

THE IMPORTANCE OF
THE PARISH
FOR CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

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**THE GRUBB
INSTITUTE**

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FOR CHRISTIAN MINISTRY**

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1 God, the World and the Church

I take as my starting point three ideas¹

- .1 That God is concerned with the world
- .2 The church does not primarily exist on behalf of itself but on behalf of the world
- .3 The church is essentially a voluntary organisation of laity, served by clergy.

Each of these statements is open to question. But it is in the context of these issues that I want to talk about the importance of the parish for Christian ministry today.

The first point emphasises that God and God's reign in the world needs to be acknowledged. If God is active in the world it might be concluded that justice, peace and freedom would characterise human behaviour. However, these qualities of life do not seem to be very much in evidence internationally in the world today. This poses a major problem. If God is God and He has made us, why has it turned out so badly? Does it mean that we have got it all wrong, God does not exist or is not interested in the world?

The Christian message addresses this point by saying that God has shown his concern about the world through the prophets and teachers that He sent to the descendants of Abraham. This concern found its culmination in the birth of Jesus, as God Himself entering into the world, taking responsibility for what had happened, both good and bad. Jesus taught His followers that the Father is in heaven, that He is sure His Kingdom will come and that His will is operative on earth.

The coming of Jesus was the evidence that the failure of human beings to live according to the principles of God's Kingdom was not being glossed over by God. Instead, through His love He took the full brunt of man's degradation in suffering the torture of crucifixion. In bearing the full consequences of human sin, He drained away its power and offers forgiveness to those who see this as true for themselves, *ie* believe in Him.

The key to this outcome is God's total involvement with the world through the incarnation - his identification with the world, and with the people who would ultimately reject Him. Through the resurrection, He gave courage to a group of frightened disciples and commissioned them to continue what He had started. He instructed them, that they could, because of Him, take authority to forgive sins and proclaim judgement on society.

"Whosoever sins you forgive, they are forgiven; and whosoever sins you retain they are retained"²

You and I are the consequences of the disciples following Jesus' instructions. The task and the mission which these apostles were given, and the purpose which they were constantly to keep in mind is summed up in the prayer which Jesus taught them. This prayer for the coming of God's Kingdom is a central part of most acts of worship. The sad thing is we so often recite it thoughtlessly, that we do not realise its tremendous clarity, potency and the implications for those who pray it.

The thesis I want to put before you is that the charge given to the disciples remains the charge given to each gathering of Christians today. The responsibility is the same - to work and live so that God's kingdom will come in the world.³

Members of the Church of England have inherited a model, in this country by which this may be done if we set our minds and hearts to it. It is the model of the **parish church**. The church in which God is glorified and worshipped, where the sacraments are dispensed, and people can be strengthened to accept the responsibility to carry out that mission in the world. The **parish church**, because in England each church has been allocated a particular part of the land for which it can take responsibility - what we mean by the word "parish". As the Green Party have said "Think globally, act locally".

This principle is made clear every time the Bishop of a diocese (or his representative) inducts an incumbent to a parish church. He pronounces with regard to all those residing in the parish, that the "cure" of their souls is "both mine and thine". "All those residing in the parish" includes not only Anglicans but members of other faiths and of none. This statement has considerable implications for the corporate life of the church, which we will return to later. Prior to that I want to give a picture of how our current parochial system came into being.

2 The Idea of the Parish and its challenge to the Church

The word **parish** comes from the Greek, meaning "one who lives besides", the neighbour, often meaning the alien or the stranger. So because the parish church sees everyone as neighbour, not crudely as potential converts, it is able to represent them before God and to represent God before them.⁴

In examining the origins of the parish, we turn first to the writings of the Elizabethan ecclesiologist, the "judicious" Dr Richard Hooker. He writes:

...religion and the cure of souls was (the Apostles) general charge in common over all that were near about them, neither had any one presbyter his (own) cure . . . until Evaristus, Bishop in the See of Rome about the year 112 began to assign precincts unto every church or title which the Christians held, and to appoint unto each presbyter a certain compass whereof himself should take charge alone. The commodiousness of this invention caused all parts of Christendom to follow it and at length our own churches became divided in like manner . . . Churches then were not defined as now they are; first by the bounds of each state, and then within each state by more particular precincts, till at the length we descend into several congregations termed parishes with far narrower restraints than this name at first used.⁵

William M Patterson, in his *History of the Church of England*, continues the story:

Theodore a Greek from Tarsus appointed by the Pope as Archbishop of Canterbury in 669 is sometimes stated to be the founder of the

parochial system (in Britain). But this statement gives the wrong impression. The system by which the whole of England was gradually divided into parishes, in which each priest was placed, specially responsible for its spiritual welfare, had no actual founder. It gradually grew up. In the earliest days the missionary work was generally done by monastic settlements, but as the monks gradually retired from missionary activity in the world, and became in some cases exempt from episcopal control, they were replaced by secular clergy working on parochial lines . . . we know from (the Venerable) Bede that in 690 the whole of England was not yet mapped into parishes and that there were many villages in which there was no parish priest . . .⁶

A more intimate picture of parish life is given by J R H Moorman in his history

But what were these parishes like? "The parish with its church and resident priests owes its origin almost entirely to the initiative of the local landlords . . . The earliest parish churches were private churches . . . owned by the local thegns (Lords) who had built them, endowed them out of their own land, and assumed the right to choose the men who would serve them. The village priest was therefore very much his Lord's "man" and subject to his authority and jurisdiction. But he was not a serf. He was a free man . . . (and) his only duty to the community, apart from his spiritual functions, was that he normally kept the bull and boar which served his parishioners' beasts . . . As a member of the manorial community he owed allegiance to his Lord, while as a servant of the Church he also took his oath to the bishop."⁷

An Anglican parish church today usually finds that not only are there churches of other denominations located within the parish, but in many places there are also Muslim mosques, Hindu and Sikh temples, buildings and representatives of other faiths and religious cults. In discussions with diocesan Bishops and Anglican clergy over the past few months, I have found them very conscious of other faith groups, nevertheless the great majority have declared that they continue to accept responsibility for the cure of souls for everyone within those areas. In this they are

joined by the Roman Catholic, Abbe Michonneau, who writes of the mission to Paris in the late 1940's:

Having studied a map of the parish, or - better still - having made a walking tour of the whole place, we say to ourselves: Our parish is the entire territory: all those living inside this section are committed to our care, without any exception made because of nationality or immorality or hostility to the clergy. Nothing can free us from the obligation of caring for their souls. Hence all those who do not come to us, and whom we will never get to know unless we go to them all those we meet - including Algerians and Chinese - they are all our parishioners.⁸

3 Responsibility of the Church for its Parish

This may sound like an impossible dream for clergy in highly mobile, heavily populated urban parishes. So long as this cure of souls is seen only in terms of the work of the parish priest, he may be confronted with a burden which he feels unable to carry. But this is to discount the laity, the ordinary members of the congregation. For, if our statement that "the church is essentially a voluntary organisation of laity"(p1) is valid, then they have their own part in this task.

Let me illustrate this from our experience in The Grubb Institute. Over a number of years, I and my colleagues have organised and led week-end conferences attended by small teams of laity from 5 or 6 parish churches at a time. About one day into the conference, we presented a true case study of someone who was in a critical condition, physically, emotionally and spiritually. Each parish group was asked that if such a person resided in their parish, what would their attitude be to them? After discussion in their group, they gave their response.

Without exception every Anglican parish church group we have asked about this has said they would accept responsibility for the person because he or she resided in their parish.

Since we are talking of over 300 different parishes, this was extraordinarily impressive and convincing, considering that the people we are talking about were predominantly average church attenders, and not

trained lay people with church responsibilities. This response was even more striking when compared with similar conferences where we worked with teams from non-anglican congregations, including Methodists, Roman Catholics, Baptists, URC. Having put the same question about responsibility for the person to them, not one of them, as members of their local church, would have felt they were responsible, although they personally might have felt that as human beings they would want to help. This reaction could be due to their negative view of the Church of England as claiming some imperialist right, if they previously knew about the parish system, but in most cases it was obviously something they had not previously thought about.

These conferences have not been held for over a decade, and attitudes may have changed since then, but you might like to consider how laity in your own parish church would react in these circumstances.

This leads us on to a further question. If lay members accept this responsibility, why don't they take their own initiative in engaging more widely with problems in the parish? Without assessing whether it is true of all parishes, another experience that we have had in the Institute might go some way towards illuminating the point.

The vicar of a Black Country, working-class parish, who knew of the conferences that we had run for parish groups, asked if we would be prepared to run a modified, in-house conference for the members of his PCC. He ungraciously added that he felt they were "dead from the neck up".

Considering his assessment of his PCC members, we were agreeably surprised to discover that an average of 29 people turned up out of a possible 34 on week-day evenings from 7 - 10 pm. As this was a lay conference, the clergy did not participate. They sat at the rear of the hall and observed plenary sessions but were not involved in the small groups where the laity discussed questions and studied Bible passages.

Towards the end of the second evening, when members were reporting back in plenary and I was writing up their reports on the flipchart, there was

a sudden eruption from the vicar. By way of explanation, the content of the reports from the groups had a clarity of Christian thought, and a depth of meaning which was impressive. I turned to the vicar, who was obviously agitated, and asked "Did you realise they knew all this?" He replied, "If I had I would not be preaching the kind of sermons I do!" I then turned to the members and asked, "Did you know you knew this?" And reflectively they said, "No, we didn't know either!"

My understanding of this and the previous story is that they indicate the teaching capability week by week of the liturgies and worship of the Church of England. However, if clergy do not appreciate that potential, they are unlikely to be aware that their congregations might be assimilating Christian teaching but without being able to express it. If the clergy did believe that the Holy Spirit might be working in this way, they could draw these ideas out of their laity as we were doing in the conference. These were people who had come thinking they knew nothing and feeling ignorant, yet gradually beginning to gain in self-esteem. It was not because they were being taught by us at the conference, but because they were able to draw upon their own resources and recognise in a new way their authority as Christians.

This line of thought was confirmed through a research project conducted by The Grubb Institute, involving the study of a number of Christian congregations. Among those studied, there were two parishes adjacent to each other in an outer suburban working-class area. At the time of the study, one of them was a strongly evangelical parish, and the other anglo-catholic. When my colleague studied their history, he discovered that ten years previously both parishes were more or less the same as each other and ran the usual range of church activities, with one tending to be "higher" than the other. But in the succeeding years, one had become evangelical and had a large congregation which engaged in many, (we counted 39), activities during the weekdays. A good number of the congregation said that the most exciting time for them was the Wednesday night prayer and bible study. By contrast the anglo-catholic church, apart from its worship services, had dropped all its activities except for the women's healing and prayer group.

When we related these churches to the world outside, we uncovered evidence to show that in the evangelical church everybody was so busy in church activities, they had little or no time for any involvement with the local community. The other church, equally well attended, had members who were engaged in many different community groups, local councils, trade unions, governors of schools *etc* and were exerting considerable influence on their surroundings. When asked about this, they said, "Our worship in church is so satisfying and fulfilling that it strengthens us as a body to do this, we do not have to bother about church activities during the weekdays".

As this was a project, we reported back to the PCCs. The anglo-catholic church was very pleased with our report and felt confirmed in the attention they had been placing on their parish communion and clearly wanted to proceed in that direction. The PCC in the evangelical church heard our report with some concern, but having discussed it among themselves, to our surprise they agreed with our report. They had realised by what we said, that, because they were finding so little satisfaction in worship, they had to fill the week up with activities to compensate. The vicar also concurred, and within a month he had handed in his resignation to the bishop and took a year's leave of absence to consider its implications for his ministry.

What we are suggesting is that we need to reappraise the influence of the ordinary parish church and the effect it is already having on lay people, and what this could promise for the way they contribute to the parish.

In my book, *The Dynamics of Religion*, I pointed out that the church provides the opportunity for people to express their dependence on God and to articulate that dependence through their faith in Christ and sharing in His Body.⁹ Unfortunately, in the dependent climate of the church service, it is easy for lay people, in struggling to find out what it all means, to come to depend over much on the clergy - as we would say technically, to "project" on to the clergy their hopes and fears about believing in God and living in His world. As a result of this, clergy have loomed larger than life in their minds, and in turn

they then under-value their own capabilities. This can lead to the feeling that to call oneself a sinner is to be diminished, rather than to take authority for the failure in one's behaviour and the breakdown in one's relations with God. Clergy (and we have confirmed this many times in our conferences for parish clergy) find difficulty in dealing with this type of dependence from their lay people. They do not realize that by working with their people on their dependant condition they can enable them to develop a mature faith. Even though they realise something is wrong, the laity remain locked in low self-esteem as Christians and are unable to exercise the freedom they have as the children of God and take up with authority their roles as members of the Kingdom.

4 Four Conditions for Effective Ministry by the People of God

From what has been said already, we can list four conditions for the People of God if they are to be effective in Christian ministry today.

- .1 They need to accept their shared humanity with others.
- .2 They need to understand their incorporation into the Body of Christ and to think corporately about the Church as distinct from only considering themselves as individuals.
- .3 They need to differentiate the roles of clergy and of laity in the work of the People of God. Both need to accept joint accountability for the mission of the Church in the world, through the clergy serving (ministering to) the laity, and working with them.
- .4 They need to avoid confusing the Kingdom of God with the Church, recognising that the task of the Church is to serve the world so the Kingdom may be manifested.

In the time remaining I wish to comment on these conditions. Each condition deserves at least one lecture on its own: all I can do here is to give some pointers for further consideration.

- .1 By "shared humanity", I mean a humanity which is common to all based upon an understanding of the human condition. One view is the assumption that human beings are essentially people who have needs - air, food, shelter, love or whatever. Based on this appraisal, human beings can be defined as persons having needs which can be met by someone else. So everything and everyone is valued to the extent that they are able to meet and satisfy these various needs. Likewise the value of the Church to society is seen in being able to meet some essential needs of human beings. The success of the Church is then measured in the same way as the success of the supermarket. Do people come? Does it "make a profit" to allow for expansion?

Another view of humanity is that the primary fact is not that humans have needs, but that they are forever in need because they are created as contingent beings. To be "in need" says something extra about the inner condition of ourselves as people.

When people recognise this in needness as the true nature of their situation they are led to acknowledge the dependent relation between themselves and their environment. This being "in need" is what compels us to make relations with other human beings in order to secure the wherewithal for life itself, survival and growth. In establishing these relations with others we learn to give and take, to be greedy, and to be generous, to reject and to love, to deny and to fulfil - that is, we establish the values on which our communities are based. We can plan how to live, and ultimately discover our end, in dependence on God the provider.

Those accepting this view of human beings are also sharing their humanity with others. They recognize that this sharing covers many aspects of human existence including countless people we will never meet or relate to. The concept of the parish scales this down to manageable proportions. It enables us to see our integration with all others living and working in the same place as we are, to admit our dependence on them, and to question what responsibility we as the Church have for them as fellow human beings. It compels us to look outwards to the world.

The word "world" sometimes has a sinister meaning in the Scriptures. Because human beings have denied their dependence upon God and exploited their in-needness with each other they have severed the human / divine relation, an activity the Bible calls sin. This is perhaps why Bishop Westcott defines the world as "society organised apart from the thought of God". The Church in its mission will experience this dark side of the world, whose principalities and powers will not yield to human wisdom. The redeeming power of the Gospel gives us strength, as St Paul says, to "wrestle against these powers" (Romans 12). In going into the world, the Church which has become aware of its own shared sinful humanity, is called to share with faith, courage and compassion its new humanity in Christ with those still dominated by those dark principalities.

- 2 To **think corporately** was the natural inclination of ancient peoples and still remains so today for some. But in the Western world the assertion of human autonomy and freedom, as expressed in the 17th century, and afterwards in the time of the Enlightenment, led to an emphasis on individualism, where dependence on others and on God was seen to be oppressive and denigrating. The consequent fragmentation of human life through each person becoming primarily concerned for themselves, has enabled modern marketing to target the individual as a consumer. The creation of communes, communities and associations are attempts to redress the balance, but frequently do so at the expense of preventing expressions of differences and of constructive conflict among their members: they become collectives rather than corporate bodies. Church Growth movements are more likely to foster collectives than corporateness among the People of God.

To think corporately means that we see ourselves as part of a whole for which we accept responsibility and take authority as members. Christians are incorporated into the Body of Christ by right through the gift bestowed on us in our baptism. No matter whether the whole church as we experience it is large or small, strong or weak, holy or sinful, we represent it, warts and all. The weakness of one is

shared by all, the achievement of one is celebrated by all. As St Paul said, "we cannot say to the eye you are not part of the body, nor can we deny our less presentable parts" (I Corinthians 12). Understanding this, our energy need not be wasted in recriminations or blame, but spent in using God's gifts of the Spirit to equip the Body for ministry. Differences between members are to be encouraged for they can enrich the Body when members serve one another. Where this begins to happen, members become aware of representing one another as they go about their business - so where one member is, there is the entire body. The term "esprit de corps" describes the Holy Spirit facilitating this. So the People of God are liberated from having to keep cuddling up to each other, instead, after their corporate acts of worship and teaching they can freely disperse into the world, to live the Gospel and to preach it.

They are at home in the world through their shared humanity and learning to think corporately as Christians enables them to discern God's work everywhere among everyone. These Christians are signs that the Kingdom is coming in the world.

- .3 The role of lay members of the Church was greatly clarified by Hendrik Kraemer in his seminal work, "The Theology of the Laity". But it is an alarming fact that in the forty years since its publication, we are very little further on in enabling laity to take up their appropriate roles with authority. The sad outcome is that because clergy were unable to empower the laity to run the institutions of the world, they unconsciously compensated by inviting the laity to assist them in running the Church instead. The Christian model of human beings has become increasingly clericalised even allowing for the clergy who engage in secular activities. God is seen more as a church icon than a world figure. So the laity's vision of God centres them on engaging in the Church's activities and not on their major responsibilities as fellow citizens and members of society where the lay people, not the clergy are the experts.

Failure to appreciate this led Clifford Longley to castigate me and my colleagues in his contribution to our book, "The Parish Church" for the ideological corruption of a national church which he

considered arose because of the anglican idea of the parish. ¹⁰ He contrasted two churches in Liverpool - an Anglican clergyman despairing over a parish of many thousands to which he had no way of relating, and a Roman Catholic priest who did not try to relate to his eight hundred parishioners but carried out a specific set of tasks regularly, and was feeling good about doing them. What Longley ignored was that the task of relating to those living in the parish is not the basic work of the priest, but of the laity.

What we Anglicans so often fail to do is to realise that the lay people who share the humanity of the parish have authority as representative members of the Body of Christ in the world and the parish if only they will take it. They, the laity, are in the position to "love their neighbour", and but they need to be served and shepherded so they can follow the leadership of God Himself in "loving the world" by giving themselves as He did, as described in St John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His Son . . ." That love was sacrificial, our giving of ourselves cannot be for less. In supporting laity to do this, clergy can exercise their "cure of souls".

This constitutes the Church not as a supermarket, not as a holy huddle, not as a recreation centre, but as a worship centre, and a training headquarters for service in the parish community and its institutions.

I am aware this approach might seem simplistic for those Christians who work outside their parish or who reside in urban parishes whose boundaries have no local community meaning. There is no denying the parish system has many limitations and requires interpretation, but despite all that, I am proposing it raises vital searching questions for ourselves the Church which we need to answer. The parish concept may need reforming but not abolishing.

- .4 The confusion of the Church with the Kingdom of God is longstanding. The mediaeval church followed St Augustine in linking the Church and the Kingdom, but it fused them together, whereas Augustine saw the

Church as the promise and the Kingdom as fulfilment.¹¹ As Kraemer said: ...

The Church did not enter the world as an institution but as a community expecting the Kingdom of God. . . It became an institution but is only legitimate insofar as it serves that end.¹²

Just as by faith we are members of the Body of Christ, by faith we are also inheritors of the Kingdom. And we are invited to claim that inheritance.

But the Kingdom is not only in the future, God's reign is present wherever the signs of the Kingdom - justice, freedom, peace, righteousness and love are being experienced, though it may not be obvious. Which is why the "poor" are so important in the Scriptures. For where there are the poor, there is the absence of justice, freedom, peace, righteousness and love. The poor are evidence of the absence of the Kingdom.

But the King is not absent. Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats in St Matthew 25 shows that, wherever there are the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick and prisoners, there is Christ. To serve them is to serve Him, and to foreshadow the Kingdom's disclosure.

Whether we speak of poverty caused by individuals or by institutions, this parable sorts us out. Are we so concerned to hear Christ speak in Church that we are deaf to His call from the world in its poverty?

The concept of the "parish" challenges us because the Church of England in its wisdom has allocated to us a piece of this world to respond to, whether we do so directly or symbolically. This is no add-on, no extra-curricular activity but the heart of the Gospel.

Summing it up

Michael Ignatieff, in his book, "The Needs of Strangers", points out how in responding to the stranger (*ie* the parish) we continually discover our humanity and our fullness as persons.¹³ By holding on to the concept of the "parish", we can witness how the creative, redemptive activity of God in Christ, working in us the Church through the Holy Spirit, is manifest in the world, making way for the Kingdom of God.

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