

Speech: Shrove Tuesday reception 2017: Prime Minister's speech

I am delighted to welcome you to Number 10 and to have this opportunity as Prime Minister to thank you all for the service you give to our country and for the difference you make to so many lives, day in and day out.

There was some discussion about when in the Christian year we might hold this reception. I thought you might appreciate Shrove Tuesday, not just because of its position before the start of Lent – which is such an important time for all of us as Christians.

Today we have on display in the State Dining Room some historical records from Shrove Tuesdays in Britain dating back over 550 years. And I am grateful to Patricia Humphries from the National Archives who has come here today to talk us through them. Although I'm not sure all our pancakes will quite match the Shrove Tuesday feast held in Edinburgh for Mary, Queen of Scots in February 1564!

I am delighted in particular that we have here with us today people from all parts of the church and the United Kingdom – including the Black Majority Churches, the Network Churches, Parliament's own church, St Margaret's Westminster, and church leaders such as Cardinal Vincent Nichols, Archbishop Sentamu, and the Bishop of London, Richard Chartres, who is standing down after more than 20 years.

Can I just say, Richard has been one of the great leaders of the Christian faith in our country – he is not just someone with an extraordinary presence and richness of thought who has in 20 years almost doubled church membership in his diocese and established over 30 new churches. I am sure you will join with me in paying tribute to his outstanding leadership and service – and wishing him well in the years ahead.

As Prime Minister I am hosting an annual reception for each of the main faiths in our country – and this one is of particular importance to me personally.

Growing up in a vicarage, I know first-hand the many sacrifices involved and the hard work that so many of you do, from the services and ministry in your churches to the comfort and guidance you provide to millions in our country at some of the most difficult moments in their lives.

Whether it is visiting the sick or bereaved; delivering faith-inspired projects, like the Christmas Day lunch that I join in my constituency each year; or acting as volunteers and aid workers in war-torn parts of the world – we owe you all a huge debt of gratitude and as Prime Minister, on behalf of the whole country, I want to say a very big thank you.

I also believe it is right that we should celebrate the role of Christianity

in our country. We have a very strong tradition in this country of religious tolerance and freedom of speech, and our Christian heritage is something we can all be proud of. We must continue to ensure that people feel able to speak about their faith, and that absolutely includes their faith in Christ.

I also believe that Christianity has an important role to play in making Britain a country that works for everyone.

Now, the Church will not always agree with everything that the government says – and the government will not always agree with the Church. But I think there are many areas where we can work together.

One is in addressing the persecution of Christians and religious minorities around the world which has been mentioned to me by some at the reception here today. It is hard to comprehend that today people are still being attacked and murdered because of their Christianity. We must reaffirm our determination to stand up for the freedom of people of all religions to practice their beliefs in peace and safety. And I hope to take further measures as a government to support this.

For all these reasons, I am delighted that we can take this moment today to celebrate the work that you do – and that we can do so much at such an important moment in the Christian calendar.

In the weeks ahead, as we look beyond Ash Wednesday to Easter, let us draw confidence in our Christian faith. And let us renew our determination to work together in the service of others, today and in the years to come.

So thank you again for coming here and I hope you will carry on and enjoy the rest of the reception.