

## Trusting in Partnership

Trust appears to be in short supply these days.

Which is a pity, because it was once abundant. Politicians, police, doctors, clerics, bank managers were all seen as pillars of society who, by virtue of office, could be trusted. Trust was fundamental to their position and function in society.

But, the past is another country; they do things differently there. Today, the tumbling from pedestals has gone right through society, as high as the royal family itself – and mostly, it's to do with a loss of trust, or at least a withdrawal of trust. Rather like a bank – or a building society – discovering it no longer has quite as much cash as it imagined, many of our most enduring institutions find the trust on which they, ultimately, rely has run down or, in some cases, run out.

To say that we no longer trust our big institutions, whether public or private, state or church, is simply another way of recognising that we have lost faith in them, that the partnership between them and us has been strained or weakened or broken in some way. And that, perhaps, lies close to the heart of some of the issues and themes we have grappled with over these last three days.

Partnership, if it is to be meaningful and have value, depends, fundamentally, on trust. And we all know that building trust is difficult, time-consuming, hard work. Trust evolves over time and with experience. Most importantly, it has to be earned; it cannot be bought, coerced or cajoled. But, as expensive as it is to develop, trust is vital to every aspect of life, not just publicly but privately, not just collectively but individually, and its absence allows corrosive elements – cynicism, contempt, anger and disengagement – to flourish, marring our society and diminishing our commonwealth.

We would all, I think, like to live in a world more abundant with trust – but we don't. The question then is: what are we doing about it? Because we have to do something about it: we are the body of Christ and we are called into partnership with him to establish kingdom values.

Part of the difficulty, I think, is that trust is not entirely rational – it's partly emotional. It's not just a matter of cold, intellectual understanding, it is just as much an emotional response to someone and their ideas – and it nearly always involves taking risks. And taking risks means stepping out in faith.

In their book *The Trusted Advisor*, Maister, Galford and Green developed something they called a trust equation, intended for business consultants but applicable more widely. Essentially, they said, trust is the sum of credibility, dependability and relationship with the partner, divided by the degree self-interest involved.

Credibility is just as much an issue for the Church as it is for every Christian project and agency. We are responsible for delivering important, and in many cases, vital programmes, and our credibility rests on those we work with and for having confidence that we have the experience to know what we are talking about, and the expertise to deliver worthwhile results and benefits. Are we up to the job?

Our dependability, on the other hand, is about people seeing us as reliable and consistent. It's about our reputation and how well we deliver on our promises. It's our track record, if you like.

Credibility and dependability then, can be reinforced by external criteria or at least testimonial. There's a certain objectivity about them.

Relationship is different – and yet it's essential to the building of trust. It's difficult to imagine how trust can be built outside of a relationship and the examples of the strong sorts of partnership we have heard described and discussed here, should give us all the confidence that credibility, dependability and commitment to relationship are in no way lacking among the agencies and initiatives we represent.

But if we are to have integrity then we have to ensure that building and deepening relationship is not just a means to an end but an end in itself. Healthy, worthwhile relationships will always require some level of vulnerability, openness and transparency, and building relationship requires us to take the risk of trusting other people – however difficult that is. Because it's a two-way process – and if we want trust we must be prepared to give it. We must be generous in our trust as we are in our love, there's no other way if we want to prove ourselves worthy of trust.

But, as Benedict reminded us, if trust is built through that combination of credibility, dependability and relationship, it is always damaged by self-interest. However hard we try to build trust, if we are seen to be in the relationship, the partnership, only to further our own interest, advance our own agenda, then trust will be slow to develop.

One of the biggest challenges we face is the pervasive belief that as Christian agencies, we are only in it to win converts. That it's about putting bums on seats, or perhaps more cynically, coins on the plate.

And among the most cynical or at least, sceptical, about our motives are those who most rely upon us. In his book: *Trust: A Radical Manifesto*, Steve Chalke says: "The church and faith agencies are huge providers of social care programmes here in the UK and of aid and development programmes overseas. Day after day, Christian faith mobilises an army of paid staff and even more volunteers, delivering, annually, millions of working hours dedicated to working and caring for others. Yet partnership with government and other secular agencies often remains difficult or elusive. Why? Because they don't trust us as much as we want them to or would like them to."

On paper national and local government appear happy to recognise the value of faith communities. But, notwithstanding John Battle's clear and inspiring commitment to his Christianity and his politics, what that sometimes seems to boil down to is something subtly different: that they're happy to accept the **work** and contribution of faith groups – but not the faith bit.

Yet the truth is that if it wasn't for our faith many of us would not be doing the jobs we're doing. For us our faith in Jesus Christ is our motivation, our heart, our energy and our strength. And it's what keeps us going when others give up. Because we are people of faith, we're in it for the long haul.

There were those among Jesus followers who believed that because he was entering Jerusalem, the kingdom of God must be at hand. The parable is clearly intended to correct that view and remind those who are his disciples that the kingdom comes through the word of the king - and the agency of kingdom people. No hands but ours,

no feet but ours and if we do not do the work of the kingdom then the work of the kingdom does not get done.

The parable is not exhortation to unbridled capitalism and a free market economy (although no doubt there will be those who will want to read it as such). Far less is it a justification of prosperity theology: we are not called to be successful, we are called to be faithful. It is a parable about the nature of trust and the stifling effect of fearfulness and it is the attitude of the third servant that is crucial to that understanding.

Given what we know about banks in our age, this servant might appear, at first, to exercise a wholly understandable caution – but his failure to act is actually based on a failure to trust - *I was afraid of you, because you are a hard man. You take out what you did not put in and reap what you did not sow.* The servant allows his fear about his own judgement, his doubts about his strength, his nervousness about his capacity to displace trust in the person who gave him his commission, and, as a result, he proves faithless in the discharge of his responsibilities. The result, inevitably, is a withdrawal of trust by the master, who, in contrast, rewards generously and graciously those who are constant in their trust..

Put your trust in Christ and he will put greater trust in you, is the message. He trusts us to do what is right, and good and honest and decent and charitable because we are made in the image of God and all of that is hard-wired into us. He trusts us to act and when we do, he rewards us with greater opportunity. *To everyone who has, more will be given*, as the parable reminds us.

And as Cathy Ross reminded us at the start of our conference in that passage from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, to be involved with God is to accept our responsibility in being party to the relationship with him: *God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself... and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.*

When we get what we deserve, that is justice; when we don't get what we deserve, that is mercy; when we get what we don't deserve, that is grace.

And it is from the grace of God that he lavishes his trust upon us. Throughout scripture we read of God re-establishing trust with his people in spite of their repeated failure to justify that trust. Trust lies at the heart of every compact, every contract and agreement and we are called to trust as we are called to love – without restraint.

Tony Campolo story: The Campolo organisation runs social programmes in some of the most deprived areas in America's big cities. And it staff those programmes with college students and new graduates, many of whom have come from very privileged and wealthy backgrounds. One day, Tony Campolo's office door burst open as the father of one of these boys storms in to complain that his son has started behaving as if he's Jesus Christ! He's given away all his money, he's associating with these really disreputable characters and now, worst of all, he says he wants to abandon his very expensive course (intended to fast-track him into a lucrative finance career) to work with down and outs. In the middle of this long catalogue of complaints, the man suddenly stops himself and says: Don't get me wrong, I've got nothing against the church. I'm a Christian myself – up to a point!

A Christian up to a point. Where in Scripture does it say we can be Christians up to a point? Where does Jesus say: Trust me – until it becomes mildly inconvenient?

There is no line we can draw, no point we can reach where we can say: I've done enough. The command is to love God and to love our neighbour as we love ourselves, and the call is without limit and without end – and how can we love where we do not trust? The great news of the gospel is that we can do it. Jesus tells us that whenever we go, whenever we give of ourselves, whenever we love, we are in him and he is in us and his spirit will give us the strength, the courage, the vision, the endurance, the patience and the forbearance, all the spiritual and emotional resources we need, to do what he asks of us. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not about getting you and me into heaven and it's not about filling up our churches; it's a gospel for today. It's about getting us equipped to change a world that is, into the world that God wants it to be.

One of the great things about coming to events like this is that we see and celebrate the many and varied ways in which our core message shines out so strongly: that the world should not operate purely on the basis of economic efficiency; that the laws of the free market should not be seen as paramount; that the needs of the poor should not be subordinated to the desires of the rich; that the life of the planet should not be sacrificed to the pollution of our lifestyle.

As we leave, inspired, I hope; challenged, certainly, may we continue to proclaim a message that places love, dignity, respect and relationships at the heart of trade and society; a message that proclaims that society's goals should not be measured purely in terms of money, but should be concerned with human values, quality of life and the impact of policies on people and planet; a message that proclaims God's sense of fairness and his bias to the poor and calls each of us to work towards a vision of a world where all people are able to prosper and grow into the people God wants them to be. Amen.

With thanks to Steve Chalke, Tony Campolo and Reg Bailey for inspiring much of this sermon. The errors are all my own.

For more about restoring trust to its proper place in our society read: *Trust: A Radical Manifesto*, by Steve Chalke and Anthony Watkis, published by Authentic Media, priced £3.99.