

## **ARCHBISHOP WELBY AND THE E-WORD**

By Andrew Atherstone

Archbishop Justin Welby very seldom uses the E-word – ‘Evangelical’. He mentions it only when amongst friends. Speaking at New Wine, for example, in 2006 he declared: ‘I’m an orthodox Bible-believing Evangelical ... Scripture is my final authority for all matters of life and of doctrine.’ But it’s not a label he usually chooses to define himself. He speaks of churchmanship distinctions as a form of ‘tribalism’ – a significant choice of words given his first hand experience of destructive and violent tribal conflicts in Nigeria, Burundi and elsewhere across Africa.

By eschewing the E-word in public, Welby adopts the policy of his friends and mentors at Holy Trinity Brompton and the Alpha Course. Sandy Millar tells the story of the American evangelist Tony Campolo, who once proudly told a stranger in a café, ‘I am an Evangelical Christian’. The hunted look upon his interlocutor’s face made Campolo vow never to label himself an ‘Evangelical’ again. Millar reflects: ‘I come from an evangelical tradition but I don’t like the words “evangelical” or “charismatic”. I don’t like any sort of word now that adds to “Christian” because the Spirit of God is uniting us all in a way that I don’t think was happening ten years ago. There are Christians in every sort of denomination and tradition now and there is only one word for what they are: *Christians*.’ Nicky Gumbel also speaks of his dislike of ‘unhelpful and divisive labels’. Welby follows suit. Stereotypes are too often misunderstood, both inside and outside the church.

Nevertheless, most of Welby’s teaching fits comfortably within an Evangelical framework. He testifies to a classic Evangelical conversion experience, specifically datable – Sunday, 12 October 1975, at ten minutes to midnight. He went up to Cambridge University a year earlier and struck up friendship with members of the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union (CICCU). Gumbel was a year ahead of him at Trinity College, converted through the David MacInnes mission in February 1974, and used to carry pockets full of evangelistic tracts to distribute to all and sundry. Welby was taken to a CICCU evangelistic address by another friend, Nicky Hills, who himself had only been a Christian for six months. The address was uninspiring and Welby was ‘bored out of my mind’, but he and Hills spent the evening talking about what it means to be a Christian. Hills explained that Jesus had died for Welby on the cross and the future Archbishop prayed a prayer of commitment. He recalled: ‘The penny dropped ... I asked Jesus to be Lord of my life. ... The sense that something had changed was instantaneous’. He was disciplined at Cambridge through Bash Camps and The Round Church, where he received his early grounding in Evangelical doctrine. The Cambridge years were of foundational significance in shaping Welby’s Christian life.

Welby’s priorities in ministry were further sharpened by his years as a lay leader at Holy Trinity Brompton (HTB), while he worked as a treasurer in the oil industry. The congregation enjoyed a period of rapid expansion and charismatic renewal in the 1980s. Their emphases were freedom in worship, intimacy with God, ministry with all the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and church growth. They learnt much from John Wimber and the Vineyard Movement. Wimber’s friend, Peter Wagner, famously asserted, ‘Planting new churches is the most effective evangelistic methodology known under heaven’, so HTB translated these Californian principles into a Kensington context. Their earliest church plants were St Barnabas, Kensington in 1985 and St Mark’s, Battersea Rise in 1987, the first of many, one of the reasons that London diocese has bucked the national trend of church decline over the last two decades. At HTB, immersed in a growing and innovative church, Welby learnt many of the key lessons he now brings to Canterbury. It was through listening to a visiting Vineyard preacher that he heard the call to ordained ministry. More recently his experience of dynamic growth amongst Anglican Evangelicals in Nigeria has convinced him that the same is

possible in Britain. The Evangelicalism of California and Nigeria is a potentially explosive combination for the Church of England, and bound to shake up the status quo.

On the most controversial issues of the moment, Welby holds the classic Evangelical position on human sexuality. Speaking again at New Wine, he taught: 'sexual practice is for marriage, and marriage is between men and women, and that's the biblical position'. Although he acknowledges that this view is pastorally difficult, 'it's what the Bible says' and therefore the church needs to live by it. He is an enthusiastic supporter of the consecration of women bishops, but also 'personally deeply committed', as he recently told General Synod, to ensuring a 'proper place' for conscientious objectors. He promised his diocesan synod at Durham that he would 'spare no effort' to find a way for the Church of England to demonstrate, not only in words, that it values everyone.

Alongside his Evangelical heritage, Welby has been strongly influenced by Anglo-Catholic and Roman Catholic spirituality. For the last decade he has been a Benedictine oblate, attached to Elmore Abbey near Newbury and committed to following Benedict's Rule in his daily life. He has a Roman Catholic spiritual director, Nicolas Buttet, founder of the Eucharistein community in Switzerland. These encounters have shaped Welby's sacramentalism and he receives Holy Communion every day as part of his personal spiritual discipline. He owes much to Roman Catholic social thought, encapsulated in papal encyclicals like Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, especially an emphasis on 'the common good' and 'human flourishing' which are regular themes in the Archbishop's teaching. He is vice-president of l'Association Internationale pour l'Enseignement Social Chrétien (the International Association for Christian Social Teaching), a predominantly Roman Catholic organisation. Welby also enjoys regular spiritual retreats in France with Chemin Neuf, an ecumenical religious order founded in the 1970s by a young Jesuit who had experienced charismatic renewal. Its theological emphases are simplicity of life, Ignatian spirituality, 'baptism in the Holy Spirit', mission and Christian unity. Chemin Neuf was the first to run the Alpha Course amongst Roman Catholics in France. This range of relationships is not typical for someone nurtured within English Evangelicalism, and provides the Archbishop with broad theological experience and perspectives.

Although the 'Evangelicalism' label will not often be heard at Lambeth Palace, that other momentous E-Word – 'Evangelism' – falls much more frequently from Welby's lips. His abiding passion is for people to come to faith in Christ and for churches to grow. As a young convert at Cambridge University he was an eager evangelist. For example, he took Michael Reiss (now a prominent professor of science education) to the CICCUC mission addresses by John Stott in February 1977. Reiss had been raised in a secular family but found that Stott's expositions of the Christian gospel made sense and he put his faith in Christ. That pattern of evangelism has continued. Welby's desire, often articulated, is for every professing Christian in Britain to know how to lead their friends to faith in Christ. As a parish clergyman, cathedral dean and diocesan bishop, evangelism (not just generic "mission") was high on his agenda. At Liverpool Cathedral, the first person recruited to his team was a Canon in Mission and Evangelism, a specialist in 'fresh expressions'. In Durham he has launched a rolling programme of deanery missions, emphasising that evangelism is not only the work of clergy or other specialists but of the whole people of God: 'We are looking for Cuthberts, not Billy Graham.'

Archbishop Welby agrees there are many strengths of the Anglican parish system, but 'we fish badly': 'The church is good at contact and presence but too often poor at bringing people to faith in Jesus. ... We are excellent at building bridges into the community and into society and rather less good at getting the gospel across the bridge, and bringing people back. Or to put it another way our net holds many but we land few.' His evangelistic passion is best encapsulated by a recent address to an Alpha Vision Day in Sheffield, attended by over 700 church leaders from across the north of Britain: 'We are facing in this country the greatest opportunity that God has given us since the

Second World War. ... It is a moment of unique opportunity and the challenge that the Spirit is saying to the Church today is, "Will you take this moment and reverse the decline that we have seen for the last 70 or 80 years?" With buoyant confidence in the grace and power of God, the new Archbishop believes that great things are possible in our generation. The task of the church, he insists, is 'to go out and ... to reconvert our land, to transform its society and all that goes with it.'

*Revd Dr Andrew Atherstone is Tutor in History and Doctrine and Latimer Research Fellow, at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, and a member of the Churchman Editorial Board.*