On Friday night I was in St. Mary’s Guildhall for a Civic Heads dinner – and, as usual, I was asked to say grace. I thought of suggesting that it underlined the truth affirmed by the Prime Minister and the Archbishop of Canterbury this week that we are, indeed, a Christian country. I didn’t say anything, but the point was not lost on at least one of the guests.

Are we a Christian Country? Do you want us to be? What does it mean if we are – or are not?

It’s been another great week in the media for demonstrating that the Church of England, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, continues to be a consuming public interest. It all sparked off with our trade paper, the Church Times, who had achieved the considerable coup of an article on Good Friday by the Prime Minister, celebrating England’s Christian heritage. He wrote: ‘I believe we should be more confident about our status as a Christian country, more ambitious about expanding the role of faith-based organisations, and, frankly, more evangelical about a faith that compels us to get out there and make a difference to people’s lives’. He went on to point out the value of faith as a ‘guide or helpful prod’ towards a moral code, and a source of strength in the ‘toughest of times’, before returning to his opening theme: ‘greater confidence in our Christianity can also inspire a stronger belief that we can get out there and actually change people’s lives, and improve both the spiritual, physical and moral state of our country, and even the world.’

His letter – which included several personal confessions of a ‘classic Church of England’ sort of faith – provoked a strong riposte in a letter to the Daily Telegraph by some 50 people including Sir Terry Pratchett and Philip Pullman, suggesting that the Prime Minister’s remarks were to ‘foster alienation and division in our society’, and had ‘negative consequences for politics and society’. Predictably, others have entered the fray, with the Archbishop of Canterbury describing the negative response to Cameron’s article ‘baffling’, and the deputy leader of the coalition calling for disestablishment. It’s been great. (Oh, and in case you missed it, there was a letter in the Guardian from your very own Dean on Tuesday, celebrating the architectural richness of the cathedral).

So, are we a Christian country – and if so, is that a good thing? And how does it relate to the narrative of the Easter season, which we continue to celebrate in churches across much of the world this week. This is one of those moments when the one sidedness of a sermon becomes slightly awkward – it’s not the right context for a conversation, so I’ll tell you a little of what I think, and we can talk about it together later.

History is clear. This country has been shaped by Christianity, amongst other traditions. It has also, for example, been shaped by classical history, law and politics – the traditions of Greek philosophy and the Roman Empire have played a significant part in making us who we are. It is not only Christians who understand that a strong and civilized society is built around the importance of the family, around a legally undergirded commitment to the common good, and to the primacy of law and justice. The Golden Rule – love your neighbor as yourself – is found at the heart of most, if not all, world religions. Yet the expression of faith which has informed, inspired, guided, and provided a framework of accountability for those from the highest to the lowest echelons of society in this country has been, for around 1400 years, Christianity. It is Christianity that has provided a common moral framework, source of inspiration, and guidance and
strength across society. It continues to be one of the most significant common bonds across our society – whether to celebrate or to rail against, it is unquestionably a shared point of reference.

But does this mean we are a Christian country? When Henry VIII declared himself Head of the new Church of England in 1534, it was a natural thing to do. He had become increasingly concerned about the claims of political power of the Pope, expressed through a bench of Bishops who were about as English as most Premier league football teams are today. He was a genuinely religious man, attracted by some of the new teaching of the Protestant Reformers – despite having been awarded the title ‘Defender of the Faith’ by the Pope himself only thirteen years earlier (1521). But he considered himself responsible for his people, in both their temporal and spiritual lives. For hundreds of years, to be English was presumed to mean being Christian, and was to be Catholic – now, to be English was still to be Christian, but also to be Protestant. The comings and goings of the next 150 years or so established, not without significant pain and sacrifice, a Church of England whose boundaries were defined not so much by doctrine as by sea – in other words, the breadth and possibility of diversity and debate over quite fundamental issues of doctrine was built into a faith which was there to embrace the religious aspirations of a whole, and varied society.

That’s the Church of England that I love, and sits behind, in my view, the threefold commitment in our own Coventry Community of the Cross of Nails to: healing the wounds of history; learning to live with difference and to celebrate diversity; and building a culture of peace. It is, at its best, a uniquely hospitable faith that invites everyone who makes their home in this country to find their home in its most symbolic buildings – its churches. (Our most symbolic buildings are either churches, or stately homes and castles – the former belonging to everyone, the latter there to celebrate a very different sort of power.) To explore the great questions of life, and to bring their emotions of joy and pain, to gather to celebrate or to mourn, to be alone or together. Church of England churches stand at the heart of communities up and down our land, and are rightly seen as belonging to all.

Of course, over the years, the toleration and hospitality of the Church was sometimes observed more in the breach. For many years it was a ‘forced hospitality’ – everyone was invited to belong, but if you refused that invitation you were excluded from political or other aspects of the life of society. I’ve found it wryly amusing that much has been said this week of the Christian value of ‘toleration’ – the word only occurs in scripture rarely, and then negatively. We are called to love, not tolerate others. In fact Christians, and Anglican Christians, have often been intolerant of those who are different than themselves – in this we have often not commended ourselves.

Yet for all its failings, the Church of England remains an astonishing presence in the heart of our social fabric in this country. I love hearing our own Ulster Anabaptist, David Porter observe with astonishment how doors ‘fly open’ in Westminster, in the seat of political power, at the name of the Archbishop of Canterbury. We have a voice beyond our strength. And this, I suppose, is what irks those who wrote to the Telegraph this week. But that voice, at its best, is part of our country’s conscience. It is not afraid to challenge, to bring a different perspective – which may be embraced or resisted, rightly or wrongly. I was ordained around the time of the ‘Church and the Bomb’, and ‘Faith in the City’ – two reports that challenged the Thatcher government on issues which touched a wide range of society, and raised the level of public debate. More recently, the controversy around Women Bishops and Same Sex marriage have drawn public debate in ways that have enabled a wide variety of views to be heard and exchanged. I find it strange that popular opinion still often assumes a politically conservative, reactionary culture in the church: a long and wide ranging conversation with one of my more distant relatives last year concluded with him suggesting that some more liberal views might not be warmly received in a cathedral. I was bold enough to suggest that this cathedral – about which he had been sounding quite enthusiastic - sported a significantly large number of Guardian readers. ‘Oh dear!’ he said. (But I digress?)

So are we a Christian country? Actually, I’m afraid we are – like it or not, at least for now. What that means is that the Church – or at least, the Church of England - remains a natural gathering place for everyone who makes their home here – a natural place for celebration, for mourning, for personal reflection, and public declaration. It is a host not just to those who are Christians, but also warmly welcomed but those of other faiths – for whom the Church of England often also speaks in the public sphere. That also raises challenges
for the church – if we want to say that everyone belongs, where is the distinctiveness to which the scriptures bear such clear witness? That takes us back into a theological conundrum of our faith, and our own response to God: in truth, God was reconciling the world to himself – so everyone belongs, without exception – but we are all personally challenged to live out the implications of that belonging. Our job is to proclaim and to demonstrate that ‘everyone belongs’ – to make everyone at home – and to leave the rest up to them, and to God. It’s not toleration: it’s much more demanding than that.

Here in Coventry we find ourselves at the centre of our Civic and community life – so we might want to ask ourselves, is this a Christian City? Well, our Christian heritage lies at the heart of our identity – going back at least to Lady Godiva, and her willingness to embrace personal humiliation for the sake of the poor. It gives us principles of dedication to the common good for all to aspire to – and for those of us who are Christians, assures us of the heavenly resources in carrying out a heavenly task: the inspiration and power of the Holy Spirit. As Christians – and specifically as Anglican Christians – we are entrusted with the heart of the city in a unique manner, and we need to exercise that trust responsibly, with humility and generosity.

Our vocation as a church is, I believe, to have blurry and soft edges, but – because our boundaries need to be so open – our heart needs to be strong, expressing the heart of Christ for all, and grateful for the task he has given us at the heart of our national and community life.

May God give us grace to fulfil this vocation, and to see his Kingdom grow.