

## **Session Two:**

In *Toy Story*, Buzz Lightyear, in a panic, says, “This is no time to panic.” “This is a great time to panic!” says Woody. After 36 years in ordained ministry, nearly 30 of it in parish life, I’m tempted to think Woody might be right.

For eight years working in two national jobs charged with helping the Church to think clearly about mission and ministry, and then as a bishop with ‘over-sight’ of a diocese, I have had time to consider about the outpourings of the theorists in parish development, ministry and church health. Some of my time as a parish priest had been spent reading the books, watching the videos and attending conferences about how to stop your church from declining and how to help your church to grow. And the results over the years were not bad – but not startling, either. Yet I lacked a dispassionate, less directly involved overview of what the Church is for. I was so busy being a pastor, preacher, eucharistic president, leader, chairman, chaplain, and so on - being up front - that I sat in the pew only was when I was on holiday, and that was an exception, and always looked at the contemporary situation from the perspective of being ordained.

In these recent years I was ‘a person in the pew’ and an observer more often than I had been for three decades, and I have discovered a great deal: that some worship is not just out of touch with young people it’s even out of touch with the middle-aged folk like me; that some preachers really need help; that my fellow-Christians (lay and ordained) are very friendly, very gifted, very well intentioned and very faithful – in innumerable cases helping local churches to grow - but apparently unaware of the extent to which the Church in the global north has turned in on itself and, as an institution in these north Atlantic isles at least, showing symptoms of terminal decline.

Wider experience of the institutional church has led me to observe that it takes a new convert or newly-baptized adult about 3 years to move from enthusiasm for worship, prayer, the Bible and witness – the basics of Christian discipleship - to a preoccupation with administration, church groups, doing things in or for the building, handing out books, reading the lessons - things for which we draw up rotas. It’s not that any of these internal ‘ministries’ are completely unnecessary or unvalued but that the primary focus has shifted. Experience at national level is that it seems to take a similar period for new clerics to move from having visions of leadership to a preoccupation with details of management, from mission to ministering to the needs of demanding congregations.

At the same time, I find myself bombarded by statistics about this growing parish or that declining diocese, each offering the key to understanding growth and decline, and I become increasingly sceptical. So much time and energy is still spent on the fundamentally internal exercise of trying to make 'my' local church grow. In a gathering of clerics at which McGavrin's so-called 'Homogenous Unit Principle' was being promoted (that is, 'People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, class or cultural barriers'), I was informed by a curate, "We want to know how to make our churches grow. We don't want to know about theology, because theology ..." and as his sentence tailed off and he sat down something became clear about the serious mis-direction of growth-strategy. We hear encouraging news of new expressions of Church life that are real signs of hope when they are genuinely 'catholic', signs that the Church is less concerned about itself and the preservation of the institution. Yet for the most part I suspect congregations think that sort of thing is a good idea for *other* people and shouldn't happen here! It's our **theology** which helps us to direct our ambitions away from a priority of repairing the institution and out towards 'the world'. So Archbishop Rowan has put his finger on the key issue when he points to an improvement in theological education at all levels as a priority during his primacy. Even the simplest reading of the gospel ought to make us aware of the purpose of the Church: God and the world he loves. The Church isn't here for itself and any church that is more concerned with its own existence than with God and the world may need to die.

### **Anyone for theology?**

So are there some theological principles available? Let's look at a few examples among many.

***In the first***, Jeremiah was called by God to proclaim an impossible message, the close-down of the temple institution, such that he became thoroughly depressed:

Among his many words of violence and destruction were these for Jerusalem:

*'The Lord spoke to you when you were prosperous, but you refused to listen. ...  
Your leaders will be blown away by the wind, your allies taken as prisoners of war,  
your city disgraced and put to shame, because of all the evil you have done.'*

[Jeremiah 20]

The Temple was indeed closed down, the holy city deprived of its status, numbers of the people deported, and the exile lasted two or three generations. We need to be awake to the possibility that something similar *might* be in store for us in the 'global north', the *divine* closing down of the institutional church or - and this is certainly much worse - the closure by the church itself of all that isn't financially viable! The whole of my Christian life and public ministry has been based on the conviction that God has a great future for his Church, even for the institution and for Anglicanism in particular, and it still is; but I have to be honest and ask myself whether there are signs that God may have different plans. That possibility (however distant) will inevitably affect our thinking: not that we should simply hold up our hands in despair and give up, but that we should keep our eyes open for where new life and blessing is appearing, discern the ways in which the treasures of the past can enrich the future and allow some things to die.

The prospect of institutional exile does not lead inevitably to despair. The letter sent by Jeremiah to the exiles in Babylon [chapter 29] encourages them to settle down and flourish in the place of their exile. In due time, he writes, the people will seek the Lord, will find him and will be restored to the land.

**A second theological observation** arises from the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel.

*'He [the Word] came to his own country, but his own people did not receive him.'*

[John 1. 11]

Why did most of the Hebrew people not receive the One whom his disciples recognise as the Messiah promised in the Scriptures? From where we stand, it looks obvious! The problem was that their picture of the Messiah, derived as it was from their understanding of history and their reading of the texts, did not match what they saw in Jesus, a carpenter-turned-peripatetic-rabbi from Galilee.

Hebrew history is littered with external threats - from the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans among others, with a short break in the second century BC - and so the promise of a saving Messiah inevitably developed into a longing for an 'anointed one' who would rescue the people of God from their submission to greater powers. That understanding of their history made it easy to read the Scriptures in a way which politicised the messianic hope. The later chapters of Isaiah, as just one instance, could be read in this way. For example, and there are many:

*'You will be known as the priests of the Lord, the servants of our God.'*

*You will enjoy the wealth of the nations and be proud that it is yours.'*

[Isaiah 61. 6]

Even scriptures which look as though they refer to Israel as a means of blessing the nations – *'My temple will be called a house of prayer for the people of all nations'* – can be read as being about *'bringing other people to join them'* [Isaiah 56. 7, 8], an apparently come-and-get-it approach, rather than the more outgoing offer to enrich the nations as divine gift. It's there in the Letter of Jeremiah to the exiles referred to earlier: *'Work for the good of the cities where I have made you go as prisoners. Pray to me [the Lord] on their behalf, because if they are prosperous, you will be prosperous too.'* [Jeremiah 29. 7].

From our own historical and faith viewpoint, we need to be acutely aware of the founding charter of Israel's existence: that a nation dedicated to God would, by its very existence, be a divine blessing to all nations. God's promise to Abram and his descendants declares this missionary purpose for his people:

*'I will bless those who bless you. But I will curse those who curse you.*

*And through you I will bless all the nations.'*

[Genesis 12. 3]

The Apostle Paul develops that covenanted promise of blessing to all peoples in Galatians 3 – what he describes as *'the Gospel to Abraham'* - to support his conviction that *'God would put the Gentiles right with himself through faith.'* [Galatians 3. 6-9].

Simeon's song of recognition and fulfilment, the Nunc Dimittis, is emblematic of this universal blessing:

*'These eyes of mine have seen the salvation which you have prepared for all the world to see: a light to reveal you to the nations, and the glory of your people Israel.'*

[Luke 2. 30–32]

Had we been there 2,000 years ago, we, too, would almost certainly have forgotten Israel's founding charter and been looking for a saviour for our own nation, someone to rescue us for a millennium from our tragic slavery to powerful empires. No wonder that *'He came to his own country, but his own people did not receive him'*, because their reading of the scriptural texts had been so conditioned by their painful history that Jesus appeared to be entirely the wrong kind of messiah! Put it another way, they found

themselves with an internally-directed strategy determined by a disorientated view of what they understood as success. Political adversity had affected their view of God.

The parallel with the current plight of most of the Church in the world of European influence seems to me to be striking. Many appear to be showing signs of a desperate search for the salvation of the institutional church. Our attention has shifted from our fundamental purpose because our thinking has become conditioned by our history and the mental picture we have of ourselves as a Church: we are, quite simply, disorientated. The Church in these islands, for instance, is fed up with the opposition of all the 'empires' which appear to marginalize its witness – secularism, commercialism, relativism, and so on - and it's looking for ways of inaugurating a new messianic age. The critical danger is that we are searching for a cure for institutional ageing by selectively examining the symptoms (numbers and finance) and then prescribing often drastic remedies! It is my contention that this course of action confirms decline - as it has done with a number of other denominations that have dealt with the symptoms of their crises without first assessing with great care what the Church is for. Financial solvency is no use if the result is catastrophic collapse!

In this plight – and I am far from denying the seriousness of the situation as some of the Church's weaker branches face the possibility of closure and finances are precarious – there are dangers that we will focus on the wrong kind of self-referential programme of *internal* renewal. Here I find myself in the realm of paradox because I want to see renewal and growth, both in depth and maturity, but I am fearful of strategies which pander to an internal 'market'. No Christian in their right mind would oppose the exciting new expressions of Church life, well-run cell groups, relevant and inspiring worship, loving pastoral care, committed praying, effective preaching and good nurturing, all fundamentals for renewal and growth. The difficulty is that so often our excellent aspirations are all about improving the Church – sadly sometimes only about improving what goes on in the church building for an hour or two on Sunday – and are essentially based on the concept of 'ministry'. Instead of the Church being for God and for the world, we have become engaged in a struggle for our own survival. The danger is that we may in all sincerity be searching for the renewal of the institutional church instead of for the coming of the kingdom of God and, in so doing, fail to notice the King at work.

*The third theological reflection* arises from a misunderstanding of one of the most basic illustrations of the Church in the New Testament: the body of Christ. Back in the 1970's and 80's it became the liturgical fashion to link the eucharistic Peace with a reference to the body of Christ, as in: *'We are the body of Christ. In the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body ...'* This was followed by encouraging congregations to share the peace – all good stuff and in itself laudable. But I have a sneaking feeling that it did some damage to the Anglican psyche because its underlying message became, "We *here* are the body of Christ; it is while we celebrate the Christian family meal together that we express what it means to be his body. We are 'the eucharistic community' and it is vital that our spiritual needs are met."

That sub-conscious thinking can be highly deceptive. I am sure that Saint Paul in Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 was making a much broader reference than the local eucharistic gathering. I am convinced that he was not simply thinking of the meeting for worship on a Saturday night or Sunday but also of the great diversity of life and witness of the Christian community during all 168 hours of the week. So, on Monday morning, John is in the factory, Jane is in the hospital, Mary is visiting a client, Stephen is opening his shop, Clare is looking for a job, and so on: that's what the body of Christ looks like for almost all the week. The Church is, for most of its life, turned outwards, the body of Christ is explosively diverse in its mission, witness and discipleship; in the words of Bishop John V Taylor, 'making Christ visible'.

I have a fourth theological reflection, but I will leave that until later.

### **What is the Church for?**

Which brings me round to the question I find myself asking repeatedly: What is the Church for? It is obvious from what has gone before how I answer the question: God and the world. The Church is for God because he is and we adore him, expressing this in faith, prayer, worship, word, sacraments and service. The Church is for the world because that's where God's heart is - it's what *'God so loved'*. [John 3. 16] All this is centred on Christ and the Father's gift of the Spirit who brings the risen Christ to us and breathes into us the love and mercy of Christ. For me, it's 'Together making Christ visible'.

Robert Paterson