

# The Bishop of Winchester

The Rt Revd Michael Scott-Joynt

Wolvesey, Winchester SO23 9ND

Telephone: 01962 854050 Facsimile/telephone: 01962 897088

Email: michael.scott-joynt@dsl.pipex.com

[www.winchester.anglican.org](http://www.winchester.anglican.org)



The Diocese of  
Winchester



THE CHURCH  
OF ENGLAND

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## “the kingdom of God has come near” (Mark 1.15)

A fortnight ago today I was in Bunia, close to the Eastern edge of the Democratic Republic of Congo; I'd been invited by the still-new Anglican Archbishop to be present at the Meeting of the Bishops and to give a daily, tone-setting Address – and to preach on the Sunday before the Meeting. In the days before, he had invited me to visit Boga, still nearer the border with Uganda, and the seat of the Diocese because the place to which the first Anglican missionary in Congo, the Ugandan Apolo Kivebulaya, came in 1903 - and stayed for 30 years until his death. In four previous visits to the country I had never been there; and I had long wanted to visit the place from which the Congolese Anglican Church had grown, and to pray where the deeply revered Apolo had lived and prayed.

I sat in the church - *La Cathedrale de St Apolo Kivebulaya*, I read over the inside of the West door – in the dusk and as it got dark on the Thursday evening, with a group of 20-25 local Christians, lay and ordained, whom the Bishop had invited to meet me and to talk with me. It occurred to me that some of them might have grown up with family memories of Apolo; so I asked how many of their parents or grandparents had been brought to Christ by Apolo's ministry. About half of them put up their hands; and then I heard direct from them, what I'd heard from others and read, how Apolo had been a good and humble man, how he had quietly persevered through all kinds of opposition and difficulty and illness, how he had been consistent, and brave, and gentle; how he had come “*just with his Bible and his hoe*” – that is, he grew his food, he was not a cost on the people among who he came to live; he won them to Christ and to Christian behaviour through the consistent goodness that people perceived in him.

And as I left the Church that night, I spotted a Foundation Stone laid at its opening in February 1971 by the then Canon John V. Taylor of the Church Missionary Society - 4 years before he came here as Bishop! I was moved to learn that that good man had been there, too, before me!

The Anglican Church in Congo has grown from Apolo's faithfulness – from his humble, persevering trust that in his Lord Jesus “**the kingdom of God has come near**” (Mark 1.15): in Jesus, out of the power and love of his Risen Presence among us, God makes it possible for any who will receive him, individuals and societies, to have God as King, to live in obedience to Him, to have Jesus as Lord.

Committed to preaching here this Sunday long before any of us knew that we should now be in the throes of an Election, I'm going briefly to explore what this Faith asks at this time not only of us – asks of our prayers and our questions to candidates - but asks too of those who seek to govern us.

In the title of two documents, the first published in 1996 and the second a few weeks ago, the Roman Catholic Bishops of England and Wales have given us what I find to be a very helpful two-word summary of what should govern our concerns as Christians: *The Common Good*.

The words challenge fundamentally what has most struck me about the election campaign to which I returned ten days ago from Bunia: the assumption that everyone's vote will be, may legitimately be, cast on the basis of a reckoning about "what's in it for me?".

But if the *Common Good* is our governing concern, we are called to think too about others with whom we are bound up, whether in this country, or across the world; and as we fail to do so, and as our political leaders of every colour fail to encourage us to do so, we are less than fully human, we fall short of the image of God that we have been given to see in Jesus, and into which he calls us to grow in and as his Church for his world.

If the *Common Good* is our governing, beckoning concern, taught by our Lord and by Scripture, then our own attention, and through us that of those who seek election, must be specially directed to the needs and the care of those who are vulnerable – those who are poor, old, young, ill, in any way marginalised – and not only in our own society, but across the rest of the world too. So the Millennium Development Goals, and the control of Climate Change for the sake of future generations, and the freeing of millions from the destructive shadow of armed conflict and from the rape and pillage that goes with it, must be on the same page, viewed with the same eye, as, say, Education and Health in the UK.

If the *Common Good* is our governing concern, then those who govern, here and across the world, must live as people accountable to those they govern; and they must in turn hold accountable, for the sake of those for whom they have responsibility, institutions as well as individuals who exercise power and who hold and control and manipulate wealth – in a society, and in a period, in which the gulfs between richer and poorer, whether individuals or States or institutions, continue to grow rather than to diminish.

If the *Common Good* is our governing concern, then at every level, from our personal behaviour at home and at work, to the behaviour of parliamentarians and Governments and of financial and all kinds of other institutions, we must be prepared to talk freely (not apologetically!) about, to encourage and to expect "virtue" - goodness, behaviour that will stand exposure to the light – and the more critically, the more power and responsibility a person is appointed to exercise. What is required, of everyone, is seeking in every circumstance to **"act justly, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God"** (Micah 6.8); which will always be vastly more demanding, but also more life-bringing to others but also to the one who is seeking to live this way, than any Code of Rules however exhaustively designed.

This was Apolo's example and teaching, as I heard at one remove ten days ago in Boga – because it was the example and the teaching, and the gift and the call, of his Lord and ours. It is for us to follow him ourselves, and now to find ways of placing commitment to the *Common Good* at the heart and as the mainspring of our public and political life.