



The Right Honourable The Baroness Cox, of Queensbury
“Leading With Courage”

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Mesdames, messieurs, bonjour. Thank you all for inviting me to be here on this special occasion. I'd like to begin, if I may, by introducing myself a little more modestly.

All I ever say about myself, is I am a nurse and a social scientist by intention. That's what I thought I was doing with my life. I am a Baroness by astonishment. I can tell you it was God's sense of humour.

You become a Baroness by being appointed to the British House of Lords, like your Senate. I wasn't into politics. I'm also very shy. And so, I got this message from Margaret Thatcher at the time, in response to my work I tried to do for academic freedom in the UK, that I had a place in the House of Lords.

I sort of said to the good Lord, “Well, Lord, what is this all about?”

And I didn't move in those circles. I was so much not in those circles, I was the first Baroness I had ever met. You wake up one morning and you find a Baroness looking at yourself in the bathroom mirror...quite a shock, you say. What a privilege, of course, to be able to speak to one of the highest levels of the British Parliament. How do I use this privilege?

I think the message came very clearly. It's a wonderful place to be a voice for those who have no voice, or who have voices and voices which are not heard. So, I tried to use the big privilege of being able to speak in the House of Lords.

Now one of the ways in which I've tried to take forward that mission...that mandate, was to establish my own little not for profit, or charity called Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust, or HART...the blandest possible name you could use deliberately, because we try to behave in a very inconspicuous way.

We try to speak for people who are suffering oppression and persecution, who are often trapped behind closed borders, or in areas which are not reached by major aid organizations. That happens, because if you have an oppressive regime that is oppressing people in its own

borders and doesn't give permission to the big aid organizations to reach those victims with aid or advocacy, they don't go. And so, there's victims left unreached, unhelped, unheard.

So, I do spend a lot of my time crossing borders, a little bit unofficially, sometimes illegally, to be with those people who are in need of aid or advocacy. We work through local partners and they are the real heroes and heroines holding front lines of faith and freedom in some of the most challenging parts of our world today.

Now, the Biblical mandate is to heal the sick, feed the hungry and speak for the oppressed. Not just the Christian hungry, or the Christian oppressed. We are available for all in need.

We work, for example, in Shan State in Burma, where the Shan people are suffering in a way that hasn't hit the headlines like the Rohingya, whose suffering is very real. But there is heavy fighting going on in Shan State. They are Buddhist. We don't hear what is happening to them.

So, we work with Shan Women's Action Network across the border into Shan State. In Blue Nile, in Sudan, it is dominantly the Muslim people who are suffering at the hands of the Khartoum regime. And it's our privilege to be alongside them.

But most of our partners are actually Christians, because most of the people suffering persecution today are Christians. Christian persecution is at an all-time high. So, it's a great privilege to be alongside them, with aid, with advocacy and then to come back and try to tell their story.

Sometimes it's a bit scary and you mentioned that wonderful verse in Joshua 1:9, "*Have I not commanded you to be strong and of good courage. Be not afraid, nor be thou dismayed. For I the Lord your God am with you wherever you go.*"

It's my confirmation text. I was confirmed many, many decades ago, and that was my confirmation text.

I have to confess that I am often afraid, I am often dismayed. And sometimes when we're going into war zones and very high intensity conflict zones, I'm terrified. But I have to learn to cross that frontier of fear.

And we all have frontiers of fear. And they won't necessarily be the kind of frontiers of fear which I'm going to cross. But, what I find again and again, is if you do and when you do cross that frontier of fear, you meet the most amazing people. You meet heroes and heroines of faith. And we always come back humbled and inspired, receiving more than we could ever, ever give.

So, I'm going to invite you, [...] just very briefly, to travel with me to three of those areas with some of our wonderful partners, which we have visited in recent times and you'll see why we come back so humbled and inspired.

In the Sudan, the Islamist [government] regime, which is responsible for the previous war against the South in the Nuba Mountains, in which two million perished, four million were displaced, tens of thousands taken into slavery.

I went there 40 times in the previous war, and every month [government regime] would publish a list of areas that were open to United Nations Operations (?) in Sudan and the forbidden areas. And of course, it would carry out its military offenses in the no go areas, so no one could take aid to the victims, or tell the world what it was doing.

I went 40 times to those no-go areas, all parts of South Sudan, Nuba Mountains, the Beja people in the East. And [the government] did not love me very much, because you told the world what they didn't want the world to know. We took aid to victims they didn't want to receive aid. So, they gave me a prison sentence for illegal entry, which I'm serving in absentia. Thank you very much [...] for accepting a convict. I really do appreciate your openness.

But you meet the most amazing people, but you also come across the most amazing suffering. That regime is now carrying out their genocidal policies. We hear about Darfur. We don't hear about the Nuba Mountains and Blue Nile.

Earlier this year I was in Sudan, across the border (unofficially) in the Nuba Mountains, and there the regime has been attacking its own people, bombing their villages. They've had to flee by hiding in caves in the mountains, caves with deadly snakes.

When we arrived in that part of the Nuba Mountains, I said to the local commissioner, "Commissioner, I do need to see what's happening to these people, because I need the evidence to go back and tell the British government."

Well I slightly regretted that the next day. They took us in a vehicle to the bottom of a rather large mountain. And I had fallen over at Juba Airport and banged my knee, and it was a two and a half hour climb up that mountain in 100 degrees. And here it's quite cool in Ottawa today, compared to what it was like there.

I wouldn't have missed it for anything. It was so important to be there, to be alongside those people, in those caves, with deadly snakes. I met a girl who had been bitten by a cobra and survived, when most don't.

The situation there is dire. But it's important to go and come back and say, "I've been, I've seen and this is how it really is." And to challenge the British government, which at the moment is having a love affair with Khartoum. And the United States government is about to lift sanctions against that regime, which is still carrying out its genocidal policies against the three areas of Darfur, Blue Nile and the Nuba Mountains.

Secondly, if you will come with me, to northern Nigeria. It has been my privilege to be in northern Nigeria probably 30 times. The situation in northern Nigeria in the Sharia states has been very dire for Christians, for many decades. Hundreds of churches have been destroyed, many thousands of Christians killed.

With the rise of Boko Haram and the rise of terror, many Muslims have also been killed. It is a reign of terror, but [we have a] wonderful partner there... [He and his wonderful wife] have suffered so much, but they have suffered with such incredible faith and dignity.

A few years back, militants went to kill [this Christian leader.] They tried to kill him and [his wife] many times before, they have just escaped. On this occasion, [he] wasn't there. You see, they took my beloved friend's [wife] and they did the most horrendous things to her. I won't go into detail, as you can imagine, with broken glass and with splintered wood, and they tramped on her so much, that she was blinded temporarily.

Well of course [he] went back immediately. And I got one of the most dramatic and poignant emails I will ever receive. He began with characteristic African resilience...indeed humor. He said,

"When I came back home immediately...I've now been home for 24 hours. I've had time to sit and think and pray. And I had to laugh, because even when I was a little boy, my mom used to pray so hard that I would be a Christian. And I knew that when Christians in Nigeria get into trouble, Christians in the West pray for us. (And it's good for Christians in the West to have to pray, so maybe we should get into trouble more often.)"

Then he got serious. He said,

"I've just come from the hospital. My beloved is able to sit to receive her communion, then we had a wonderful time of prayer and worship together. We just praised God. We'd been found worthy to suffer for His Kingdom. And we prayed that all [her] pain, anguish, and humiliation would be used for His Kingdom, His glory and the strengthening of His church."

To praise God for that torture, that's the faith, that is the incredible miracles of grace we encounter with our persecuted brothers and sisters of those front lines of faith and freedom.

Then finally, for the moment because time is limited, Syria. I've had the privilege of visiting Syria, I was there last September. I was there in Western Aleppo, when ISIS was still in Eastern Aleppo. It was an amazing visit. It was organized for us by the Armenian community in Western Aleppo. But they invited all the different faith traditions: the other Christian traditions, and their Imams and the Mullahs, and the Yazidis. And they entertained us to an open-air banquet. They didn't have much food; all they had, they gave. We didn't know the sacrifice behind what they gave us.

And we sat there and the bombs were falling. You see, we were just 350 meters from the ISIS front line. But throughout the dinner, they arranged for a quintet to play music. So, the music played while the bombs fell. That's Armenia for you; that's the spirit of living faith. The next day they had a service in the Armenian church and everyone came. The two front rows were filled with the Mullahs and the Imams, Yazidis and of course the Christians were there. They had a children's choir which sang again while the bombs were falling.

Now afterwards, I will never forget the [leader] came up and the image of what he said is seared on my mind forever. He reminded us of the story of Thomas, doubting Thomas the Apostle. And how, when the Lord appeared to the other disciples, Thomas wasn't there. And Thomas said, "Well I'm not going to believe unless our Lord appears to me...unless I can put my hand into His wounded hands, my hand into His wounded side. I won't believe until I can."

Then our Lord came and said, "Thomas put your hand into My wounded hands. Put your hand into My wounded side. Then believe, go and tell."

Then this [leader] said to us, "Thank you, you have come to us. You have put your hands into the wounds of our suffering. Now you believe, go and tell."

What a pointed image, you have put your hand into the wounds of our suffering. What a privilege, and we have to believe, go and tell.

So, those are some of the examples which I have tried to speak in the British House of Lords. I wasn't popular for going to Syria. The British government was furious that I went. They didn't want us to go, because they felt we would ruin British foreign policy. I now know what British foreign policy is, and I'm afraid it's forced regime change is the last thing anyone we met in Syria wanted. It was terrifying, bringing another Iraq, another Libya. They didn't want it.

So, I came back and challenged the British government and got eaten alive [...]. [This] takes some courage in the Parliamentary context. But I'd also sent a copy of our report to every member of the House of Lords. And they all supported me. And three out of four British ambassadors to Syria said, "You are absolutely right."

So that's the parliamentary arena, for being a voice for those whose voice are not heard in some of the challenging parts of the world.

Just before I finish, on home front. We've got many issues on the home front back in the UK. And one issue I do want to share with for your prayerful concern. Freedom of religion and belief we passionately believe in.

But we are having a real problem in the UK at the moment with the growth of Sharia law, Sharia councils, Sharia courts and the suffering of Muslim women from religiously sanctioned gender discrimination. That suffering is horrendous. In Sharia law, a man can just divorce a wife by

saying, "I divorce you" three times, and she is left destitute, with no rights forever. And yet she's had a legal marriage, which most have not had.

Then polygamy. You know we don't allow bigamy in Britain, but polygamy is rampant in many of those communities. One of my Muslim lady friends, they come and share their anguish with me. I weep with the Muslim ladies who tell me their stories. They say in some of their communities, Muslim men may be having up to 20 kids each, growing up in dysfunctional families, vulnerable to extremism and indeed, demography may change democracy.

But it's the suffering of the women...that's what gets to my heart and gives me the passion. I feel that I have to speak in Parliament, because the suffragettes would be turning in their graves if they knew what was happening to Muslim women in Britain today. And also, what is happening is a threat to the fundamental principle, one law for all, that fundamental principle of democracy. We're a country that signed Magna Carta 800 years ago. Now we now have a parallel legal system.

Just two little stories of the suffering of the Muslim women and why I feel so passionate that I have to speak out on this in the British Parliament. I'm afraid that the first has a gynecological aspect to it. Forgive me for that, but it's the reality.

There's a good friend of mine who is a gynecologist and he described how a 63-year-old Muslim man, brought his 23-year-old wife to have repair of hymen which is an illegal operation in Britain. So, my friend said, "Why? It's not a legal operation."

And this man said, "I want to take my wife back to Pakistan. I want to marry her again to another man. He will get a visa to come to Britain and I get 10 000 pounds for doing this."

Happening in Britain today. This lady, imagine, a 23-year-old being used like that.

And just before I came here, just a few weeks ago, so many Muslim women came and shared their anguish with me. This lovely lady came. She was suicidal. She was in floods of tears. She had just been divorced by her husband. The divorce came through the post. The Imam said, "Yes, you are indeed divorced."

She was left destitute. And then her husband started bad mouthing her, calling her broken glass, blamed her for the divorce. So, she is discredited, ostracized in her community, both in the UK and back home in the country she came from. She has lost her children. She is destitute, desolate, suicidal.

My friends, this is happening in Britain today and I just felt like I had to do something about this. I had to speak up and I had to run the risk perhaps of being called "Islamophobic." But I think the Holy Spirit gave me an inspiration.

The way which I have raised these issues and by introducing two private Members' bills into the British Parliament, the House of Lords. And those private Members' bills focus on the suffering of Muslim women, the gender discrimination, this suffering they should not be allowing in our country today and the threat to one law for all. And people can speak about that. And if anyone is interested, I can send them a copy of the last debate we had on this topic in January this year. I had support from all parts of the House of Lords. [...]

Our government doesn't really want to know. But I believe passionately in freedom of religion and belief. But I don't think we can allow any rulings or institutions which are categorically incompatible with the fundamental laws, values, principles, policies of our nation.

So, I've had to speak out about this. I run the risk of being called "Islamophobic." But no, *The Daily Telegraph*, one of our major papers, did an article and the heading was, "*They'd Love to Call Me Islamophobic, But I Love Muslim Women.*"

And I do. And I love them and feel that one has to speak up for them.

So, these are some of the opportunities God has given me to try to use the freedom we are blessed to have in countries such as Britain and Canada. And may I just say, you have a wonderful Canadian academic, Raheel Raza. And she's a great friend. And she has done a lot to stop the development of Sharia law here in Canada. And she has come to Britain to support our Muslim women over in Britain.

So, so much to share, but so many challenges. But I really believe passionately, and I hope this has come across, that we value freedom. It's such a precious thing. We must never take our freedom for granted. And we have to use our freedom on behalf of those who do not have their freedoms.

So, thank you for letting me share a little bit of the pain, and the passion and the privilege of trying to make a little bit of a difference in some of the challenging parts of our world today. Whether in countries such as Sudan, Nigeria, Burma, or back in our own country, where we have a responsibility for our own citizens. Thank you so much.

Disclaimer: Some details, such as names and places, have been omitted to protect those involved.