

The Place of the Church in the 21st Century

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It's a delight to be with you on this occasion as the guest of the Vice Chancellor. [Mike Malone Lee] My visit to the University today has proved both enjoyable and very informative, and I am very grateful indeed to all who have helped to make that possible.

The Chaplaincy Council has suggested that I address the question of what place the Church may have in this as-yet undiscovered new century, and that is a question that I am fascinated to consider, especially when I think of the career impact it may have upon me personally.

Moving into the third Millennium presents us all with challenges of which we had never before dreamt. The globalisation of the market place has been brought about by the combination of international capital with the new technologies of production and communication. There is a galloping urbanisation of the globe. One half of the world's population now lives an urban life and in just twenty more years that figure will, according to some authorities, have risen to more than three quarters of the world being urbanised.

Communication technology means that goods and persons and ideas can fly across the globe as never before. Last year in the middle of the Sinai desert I saw the golden arches of a drive-thru MacDonalds, signifying that American-led capitalism has invaded the globe. Globalisation is in many ways conforming us to a common life-style and yet, conversely opening us all up to the plurality about which God has always known. As if to prove Carlyle right that "reality *is* local", the local hits back with tribal warfare and genocide, the cultural stirrings of England against Europe if not the world, and the burgeoning of fundamentalism against the pressures of the plural.

International capital however is always one step ahead and has already got all this clash of globalisation and localisation covered, and now speaks of 'glocalisation' so that they can have their cake and eat it.

Some of the values that come in the wake of global capital shock any spiritually hopeful person. For capital seeks to make commodities of us all. The market place rules our choices, our life-style, our education, health, relationships, our personal worth. Or so it would seem. There are a thousand truths to choose from, there is a profound questioning of any and all authority.

It all rocks our foundations. These new challenges threaten the very platform upon which the Church has in the past taken up its rather privileged position in the world. The institutional church is losing its status and power in this fast-changing environment, and it is this loss which I believe is the key to understanding the fear which is energising the forces of conservatism both in the institutional Churches themselves and in some of the new thrusting para-church operations. The twenty-first century is a challenge indeed for the Church.

The challenge hits us at two levels.

The first level is embodied in the question, Is the Church any longer Relevant?

But more fundamental still, the second level asks: Will the Church exist at all as the new century unfolds?

Two hundred years ago Samuel Butler, the then Bishop of Bristol, declined the offer to become the Archbishop of Canterbury because, as he put it, "I see no hope for this failing Church" In the late 1960s Archbishop Michael Ramsay was at a press lunch when he was asked whether he saw a future for the C of E. His answer was that in twenty years or so it could "just fade away." The press were so taken aback by his disarming integrity that the statement was never reported. And today, we might be forgiven for thinking that the most impressive thing about the Church is its staggering decline in membership. Are we not on the way out?

On the other hand we might be focusing the question incorrectly. For when we think back to the life of our founder, we soon see that Jesus was none too affirming of the institutional religion of his day either. The major charge against him at one of his trials was precisely that he had been heard to say that the chief symbol of that institutional faith, the Temple, would be destroyed and that he would build something rather different in three days.

Perhaps then, the difficulty at the heart of the question I have been given to address is, to use Professor Joad's wonderful by-line: "It all depends on what you mean by.. the Church." Jeremy Paxman, in his lovely book, *The English*, puts it this way, "What kind of an organization is it that makes itself as available as a local post office and requires virtually nothing of its adherents?... the Church of England is such an odd invention that it can only be explained in its own terms." So let's have a look at its own terms

Defining the terms.

When the media speak of "The Church" and especially the C of E, they are referring to an Institution amongst other institutions which make up the old guard of Englishness. But those who belong to the Church are more inclined to think of that to which they belong in rather different terms. They will speak of 'The Body of Christ', or 'the Community of Saints'. One of the first things that you learn in Sunday School nowadays is that 'the Church is not the building but the people.' So just as Jesus spoke of pulling down the Temple and replacing it with something of a different nature, so that different nature complicates any answer to our question.

And there's another conundrum. Only on two occasions does Jesus speak of a Church anyway. [Matt 16:18 on this rock; Matt 18:17] His whole attention was on something he called the Kingdom of God. The Church is its privileged instrument, but the Kingdom, or better, the Reign of God, is what matters much more. That's why Michael Ramsay could sound quite disarmingly blasé about the future of the institution and take the press off guard - because he doesn't care about the institutional Church as much as they do. His whole attention, like that of his master, was on the Reign of God. And I go along with Ramsay all the way.

But, I must not use that as an excuse to duck the question that I've been charged to address. For I think that in addition to these larger questions, you will be wanting me to look as well at the Church *as institution*. And to do that I feel that I need to limit my terms more severely and talk in large measure about the Church of England. I do so because it's the bit of the institutional Church I know the best, but also because I, like Archbishop Ramsay, will want to be quite critical, and it would not be proper for me to criticise other denominations, although you may recognise parallels.

The Church of England

The Church of England is odd to say the least. It has a certain strange steadiness about it exemplified again by Paxman who says, "You simply couldn't write a novel like Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory* about a church built on the conviction that anything can be settled over a cup of tea."

Just look at its history. Matthew Parker (the original 'Nosy Parker') our first Archbishop, praised our Church's 'golden mediocrity', by which he meant that the C of E seeks to be the biggest ecumenical project on earth. Puritanism, Catholicism, Celtic mysticism, Evangelicalism, the Charismatic, Evangelical, Liberal, or the Christian Socialist - you name it we've got it. And we seek to hold it all together by our commitment to the *via media*, the middle way. Parker's 'golden mediocrity'. It's a broad Church, a family of folk with very different styles and opinions. And that of course is what makes it ungovernable, and an easy target for snipers. But it may be that being a family of very different views is precisely the way that the whole world has got to learn to go if it is to get away from its tendency to genocide, relationship-breakdown and racism. To learn to include the Other rather than exclude it is the only way forward for our globalised - 'glocalised' - world.

Religious trends

The Church as Institution would appear to be on its way out. Many would say it's lost the plot, and I've been heard to say that myself at times.

In a 1995 survey 65% of UK citizens still described themselves as Christians in the traditional sense of believing in a Trinitarian God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But this belief in the Christian God does not equate with a downward trend in church-going. Since 1980 the Church of England has seen almost a 30% decline in membership! Catholic churches are feeling the drop the worst while evangelical churches are holding up and some increasing.

There are some mitigating trends for Christians to grasp at. There is the fact that the core membership is if anything slightly increasing whilst it is the fringe which is diminishing. So that could mean we are getting slimmer but stronger. Patterns of Sunday life-style have changed so there is every reason for Sunday attendance to fall even amongst those who consider themselves full and committed members. But these factors still do not account for such a steep decline.

Perhaps laity simply don't want to come to a building where the first thing that they will get, apart from the ludicrously uncomfortable and old-fashioned seating, is being told how wanting they are in every way. Maybe they are fed up with being preached at by clergy who are largely cocooned from the pressures of house-ownership, job insecurity and questionable work-ethic expectations. Perhaps the laity want more say in what goes on?

Maybe the services have lost their sparkle or their challenge? Maybe the music is dire and the prayers inaudible? Perhaps even getting over the threshold is a nightmare? No notice board to tell you what to expect when you get inside, a vast closed oak door to force open before the great step and the puzzled faces of those who look up at you from their prayer books as you venture in. How many Churches of all denominations I have been to that are like that! I wonder why laity *don't* come.

Neither is Church-going 'cool'. The "Youth a Part" Report of 1996 spelled out the horrific facts that Anglican church attendance amongst 14-17 year-olds dropped in the period 1987-1996 by no less than 35%! This is an horrendous indictment. But it's no wonder really when we tell them that we're now going to have a modern hymn, only for them to find that it sounds like something from a 1950s musical, or they hear us arguing about the 'new service' only to find that it is the ASB, published before anyone under twenty was born! Yes, there's every reason for them to agree that we've lost the plot.

But it's not just problems for the laity. More and more clergy are stressed out. The pressure to be an outwardly missionary Church is re-interpreted to mean 'more bums on seats'. And this is largely because each Church has now to be financially self-supporting. The State has not been financing the Church but earlier generations of Christians certainly have. But that subsidy from the past has cocooned us to such an extent that we have failed to see the gathering clouds on the horizon and have used that financial cushion to subsidise our own long-term decline. In 1992, the first Church Commissioner, appointed by the government by the way, with his colleagues lost the Church reserves of something in the order of £800 million, and with that governmental fillip, we have at last woken up to the reality.

The clergy are also aware that there are less of them on the ground to do the work. Between 1980 and 2000, just twenty years, the Church of England has lost one thousand of its clergy through retirement. So fewer Clergy and laity have to shoulder those enormous cash burdens each and every year, and it's taking their eye off the ball. Looking after the heritage of the medieval building and raising the cost of the clergy is about as much as most congregations can manage. Some clergy and laity find themselves wondering where that early vocation to serve has all evaporated to.

We can try to blame Secularisation if we want to – but we might assume that the USA is more secular than we are and their churches are packed. So our clergy get more depressed to know that they are somehow failing to pack them in, and in consequence look for clues from the American church. The problem is that it is not as hard as it sounds to pack a church if you adopt marketing techniques – but it will take a saint to empty it again.

The Quiet Revolution

But let it be said that more recently, there has been a quiet revolution going on inside the Church of England. An enormous change has recently taken place in Anglican governance. In the past the lay democratic element in our decision-making had largely been in the hands of Parliament. But since 1919 church laity and clergy have met in Assembly or Synod to determine the life of the Church in growing measure. Year by year more authority has been given by, or has been filched away from, parliament to that central Church body. It now has control of its own worship and this year a whole new raft of services of worship comes on the scene. More post-modern in its openness to variety, more poetic than the earlier experiments, more participatory than Anglican worship has ever been before.

A new cabinet style of government has just been set up, with an Archbishops' Council coordinating and prioritising policy for this vast enterprise. Questions still remain as to whether this will bring more coherence or whether this will mean merely a new clericalised centralisation.

The Archbishop has stressed to the Church that we are indeed in a missionary situation and has sought to turn the Church outwards. The Faith in the City report of 1986 pushed the Church to be more participatory, local and outward looking, and the Church Urban Fund which grew out of that has furnished the wherewithal for more than a thousand urban projects. During the Thatcher years the publication of that document together with Archbishop Runcie's Falklands war sermon put the Church of England into the role of the only viable opposition party to the government, and one suspects that Parliament as a whole has never quite forgiven us for that.

One of the major planks of the quiet revolution of which I speak has been the wonderful way in which the ministry of the laity has at last been acknowledged. I'm not sure that any other profession in England has been so revolutionary. Most Dioceses now have a certificate course which offers lay people theological education and in addition, training is provided for innumerable tasks and responsibilities in Church life and order. The Office of Reader has been reintroduced whereby lay people preach and lead worship and lay people generally have a much higher profile and more power in the local church community than ever before. Their place as front-line ministers is more and more recognised in our Churches.

The Decade of Evangelism which has just been completed, was a challenge thrown out to the church at large by the Anglican Lambeth Conference of 1988 that the Church should realise its responsibility to preach the Gospel of Good News at every opportunity. It has produced a mind-set change in the Church of England. Although not every local Church will know precisely how to respond, it does now for the first time, know full well that it has a responsibility to respond. Alpha Courses, Emmaus and Credo courses, have proved immensely successful as user-friendly methods of introducing enquirers to the basics of the Christian faith. And the very concept of 'mission' itself has been refreshingly defined as including of course evangelism but now also ecology, the pursuit of justice, and the nurturing of those new in the faith. We've come a long way since insensitive Bible Bashing was the order of the day.

It was more than unfortunate however that the introduction of the Decade of Evangelism cut across and therefore was at the expense of the already established International Decade of Solidarity with Women, which thereby took second place and was hardly ever discussed in our Churches. Perhaps that's why God had his fun during these two parallel decades by having women win at last their right to ordination as Priests in his Church. And what a revolution that has been. At long last the beauty and brilliance of their ministry has been experienced to the benefit of the Church and the Nation.

So the Church of England has sought a more stream-lined system of democratic government, a more vigorous diversification of styles and approaches to worship and Church life-style, a new outward-looking approach to its relationship with the world in which it serves, and it quite literally now has thousands of women priests.

There is no doubt that there is much to be legitimately proud of as an Anglican. We still have 16,000 parish churches, many of which are growing numerically. There are 10 thousand stipendiary clergy, 2 thousand non-stipendiary; 9 thousand Readers, thousands of chaplains, making some 23 thousand in all.

It is staggering that as many as a thousand people are in training for ordination as I speak. Vocations to the ordained ministry are up by 15%. In terms of commitment, more clergy work in our Urban Priority Areas than did in 1990. And what's more, unlike other professionals concerned for our inner cities, they actually choose to live there!

The Church of England has nearly 5 thousand schools. That's more than a fifth of all state schools, educating 12.5% of all children in England. There is no doubt that in this respect we are making a worthy contribution to the well-being of our society.

There are many things that are good about the Church. But we still have to acknowledge that much is very wrong. People are leaving in droves because they sense that all is not well.

For a start it all seems so very old-fashioned. The Church seems to give the populace the impression that to be a Christian you have to be an 'anorak' nerd. The young are clear that we are a strange sub-culture. Some of us do fear therefore that we could become an attractive anti-parental alternative for them, as they adopt fundamentalist and rigorist antagonisms to their permissive 60s and 70s parents. Old-fashioned could yet become 'cool'.

Even more alarming in my view is a factor which comes to the fore when the Church speaks out on justice issues. For the public are not fooled even if we are ourselves. They, I believe, really yearn for a Church which can stand for the justice and truth of its founder, but instead they see an institution full of injustice and prejudice. We are especially prejudiced against the most vulnerable groups in our society. I think we are the only British institution which on account of our prejudice against women, is allowed to opt out of our nation's equal rights legislation. Our homophobia is likewise renowned. The Lambeth Conference of Bishops was about to vote a resolution damming gays when a minority amendment was only just in time forced onto the agenda so that a minimal sentence was included to say that we must not be prejudicial towards homosexuals and must listen to their concerns.

Then there is the in-Church back-biting. We talk about the Church being the Body of Christ when, for all to see, there is such Party wrangling and hatred? We talk about the inclusive love of God whenever we tell the parable stories of the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son, but then we are as exclusive as ever. Jesus said, don't judge someone by what they say but 'by their fruits you shall know them.' How can we open our mouths to the nation when our hypocrisy is so palpable?

At one time the Church of England was renowned for being that place where ordinary folk could find that their unarticulated experience of God in their lives found expression. We were able time and again to give voice and symbolic content to the deep stirring of spirituality in the hearts of the English people. Now we turn away a couple who come for the baptism of their child if they have not been married. We make them jump through all sorts of bourgeois hoops before the grace of God for that child can be displayed in the sacrament. We are making the threshold of the Church higher and higher. I sometimes

wonder whether the real *raison d'être* of the Church is to safeguard people from the experience of God in their lives rather than introduce them to it.

Of course I must ask likewise whether it is I myself who is in denial. Perhaps the ordinary 'folk' of 'folk religion' fame have never had any profound sense of religion. Perhaps it did after all blow itself out during the bloodletting of the Civil War. And yet I sense that the answers to those national surveys on belief in God are so abiding and consistent, and my belief is so strong that God is a God of incarnational engagement in God's world, that I have to believe otherwise.

A very great difficulty for the church is that at its best it has sought, in Archbishop William Temple's well-known phrase, to be an organisation 'that exists for the sake of those who do not belong to it.' It has sought to respond to the signs of the times – to read the culture and reflect back to society what the Christian Faith brings to the situation. And that has been a fine aspiration. Our difficulty now is that the whole of society seems to be in such flux that it is difficult to read the signs of the times until long after the events. It leaves us looking rather reactive and slow off the mark.

Perhaps society has lost faith in institutions altogether. They seem to be too impersonal and distant. And yet I am only able to have my say today because I have been invited to do so by an institution. I am only alive today because of an institution – the National Health Service. Deriving as I do from East End working-class stock, I know that left to market forces without the advent of the Union movement, the quality of life for people like me would be unimaginably dire. Institutions can be a force against the over-privatisation and individualisation of our society which eats away at our social cohesion. For institutions are powerful enough to tackle the big issues, and Jesus expected his followers to address big issues, not trifles.

But the C of E is "institution" with a capital 'I'. It is the Established Church. What do we make of that for the future?. It is interesting to hear Professor Tariq Modood, of Bristol University, arguing for Establishment on the grounds that it helps to keep spirituality and the faith perspective at the centre of our nation's life. He does not want to see the diminishment of religious identities and religious voices in public affairs that he believes would follow from dis-establishment. We all seem agreed that other faiths and denominations should share the responsibilities of all this, and not to leave it all to the C of E, but we must not go to the other extreme and throw the baby out with the bath water. I am therefore prone to accept establishment but right now some drastic adjustments need to be made to make sure that it is inclusive, forthright and not limiting on the prophetic voice of the church, nor on the Church's right to order its own affairs.

Let me go further now and say more unequivocally that, quite apart from the question of establishment, I do believe that the institutional Church has an important part to play in our land in this new century. It will of course, like all things, have to continue to review itself and change accordingly, and radically, but it must play its part for the nation's sake and for God's sake. For all that I've said about the faults of the Church – and I've sought to be as honest as I can – I have faith in this old institution to come up trumps again. I feel rather like Samuel Johnson in this respect who once remarked that he could not be a true philosopher because "cheerfulness keeps breaking through." I am certainly prepared to entertain the fact that the Church of England itself must one day come to an end – but not without something else to take its place so that we Christians may play our proper part in the larger concerns of our society.

I believe that our nation would be worse off had it not had the institutional Church through its long history. Would Britain be a place where the rights of the individual, where tolerance and freedom of opinion are all still held as of value? Would our English language have the subtlety and quality which it evidently has? Would we have that naughty streak in our natures of utopian romanticism? For that matter, would we have hospitals, schools, a probation service, the scientific quest, or even our Samaritan service?

But all that's history. What of today and tomorrow? I want therefore to finish my lecture by sketching out what I believe the institutional Church must offer and how it must change to take its proper place in the society of the twenty-first century.

First, the Church must turn into a leaner machine if it is to be able to respond to the fast-changing world in which it must minister. It must jettison a great deal of its baggage and its historical accretions. Just a few random examples of what may need to change. Freehold for us clergy which keeps us beyond the risks with which any lay person lives, must go. So must the patronage system which on occasion allows those who have no other interest in the local church at all to make key appointments of parish clergy and of bishops. Parish boundaries certainly need to be looked at. How silly they can seem to those who come to the Church in need – they simply fail to address the needs of a mobile population.

And what about all those costly buildings? Should the church community simply be keepers of the national heritage or do we have more important work to do? We are over-churched, and that means too many small struggling congregations, and that's depressing for us all.

And yet the vast majority of the parishes are great! It's at this level that we see the real Church of England at work. Our parish clergy are our unsung heroes and heroines. They don't just talk about it, they live it day in and hour out – often in places where no other professional would be seen dead, let alone committed. We must maintain a structure that allows us to operate at this local meaningful level, but also that puts that local base in touch with the national structure so that the Church can work meaningfully at both levels. And as for our laity, they must be given power, education and the tools to do the job.

As well as becoming a leaner machine, the Church must be a prophetic voice to the nation. The Church must be on its guard to analyse all that holds God's children back from realising their divinely-inspired potential. Jesus' strategy for redressing this balance was to be alongside the poor and downtrodden. From that perspective the world's issues become more stark and clear. From that perspective the Church too can speak out with integrity, knowledge and passion, so that the critical voice can be heard at the heart of our national life. We can hold up Gospel values against the post-modern values of commodification. The only meta-narratives that seem admissible today are those of the market place and the philosophy of post-modernism – well, the church will have a different story to tell.

What will this Church look like? I think it will consist of small, inclusive issue-focussed groups, where more intimate worship is possible and where considerable networking with other women and men of good-will is more likely. These local groups will then, I suspect gather together in the larger Eucharistic community of believers for larger worship services. Their life will not just be reflective, but will involve integrated action for justice too. This will be a self-sacrificial Church for the new century, for to make the Jesus challenge fresh for our time will lead to crucifixion, as ever it did.

A leaner machine, a prophetic operation, and thirdly I want to say that in the twenty-first century we must have a Church that remains true to its Catholicity. Diversity and difference in creation is not a design fault, but given by God so that in dialogue with difference we may learn that truth is not a statement at all but a relationship with others, and with the Other. The Church must therefore be a bridge-builder for community. It must be properly inclusive of its women. It must affirm the valuable contribution that its homosexual clergy make and have made over many generations. It must acknowledge that Catholic, evangelical and liberal need one another, for if they don't hang together, they certainly deserve to be hanged separately.

All this will put us into networks with groups of very different styles and beliefs. That will be good, but within that we will however continue our duty of giving rapt attention to the treasures of the Christian faith, its beliefs, traditions and practices. We will as Christians want to tell our Good News and continue to enjoy and share our life together as the Eucharistic community. We will want to guard our traditions whilst being open to engagement with different others and with the issues of society so that we can be a witness to coherence in a fragmented world. This dialogue between our traditional treasures and the new world challenges will be divinely inspired if always the whole exercise is underpinned by continued encounter with God. And this is my fourth mark of the Church for this new century.

If the Church in the new millennium is not God-orientated it will have nothing of substance to offer in its dialogue with the world. If however our life together is nurtured by prayer, worship and loving action - through all of which the creator God continues to encounter us - our concern will then be for God's mission in the world. Our Church for too long has been concerned with itself and its own mission. But our attention must not be on ourselves but upon the Holy One, for then we begin to perceive how often God is making Godself present to so many of the 'un-churched' who, while not using churchy language, know themselves to be touched by God's presence. The Church has become such an eccentric sub-culture that it is losing its ability to engage with the world where God is so evidently at work. If the Church turns faith and religious experience into sectarian 'religion', it will only defend itself against being touched by God and will become yet more irrelevant to those who yearn to find ways of articulating what God is to them in their experience.

Of course it may be that I've got all this wrong and the real reason that people don't come to church so much any more is because this society and culture have gone rotten and selfish and brutish and our church demise is but a symptom of that. And if that be the case then maybe the Church will eventually be destroyed by its enemies. But then it will be even better placed for resurrection, to play its part in the twenty-first century and beyond.

So, in conclusion, I simply want to repeat that I think the people of Britain today are entitled to a church that has integrity so that those who hear the music of the Holy One will not feel cut adrift in a society of the tone deaf. And where prophetic ideas can be envisioned, where we can be inspired by the presence of the divine within all creation, and re-enter the fray with new eyes and determination.