

Address by Roger Morris, Bishop of Colchester at Christian CND's AGM, 26th October 2019

A very warm welcome to God's own county of Essex

And a very special welcome to people from all denominations and none. Thank you for coming – thank you for caring, thank you that – in two thousand and nineteen with all that is going on in our nation and in our world you have chosen to say that this campaign still matters, that – as the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King once said unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality.

It is refreshingly radical to be gathered together in a large cathedral church in order to give thanks to God for the work of the Christian Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.

Our Cathedrals, Abbeys and Churches are symbols of God's great mission to reconcile the world to himself and to establish his just and gentle reign of peace.

They – we – are signs and agents of the Kingdom of God.

And so I long for and pray for a world in which nuclear weapons of mass destruction can be consigned to the history books rather than developed and deployed across the planet.

As we shall hear today, there is much to celebrate globally, there are real signs of hope but there is also much more to be done and signs of another arms race are never too far away.

As I sat preparing for today sipping from my 30 year old CND mug that says on it 'Make Tea Not War', I found myself reflecting on my early involvement with the peace movement; 'Walking around Westminster' with a donkey on Palm Sunday marching for peace and one very special memory from when I was at Imperial College London in the 1980s and invited Bruce Kent to speak to a gathering of students.

Many of the students at Imperial College were sponsored through training by the MOD and Bruce Kent's gentle, humble, sensible words left a legacy of conversation and conversion as people discussed and embraced a more peace-oriented way of life.

I was delighted to learn that this year the International Peace Bureau awarded Bruce Kent with its highest honour: the Sean MacBride prize.

But – you know, back in the 1980s, things were different.

I'm reminded of those times when I drive around Brentwood. I don't know if any of you noticed about 5 miles down the road from here the huge signs pointing to the Secret Nuclear Bunker at Kelvedon Hatch. In the midst of the Cold War that was a site designated for regional government though quite what would be left to govern after a nuclear explosion is anyone's guess.

It was an extraordinary era – the 1980s when the threat of nuclear annihilation seemed imminent.

The election of Ronald Reagan as President of the USA in 1980 gave many people the impression that it was now the trigger-happy finger of a B-movie cowboy that hovered over the infamous red button.

People became aware of the presence of US cruise missiles on British soil and this in turn led to the formation of the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, an iconic part of our history.

In 1980, the Home Secretary, William Whitelaw, more than trebled spending on civil defence. This led to the publication of a pamphlet entitled *Protect and Survive* which was distributed free to every household.

The leaflet contained advice about how, using a number of simple do-it-yourself techniques, one could construct a fallout room within the home.

We were also advised to paint all the windows in the house white so as to reflect the initial flash of light and heat. An inner refuge was to be constructed inside the fallout room using doors to make a lean-to and then piling sand, books and bags of clothing around it.

Finally, it was necessary to gather enough food, water and other provisions (such as toilet paper) to last the whole family fourteen days. All this added to a growing sense of disquiet:

Tom Beaudoin in his book *Virtual Faith* says this about growing up in the 1980s: 'In health classes, I watched grainy black-and-white movies displaying proper ways to store food in a fallout shelter and illustrating charts

about the number of days before a human could 'safely' return outside after a nuclear blast (we memorized charts detailing distances from the theoretical blast site).'

And he adds 'The degree to which we could calmly assimilate instructions about fallout shelters and radioactivity into our lives was a sobering measure of the degree to which we accepted radical uncertainty about our future.'

And it's true. Any news of troop deployments or political unrest had us almost loosening the hinges on the doors and panic buying tins of Heinz baked beans. People grew genuinely afraid and this led to a real sense of uncertainty about the future. Soon scriptwriters got in on the act and we were treated to films and TV dramas that began to reveal something of the real horrors that awaited us.

On November 20, 1983, over 100 million viewers in America tuned into 'The Day After' in which Kansas is obliterated by a nuclear attack. On the following day after the broadcast, Secretary of State George Schultz appeared on television in order to calm the fears aroused by the film. Counsellors were dispatched to high schools across America in order to ease the anxieties of those who had glimpsed something of the fragility of a world into which they had only recently been born.

The film *Threads* aired here in the UK which very graphically detailed the effects of a nuclear explosion over Sheffield. The film is harrowing and yet utterly credible. It engenders a sense of sheer helplessness. There is nothing anyone can do to relieve the suffering that is being played out on the screen. All you can do is hope that death will free them from their pain.

And a similar sense of helplessness was felt when watching the film *When the Wind Blows*, adapted from the book by Raymond Briggs. In this film, an elderly couple try to survive by following the advice laid out in 'Protect and Survive'. They are confused by dangers they cannot see and by an enemy they do not know. In the end, crippled by radiation sickness, they huddle together and pray.

The old man, in his confusion, quotes from Psalm 23 ('Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...'). This is a powerful film about innocent people suffering. It is made more poignant by the couple's inability to comprehend what is happening to them.

For those who emerged as adults during the 1980s, for those who – in the words of Freddie Mercury – ‘grew up tall and proud in the shadow of the mushroom cloud’, well, for many of us, insecurity and uncertainty about the future remain strong.

In the 1980s, we asked ourselves what we would do if we had only four minutes left to live (four minutes being the time that would elapse between the ‘attack warning’ sounding and the bomb going off). When the next four minutes could be the last four minutes of your life, you tend to see the world as much more fragile – this life as something so much more precarious.

By all accounts, the American film *The Day After* and a number of high profile ‘near-misses’ finally convinced Ronald Reagan that negotiation with the Soviet Union was the only way forward.

Since then, The Soviet Union had disintegrated, the Berlin Wall has been demolished and the Cold War thawed sufficiently for anxieties to subside once more.

The sense of immanent nuclear disaster began to wane. And while obscene amounts of money were still being spent on Trident; some tens of billions of pounds, I for one got on with getting on with life, I filed away my copy of *Protect and Survive* and stopped eyeing up which doors I would remove to build my little shelter.

But that lowering of anxiety – that complacency has in recent times given way to renewed fears – and a more urgent call to action.

There has been good news. In 2017 The United Nations adopted an international treaty banning nuclear weapons 122 countries voted in favour. The new treaty makes it illegal under international law to develop, test, produce, manufacture, acquire, possess, stockpile, transfer, use or threaten to use nuclear weapons. To date 79 states and 33 states parties have signed the treaty.

But here in the UK our government refused to participate and even issued a statement attacking the treaty.

Meanwhile our modest stockpile of up to 200 nuclear warheads remains. China has about 290, France around 300, India have somewhere between 130 and 140. Israel has an estimated 80-90 nuclear warheads, with fissile material for up to 200. And Pakistan has between 150-160. Russia has some 1,461 strategic warheads deployed on 524 intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and strategic bombers. The Federation of American Scientists (FAS) estimates that they also possess approximately 4,490 stockpiled warheads and 2,000 retired warheads.

And our friends the United States of America have 1,365 strategic nuclear warheads deployed on 656 intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and strategic bombers. The Federation of American Scientists estimates that they have approximately 3,800 stockpiled warheads and 2,385 retired warheads

But that is not all

This year President Donald Trump announced that the US would be withdrawing from the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty that banned ground-launch nuclear missiles with ranges from 500 to 5,500km. It was a treaty that had been signed by Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987.

It’s gone.

And this came on the back of the US withdrawal from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, a treaty which prevented Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

All this also calls into question whether Donald Trump will work with his Russian counterparts to renew the New START treaty the old one is due to expire the year after next.

And to cap it all the US is set to trial new nuclear missiles that exceed the INF treaty's limits and Russia - we know - has similar plans.

And don't even get me started on the 205 billion pounds that we in the UK are planning to spend on replacing Trident.

And no, I will not give thanks for that nuclear deterrent either.

All of a sudden the 1980s has come round again.

We are in a nuclear arms race and it really is a threat another threatened extinction to go alongside the urgent environmental crisis.

As a child of the nineteen eighties, I get a bit nostalgic for the music, the fashion, the films and television programmes of 30 - 40 years ago but I thought we were done with the proliferation of nuclear weapons I thought we had more sense.

But the truth is this, in twenty nineteen: This country – this world, needs the Christian Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament more than ever.

It needs you not passively – not nostalgically no – it needs you now – urgently, it needs you to campaign, it needs you to take action.

May God bless you – have a great day and ready yourselves to step up – to turn out – and to act.