

## *Mersey prophets*

I have to admit that I feel hugely under qualified to speak today, but also immensely humbled and honoured to be here.

I'm the Director of CAFOD, the development agency of the Catholic church in England and Wales. CAFOD provides financial and technical support and solidarity to hundreds of partners around the world – local experts who are working with people and communities - of all faiths and none - to build a better world. Whether it be emergency humanitarian assistance or long-term development we stand alongside these local experts, mobilizing the catholic community here to do so too.

This afternoon I want to share a few ways in which I have learned from them and then I will reflect a bit more on the theme of today – Listening for Hope at the Margins focusing on the three words: Listening, Margins and Hope.

For those who don't know me - and you can't tell from my accent - but I'm from Liverpool, and have worked with – and been inspired by – Tom, Kevin and Austin at different times in my life. I am acutely aware that there are people here who knew them far better than I. We each have our own stories!

I first got to know Tom when I was in school. We had a “retreat” day up in Ince Benet where I discovered that we were actually helping to build the place! Chopping up logs and clearing ground. I was struck by this bloke who wanted to live miles away from anywhere. Frankly I thought he was mad (and probably told him!) but he always treated this girl with a big chip on her shoulder with immense grace. Something he continued to do as he saw me grow up....

A few years later I was working for the Liverpool Justice & Peace Commission (an office of the Church) and met Austin. Of course I had heard about him a great deal before meeting him. And felt quite in awe. But he would always make me feel at ease with that twinkle and wicked sense of humour. We did have a connection because I'd come through the Young Christian Students movement and we shared a view that the simplicity of the See Judge Act method was a key way to help put faith into practice. And it also broke through the pomposity of academic theologians, which was something Austin loved to do to those in power!

Finally I came across Kevin, partly when we were organizing the National J&P conference held in Liverpool in 1988 and with some lobbying from Julian Filochowski we included a workshop on AIDs in Africa. Kevin got in touch. It was a contact that we continued, especially when about 15 years later I worked for another organisation (CIIR in full) and we were speaking out on the issue of HIV. I learned a lot from him about how to join our voices with those seeking to bring compassion into the church's position.

I feel hugely privileged to have been influenced, inspired and formed by those three men. Their legacy lives on in each of us, and the people and communities we seek

to stand alongside and serve today. We'll reflect more about that in the workshops and at the end of today we'll think more about how we put that legacy into practice now and going forward.

I'd like to share a few ways in which I feel I have learned from them and then I will reflect a bit more on the theme of today – Listening for Hope at the Margins.

#### Personal reflections

Thinking about each of them, a phrase kept coming into my mind. "Sitting at the feet". Not literally but usually sharing a mug of tea, or some form of soup in the case of Tom, would have been involved. Listening to them, not always understanding, but certainly being challenged.

Tom's sense of awe at **creation** and his radical living out of a **sustainable** lifestyle always struck me. When much later, I discovered the environment crisis and climate justice, his witness helped me see the connections of this to my faith.

Austin's unflinching **commitment to and belief in** the people of Liverpool 8 has always been a real lesson to me of how we need to consistently puncture that idea that people don't have solutions to their own situations, that people need to be told what to do. For my work now at CAFOD, it's a central theme. Our job is to help people be artisans of their own destiny as Pope Paul VI put it in *Populorum Progressio*.

I was reminded of Austin the other week we heard the story of Desmond Tutu and the impact on his life of Trevor Huddleston doffing his hat to Tutu's mother. He had never seen a white man/priest treating a black woman with respect in apartheid south Africa. That was what Austin did all the time – give respect to those who normally never had it (and I've referenced his joy at puncturing the pomposity of those who demanded respect that was unearned).

Kevin is perhaps mostly well known for pushing the boundaries of moral theology but his support of communities and initiatives like the Eldonians – a housing co-operative set up in 1983 by tenants of Eldon and Burlington Street in Liverpool - demonstrate that he wasn't just a man of words. However his focus on the church and her teaching revealed his recognition of the need to push the right levers of power. He knew that significantly more impact can be made by changing the policy than through an individual action.

For all three, **Tom, Austin and Kevin**, they were "the church" living out the gospel values – good news to the poor, love your neighbours, and doing so with real integrity. They mixed action, with compassion, respect and a sound political nous. Each of them understood the power of their witness and never took it lightly, although there was often a lot of humour.

This was a living out of a new model of church that the Second Vatican Council (meeting of Cardinals in the 1960s) promoted.

#### **The Church now**

Under Pope Francis, we are also seeing the resurgence of that Vatican II vision. At the time it was radical – in the true sense of the word, going back to the roots, to the witness and mission of Jesus himself – reaching out to those on the margins. Today when Pope Francis calls us to be a church of the poor for the poor, or for our ecological conversion, I see that the lives of Austin, Tom and Kevin are just what he's talking about. They were perhaps ahead of their time but actually, they were just authentically living out the gospel as Francis reminds us today.

*'Let us dream, then' the pope writes, 'as a single human family...as children of the same earth which is our common home...each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all.'*

So, as we are Listening for Hope at the Margins I am now going to reflect on those three main words in the light of what Tom, Austin and Kevin have taught me through their lives and witness.

### **The Margins**

Of course it is fundamentally wrong when people and communities are excluded, lack power or are not listened to. Pope Francis says in Let Us Dream:

*To recover the dignity of the people we need to go to the margins of our societies to meet all those who live there. Hidden there are ways of looking at the world that can give us all a fresh start....*

It isn't as if going to the margins is a bad thing, or a limiting thing – far from it:

*To embrace the margins is to expand our horizons, for we see more clearly and broadly from the edges of society.*

So it was with Tom, Kevin and Austin. They in their own way went to the margins – of a city, to stand alongside the marginalised communities – the Black community in L8 or those with HIV/AIDs. And they did see more clearly. It was the rest of the church perhaps that struggled to see it!

That's not to say that we ignore those in power or shy away. We need to engage with those in power and try to influence, but where do we speak from? Do we stand as allies with those on the margins?

Today in my work with CAFOD, we seek to listen to and amplify the voices of those on the margins in our world and stand with them in seeking to have their voices heard by those in power.

People like Anacleto Pires da Silva – a Quilombola leader and educator in Brazil. Quilombola people are descendents of slaves who escaped in Brazil and settled, so they are afro-brazilian, and very much on the margins.

Or Mapendo a young woman in Democratic Republic of Congo who was attacked and raped by militia in the war – despite sexual violence being a weapon of war in so

many places, they are silent victims. Not just of the atrocities they live with but from then being ostracized by their communities as they are alleged to bring shame.

Here at home, we have all been affected by the Black Lives Matter protests and the increasing recognition that racism is still alive and well in our society; it's systemic and structural. It's been a profoundly humbling experience for me to recognize my own privilege as I have listened to the experiences from people of colour across the development sector and even CAFOD's own staff.

People for whom their exclusion was so everyday most of us wouldn't even think – when a fellow CEO (black woman) tells her son to always print off a receipt when using the self-service tills because she knows of all the people who will be stopped, it will be him. Such a basic thing reminds of us how people are pushed to the margins by racist assumptions and ignorance as well as poverty, lack of opportunity and so on. This is what Austin in particular saw and felt.

Of course racism and exclusion are also within our own church. That's why Austin's witness was so powerful and why it's so important to discuss his legacy. I think there is still so much the church needs to speak out and act on in relation to racism – and the basis is already there in our teaching - the fundamental dignity of all life sitting alongside the preferential option for the poor.

The pervasive reality of racism is a bit different to Tom's concerns about creation and sustainability. But in Tom's day, concern for the environment was quite a marginal thing, whereas now concern for the environment is in the mainstream as evidenced by the activity around the recent COP26 which the UK govt hosted and continues to hold the Presidency until November. But even so there is much work to be done to ensure we take the necessary steps and work for meaningful climate justice – around the world and within our own societies. The current concerns about energy prices reflect that yet again it's the poorest who pay the price. Pope Francis has been loud and clear on the need for us to care for our common home.

He's also spoken out very clearly and strongly on the situation faced by migrants and refugees and the hostility of so many – calling us to build bridges not walls, and in Fratelli Tutti, he was hugely critical of political leaders who played nationalist politics with peoples lives.

Kevin was, I believe, hugely influential in helping us to see some of the massive developments in relation to HIV and AIDS provision although this issue is much less off the agenda. After a significant global effort, medication means that HIV and AIDS no longer needs to be the death sentence it once was but access to medication especially for the poorest in the world still remains an issue. I think that Kevin's work (along with others) has also shifted something in the church's consideration of the issue, but sexuality is still a neuralgic issue and I know many people still feel on the margins of the church as a result.

There is still a way to go for women's contribution to be fully recognized yet we are seeing many more women in leadership roles in agencies here and around the world.

We still have quite a lot of people and issues on the margins!

### **Listening**

Austin, Tom and Kevin were powerful because they listened and because of who they listened to.

They were changed by hearing the realities of those on the margins. This is what Pope Francis means when he talks about building a **culture of encounter** where we stop, get to know, listen, learn and be changed.

That will then affect how we speak ourselves – we can amplify their voices, stand alongside.

People like us who have power and influence (even if we don't always realise it)

I am struck by how many times CAFOD partners express real appreciation of the solidarity of people here in England and Wales. They want their stories to be told. Not as examples of people we feel sorry for – CAFOD works hard not to do that sort of poverty porn – but as people who have the solutions, telling the stories of local leadership and success is so important.

For Anacleta, CAFOD staff and our local partner supported her and HR defenders to meet with the UN Special Rapporteur. Despite being threatened and marginalized, she was heard by the UN and their office took up the cases. Anacleta gave a powerful testimony and sang a song which she composed herself. A reminder of the power of poetry which Austin knew so well.

For Mapendo she was listened to and is being supported by CAFOD Partner Centre Olame in DRC. The centre offers support and counselling to many women in her situation and they support “listening houses” a phenomenon across DRC to enable women to feel heard and supported.

Listening, being heard does change lives. The respect and affection with which the Black community in L8 held Austin was because he took the time to be with people, get to know. And face the flack.

I know from my own experience in CAFOD over the last two years, especially listening to the voices from our own BAME Network, that it is challenging to listen authentically and earn that respect. Especially when people are hurt from being ignored, being dismissed. This isn't easy and uncomfortable. In fact it's been painful for me at times.

Listening to the reality of people can be very hard – it's no wonder we might not want to do it. But this isn't about us, but about ways in which we can use our power and positions for the benefit of others. As Pope Francis puts it:

*Our greatest power is not in the respect that others have for us, but the service we can offer others. In every action we carry out for the sake of others we lay the foundations for restoring the dignity of our peoples and communities and in so doing allow us to better heal, care and share.*

For me, this sums up the witness of Tom, Austin and Kevin. As people who used their religious vocation in service of others and to restore that dignity in whatever ways they could.

So for us to listen to those on the margins is not just about a nice story, but is about us acknowledging their dignity, their abilities, their power and success. And allowing that to change us and our perspective.

The people who are CAFOD partners around the world that I meet or hear about are living lives in incredibly difficult circumstances, or facing violence and intimidation, or creating so much out of so little. The doctor recording every instance of gender based violence as a record of the human rights violations during conflict; The Human Rights lawyer who protects those defending the environment, the project providing space for young people in Gaza to develop skills – to an agenda set by them.

You will all have your own stories.

It is easy to feel overwhelmed but being heard, being listened to, is such an important way of recognising dignity and our common humanity. That is the foundation for hope.

## **Hope**

That is what this is about.

We know that our society is lacking. The way people on the margins are treated is appalling whether it's through racial injustice, attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers or those in poverty.

What these three prophets unlocked was hope. They brought hope **to** those on the margins through their life and witness but they also brought the hope **from** the margins to those of us who weren't. A hope from a different way of seeing the world, of being the church.

They illustrated a church that was on their side of those at the margins, that stood alongside them.

As CAFOD we try to do that – although we make more of a connection to Oscar Romero. But it's not just CAFOD – over the last couple of years especially we have all seen so many examples of great community organising. Foodbanks, charities, volunteering networks have loads of people of faith in them. Yet those voices are rarely listened to by those in power.

So a real sign of hope would be that as a church we were more vocal in asking "why" and doing it a hell of a lot more. We must speak out as well as provide the support.

We have to have hope in political change/change in policies. Because Austin, Tom and Kevin recognized this too. All three were in their own way deeply political animals. Never afraid to confront power - whether in church or society. Perhaps that's why we call them prophets. They spoke the truth of our situation, our society, of those on the margins. They all knew that the wrongs of society and the church

needed to be addressed. It wasn't enough for the church to be the sticking plaster, we need to speak out. To name it as Austin used to say!

They spoke out with hope, and gave us hope because they amplified the voices of those on the margins, not displaced them. They were allies with people for whom they had respect.

#### Final words

Today it can feel a real challenge to be an ally. But we are all given hope by seeing people doing it. Thinking about what Tom, Austin and Kevin have given to me, has strengthened my hope. In my work with CAFOD and the wider church - and all of us as we seek to support and stand alongside individuals, organisations or movements.

Hope and energy comes not from a sense of us having the answers, but from others, from the relationships and the encounters. Recognising the leadership and potential of others as well as recognising the pain.

That is humility. Those three prophets took huge hope from the people they supported because never felt that they had all the answers – although often they had huge insight and wisdom, so it would have been easy for them to lord it over us! But rather they stood alongside and take the journey with people and of course supporting each other in different ways.

That's what we at CAFOD try to do too - about recognising the leadership of local people – women especially – not pretending that we have all the answers. It's our job to walk alongside. To do together not do to.

Listening, with humility, bringing hope in from the margins. What a powerful legacy that we will reflect on more this afternoon.

I want to finish with a short extract from the poem by Bishop Ken Untener, 1979 which was a tribute to Oscar Romero, "it helps to step back and take the long view"

....

*We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realising that. This enables us to do something, and do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.*

In planting the seeds, watering the seeds someone else has planted are signs of hope. The vision of hope that Austin, Kevin and Tom all had, was of their small contribution. They allowed the grace to enter.

We are here to reflect on their legacies and seek to consider how we nurture and cherish what they have left us, but how we can continue to do what they did with others?

In the creativity, the poetry, the laughter, the silence. In the work, in the sometimes fruitless tasks, may we always allow the grace to enter.

## A Future Not Our Own

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.

Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No programme accomplishes the Church's mission. No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that produces effects far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realising that. This enables us to do something, and do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders;  
ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

Amen

Bishop Ken Untener, 1979