



## **Address at the Service of Lament and Repentance on the occasion of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Anniversary of the Abortion Act 1967**

**Rt Revd Dr Michael Nazir-Ali, former Bishop of Rochester**

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Emmanuel Centre, Westminster, London

I'm so glad that we have chosen this title 'Choose Life' because we must come to an awareness of God's choice of life, of course this is a sombre moment as we think of the wastage of so much life but we must also as Christians be people of hope. This title of this campaign reminds us not only that God has chosen life but that we too must choose life. It goes back to creation itself when God makes man and woman and he makes them together in His own image. He gives them a common task, a common mission to fulfil – the stewardship of the whole of creation and we must of course have a concern for that. They are given this incredible responsibility of having children and making sure that the human story continues. The blessedness of children is celebrated in the Bible again and again and again in the Psalms and in so many parts of the Old Testament, by Jesus himself as He welcomes children and by the rest of the teaching in the New Testament about the place of children in family life.

It is quite clear that God's choice is not just for life, but for children, it's quite specific in the Bible. We must make sure that people know through the teaching of the church that having children is a good that God wills for families and for our world. In fact, it is clear now after so many years of anti-life propaganda that it is the nations that are growing in population whether it is India through natural growth or the United States, for example, mainly through immigration that will prosper in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The nations which are not growing for whatever reason, Western Europe comes to mind, will stagnate. I mean economically but we can also say socially. God's wisdom cannot be gainsaid simply by human propaganda. God chooses life.

It is clear that this choice of life, God's choice of children, goes back to the womb itself. We've just heard those wonderful verses from Psalm 139, the writer of the Psalms is aware that God has a purpose for him and has had this purpose since the very beginning, even as he was being formed and developed in his mother's womb. Again we find prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah in the Old Testament are aware of God's call to them from the womb itself, as of course was St Paul. Although there was that dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul knew that God's purposes for him did not begin there or the street called Straight but from the very beginning, the womb itself. We know that God has a gracious purpose in creating us and a gracious purpose in calling us and

that call, that personal destiny goes back to the womb. Creating and calling that of course brings about the possibilities of response. How can we know, what can we know about the way in which this growing life in the womb is already responsive to its creator? Something to think about.

God has chosen life and God has called us from the very beginning of our existence. And this is why in the Bible there are quite severe things said about causing a miscarriage, what we would now call causing an abortion. Even if the penalty for causing an abortion is not the same as killing the mother, nevertheless there is a serious recognition about what it means to cause a miscarriage or to bring about an abortion. Throughout history the Church has for twenty centuries now and more, upheld this teaching of the Bible. In a culture, where there was not only an attempt again and again to procure abortion through pharmaceutical means, which is condemned in the New Testament, but also where there was the exposure of infant children, the Church took a clear stand. And the church never made any distinction between the two; the exposure of the newly born was quite as serious as the abortion of the unborn. The seriousness of the sin, it is always sin, and the penalties attached to the committing of such a sin vary in terms of how many weeks the woman had been pregnant but the seriousness of the sin was always recognised. There was never any doubt however early, however late, this was something contrary to God's purposes. This consensus about human beings, the human person, the human life remained in place in this country as elsewhere in Europe and the United States until comparatively recently, as we were hearing at the Vigil. The seriousness of the '67 Act has to do with the numbers who have been affected by it, mothers and children but it also has to do with breaking this moral and spiritual consensus which had been at the basis of society for so long. It was said, of course, that this had to do with hardship. We all know the arguments that were used at the time, that women whose lives were in danger were being further jeopardised by the illegal abortions, backstreet abortions and so on. Sometimes it was said it had to do with the fact that the foetus would not live in any case. All those extreme arguments were used and lawyers know that hardship must never become the reason for making law if it is the only reason. We know now that it wasn't hardship at all, it wasn't hard cases making bad law that might have been forgivable, if it was hard cases making bad law.

There was actually a distinct philosophy of the autonomy of the person of the woman. I think this is what lies at the root of so much revisionist legislation whether here or in Europe, the United States or wherever it may be. This is a particular view that a woman only has a say over what is happening in her own body. This is a claim for radical autonomy and I think that it is this that needs to be challenged for two reasons. One, for the sake of the unborn child, the welfare of the child was upheld in legislation until recently in this country. Of course a woman has rights over her own body and of course these rights must be respected. Of course we cannot condone any abuse of the body of any woman or of her person and any violation of that that must be said. However that then needs to be balanced with the rights and the needs of the child not yet born. This is always the case isn't it whether in law or in life. We need to balance the rights and responsibilities of the one against the rights and responsibilities of the other. What rights does the unborn child have, who will stand up for the unborn child who of course cannot stand up for himself or herself?

It is clear that even in law, some of these rights are recognised. For instance, law recognises that if there was damage caused to an unborn child then that child later on can sue for the damage that has been caused. This came out particularly with the thalidomide cases didn't it? The rights to an unborn child to inheritance, to a limited extent, are also recognised. It is not that law does not know that the unborn child has some rights, it is simply a failure in this instance to recognise those rights.

The other reason for limiting autonomy is that no-one, man or woman is entitled to radical autonomy. Each one of us is limited in one way or another by the world and circumstances in terms of the freedom that we can have and exercise in our world.

In addition to the status of the unborn child there is also the common good, what society needs and requires and recognises as good for it. How we treat children whether newly born, growing up or indeed unborn, how we treat children determines what sort of society we are. This is why Jesus welcomed children saying 'do not forbid them, let them come to me, for such is the Kingdom of Heaven.' This is a provision for the child being at the centre of the concerns of the Kingdom. Therefore when Christians think of society in terms of the Kingdom and its values, the child must be at the centre, whatever its stage of development.

Now we have been thinking today regrettably of abortion in its traditional forms, and how horrible they are. Preparing for today I was reading, that as the foetus develops in the mother's womb the procedures for abortion get more and more terrible, there is no need to remind you of that horribleness but we need to acknowledge that it is very horrible. But as Pastor Ade was correctly saying in his prayer, there are new concerns about the ending of life to which we must turn our attention. These concerns take three forms; the first question is about assisted fertility. It is good, generally speaking, to help men and women to have children, of course it is. But when we do so, we must do so provided that does not cause the destruction of embryos, foetuses, unborn babies – whatever you want to call them. It is, I think, technically possible, even with the techniques of In Vitro Fertilisation to bring about the birth of children without destroying embryos. This is almost never done, because it would affect success rates and would affect the reputations of practitioners and clinics. So the principle that we need to hold onto is that yes, to assist people to have children is a good thing but not at the cost of destroying other people, that's fairly obvious isn't it?

Secondly we must make a clear stand against the creation of embryos simply for research, this is happening now more and more. If someone is carrying a child there is some ownership of that unborn child even when there is jeopardy, there is ownership. But what about these embryos that are being created simply for research to be 'disaggregated', that is the euphemism, when the researchers' purposes have been fulfilled. Who is going to speak for them?

Thirdly I think we have to stand up to the lie that embryonic stem cell research is the way forward in terms of treatment. All the evidence so far is that it is not embryonic stem cells but adult stem cells that have been reprogrammed suitably so that they can be used for treatment. Yet embryos continue to be produced simply then to be destroyed so that their stem cells can be harvested.

We must continue to campaign against this terrible figure of 200,000 plus abortions per annum, but that is just traditional, old fashioned, conventional abortion. That does not include the increasing number of embryos destroyed needlessly in fertility treatment, in embryonic research and in developing research and treatment with embryonic stem cells.

So Brothers and Sisters I'm so glad that we have chosen life because our God has chosen life and it is absolutely right, as Pope John Paul used to say, to celebrate a culture of life, rather than of death. We pray that God will continue to give us the courage and the hope to choose life.

For more information, please contact:

**Christian Concern**

[www.christianconcern.com](http://www.christianconcern.com)

020 7935 1488

[info@christianconcern.com](mailto:info@christianconcern.com)

**Choose Life**

[www.chooselifecampaign.org](http://www.chooselifecampaign.org)

[info@chooselifecampaign.org](mailto:info@chooselifecampaign.org)