

Tony Blair Speech to the National Prayer Breakfast

**RT HON TONY BLAIR
SPEECH TO THE NATIONAL PRAYER BREAKFAST
WASHINGTON DC
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It is an honour to be here. A particular honour to be with you Mr. President. The world participated in the celebration of your election. Now the hard work begins. And now, also we should be as steadfast for you in the hard work as in the celebration. You don't need cheerleaders but partners; not spectators but supporters. The truest friends are those still around when the going is toughest. We offer you our friendship today. We will work with you to make your Presidency one that shapes our destiny to the credit of America and of the world. Mr President, we salute you and wish you well.

And great news about your blackberry. I had the opposite problem. I got my first mobile phone the day after I left Downing Street. I sent my first ever text message to a close friend. In my ignorance I didn't realise my name didn't show up on the text. Back came the reply: "sorry but who are you?"

I thought: "Its been 24 hours."

After 10 years as British Prime Minister, I decided to choose something easy. I became involved in the Middle East Peace Process.

There are many frustrations - that is evident. There is also one blessing. I spend much of my time in the Holy Land and in the Holy City. The other evening I climbed to the top of Notre Dame in old Jerusalem. You look left and see the Garden of Gethsamene. You look right and see where the Last Supper was held. Straight ahead lies Golgotha. In the distance is where King David was crowned and still further where Abraham was laid to rest. And of course dominating the Jerusalem skyline is the Al Aqsa Mosque, where according to the Koran, the Prophet was transported to commune with the prophets of the past.

Rich in conflict, it is also sublime in history. The other month in Jericho, I visited the Mount of Temptation. I think they bring all the political leaders there. My guide - a Palestinian - was bemoaning the travails of his nation. Suddenly he stopped, looked heaven wards and said "Moses, Jesus, Mohammed: why did they all have to come here?" It is a good place to reflect on religion: a source of so much inspiration; an excuse for so much evil.

Today, religion is under attack from without and from within. From within, it is corroded by extremists who use their Faith as a means of excluding the other. I am what I am in opposition to you. If you do not believe as I believe, you are a lesser human being.

From without, religious faith is assailed by an increasingly aggressive secularism, which derides faith as contrary to reason and defines faith by conflict. Thus do the extreme believers and the aggressive non-believers come together in unholy alliance.

And yet, Faith will not be so easily cast. For billions of people, Faith motivates, galvanises, compels and inspires, not to exclude but to embrace; not to provoke conflict but to try to do good. This is Faith in action. You can see it in countless local communities where those from churches, mosques, synagogues and temples, tend the sick, care for the afflicted, work long hours in bad conditions to bring hope to the despairing and salvation to the lost. You can see it in the arousing of the world's conscience to the plight of Africa.

There are a million good deeds done every day by people of Faith. These are those for whom, in the parable of the sower, the seed fell on good soil and yielded sixty or a hundredfold.

What inspires such people?

Ritual or doctrine or the finer points of theology? No.

I remember my first spiritual awakening. I was ten years old. That day my father - at the young age of 40 - had suffered a serious stroke. His life hung in the balance. My mother, to keep some sense of normality in the crisis, sent me to school. My teacher knelt and prayed with me. Now my father was a militant atheist. Before we prayed, I thought I should confess this. "I'm afraid my father doesn't believe in God". I said. "That doesn't matter" my teacher replied "God believes in him. He loves him without demanding or needing love in return."

That is what inspires: the unconditional nature of God's love. A promise perpetually kept. A covenant never broken.

And in surrendering to God, we become instruments of that love.

Rabbi Hillel was once challenged by a pagan, who said: if you can recite the whole of the Torah standing on one leg, I will convert to being a Jew. Rabbi Hillel stood on one leg and said "That which is hateful to you, do it not unto your neighbour. That is the Torah. Everything else is commentary. Go and study it."

As the Koran states: "if anyone saves a person it will be as if he has saved the whole of humanity".

Faith is not discovered in acting according to ritual but acting according to God's will and God's will is love.

We might also talk of the Hindu "Living beyond the reach of I and mine" or the words of the Buddha "after practising enlightenment you must go back to practise compassion" or

the Sikh, the scripture: "God's bounties are common to all. It is we who have created divisions."

Each faith has its beliefs. Each is different. Yet at a certain point each is in communion with the other.

Examine the impact of globalisation. Forget for a moment its rights and wrongs. Just look at its effects. Its characteristic is that it pushes the world together. It is not only an economic force. The consequence is social, even cultural.

The global community - "it takes a village" as someone once coined it - is upon us. Into it steps religious faith. If faith becomes the property of extremists, it will originate discord. But if, by contrast, different faiths can reach out to and have knowledge of one another, then instead of being reactionary, religious faith can be a force for progress.

The Foundation which bears my name and which I began less than a year ago is dedicated to achieving understanding, action and reconciliation between the different faiths for the common good. It is not about the faith that looks inward; but the faith that resolutely turns us towards each other.

Bringing the faith communities together fulfils an objective important to all of us, believers and non-believers.

But as someone of faith, this is not enough. I believe restoring religious faith to its rightful place, as the guide to our world and its future, is itself of the essence. The 21st Century will be poorer in spirit, meaner in ambition, less disciplined in conscience, if it is not under the guardianship of faith in God.

I do not mean by this to blur the correct distinction between the realms of religious and political authority. In Britain we are especially mindful of this. I recall giving an address to the country at a time of crisis. I wanted to end my words with "God bless the British people". This caused complete consternation. Emergency meetings were convened. The system was aghast. Finally, as I sat trying to defend my words, a senior civil servant said, with utter distain: "Really, Prime Minister, this is not America you know."

Neither do I decry the work of humanists, who give gladly of themselves for others and who can often shame the avowedly religious. Those who do God's work are God's people.

I only say that there are limits to humanism and beyond those limits God and only God can work. The phrase "fear of God" conjures up the vengeful God of parts of the Old Testament. But "fear of God" means really obedience to God; humility before God; acceptance through God that there is something bigger, better and more important than you. It is that humbling of man's vanity, that stirring of conscience through God's prompting, that recognition of our limitations, that faith alone can bestow.

We can perform acts of mercy, but only God can lend them dignity. We can forgive, but only God forgives completely in the full knowledge of our sin.

And only through God comes grace; and it is God's grace that is unique.

John Newton, who had been that most obnoxious of things, a slave-trader, wrote the hymn "Amazing Grace".

"Twas Grace that taught my heart to fear. And Grace, my fears relieved."

It is through faith, by the Grace of God, that we have the courage to live as we should and die as we must.

When I was Prime Minister I had cause often to reflect on leadership. Courage in leadership is not simply about having the nerve to take difficult decisions or even in doing the right thing since oftentimes God alone knows what the right thing is.

It is to be in our natural state - which is one of nagging doubt, imperfect knowledge, and uncertain prediction - and to be prepared nonetheless to put on the mantle of responsibility and to stand up in full view of the world, to step out when others step back, to assume the loneliness of the final decision-maker, not sure of success but unsure of it.

And it is in that "not knowing" that the courage lies.

And when in that state, our courage fails, our faith can support it, lift it up, keep it from stumbling.

As you begin your leadership of this great country, Mr President, you are fortunate, as is your nation, that you have already shown in your life, courage in abundance. But should it ever be tested, I hope your faith can sustain you. And your family. The public eye is not always the most congenial.

I was reminded of this, as I waited in London in the snow to fly to America and made the mistake of reading a British newspaper. It was the very Conservative Daily Telegraph. A few days ago I gave an interview in which I remarked how much cleverer my wife was than me. The Telegraph has a famous letters page. In it was a letter from a correspondent that read something like: "Dear Sir, with reference to your headline 'Blair admits wife more intelligent than him', I fail to see why this is news. Most of us have known this for a long time." As a PS perhaps: "the bar, however, has not been set high".

I finish where I began: in the Holy Land, at Mount Nebo in Jordan, where Moses gazed on the Promised Land. There is a chapel there, built by pilgrims in the 4th Century. The sermon was preached by an American, who spent his life as an airline pilot and then, after his wife's death, took holy orders. His words are the words of a Christian but they speak to all those of faith, who want God's grace to guide their life.

He said this:

"While here on earth, we need to make a vital decision ... whether to be mere spectators, or movers and shakers for the Kingdom of God... whether to stay among the curious, or take up a cross. And this means: no standing on the sidelines ... We're either in the game or we're not. I sometimes ask myself the question: If I were to die today, what would my life have stood for... The answer can't be an impulsive one, and we all need to count the cost before we give an answer. Because to be able to say yes to one thing, means to say no to many others. But we must also remember, that the greatest danger is not impulsiveness, but inaction."

It is fitting at this extraordinary moment in your country's history that we hear that call to action; and we pray that in acting we do God's work and follow God's will.

And by the way, God bless you all.

Thursday 05 February 2009