge nor understanding,
they walk around in darkness;
all the foundations of the earth are shaken.
I say, 'You are gods,
children of the Most High, all of you;
nevertheless, you shall die like mortals,
and fall like any prince.'
Rise up, O God, judge the earth;
for all the nations belong to you.

It is really important that we live virtuously. Of course that is important. But the most important thing is to recognise that we live in a *moral universe*. That is my religious belief. That is to say we live in a universe where if you propagate a system of disregard, you are acting against the plan.

You are acting outside the instruction book. You are misusing the appliance and your guarantee will be no longer valid. And, therefore, what you need to do is recognise whether it's convenient to you or not what is the morality that is built into the universe and which has come to haunt us not just last August, but every time we failed to notice that we have intended to live in a *system of regard*, in a system that takes account of those people whom other people don't take account of. And if we live by systems of disregard, the foundations of the world will be shaken, the moral, the spiritual, the physical, the economic foundations of the world will be shaken.

And, last August, was if nothing else, a call to live again by a system of regard for which we were made.