

THE FUTURE OF ENGLISH RELIGION

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In 2007 we shall be celebrating the centenary of this wonderful building. At the moment everything is in the initial planning stages. I imagine we can expect special services, anniversary dinner, a church history, maybe a redecoration of the building. One idea is to have bells in the tower.

Personally I'm the kind of person who fascinated by history. Agatha Christie once said it was wonderful being married to an archaeologist because the older she got the more interesting he found her. I can identify with that. The past fascinates me. But as a Christian minister I know that the future is more important. So I want to use this 100th Anniversary not just to look back but to ask what kind of church Trinity needs to be in the years ahead. How do we make sure that when the history of this Church is written in 100 years time they say, "Look what they did in 2007. What a difference that made".

So the education committee is planning a programme called Trinity 20/20 looking at what we want Trinity to be 15 years on and how we get there. We begin tonight with a discussion Group at 8.00 pm in the Oasis based on Anthony Robinson's Transforming Congregational Culture. If you haven't read the book there are cheat cribs at the back on the welcome table.

To start us off I want to preach today what is not really a normal sermon but my thoughts on what is happening in religion in this country at the moment.

Firstly churches are in decline. Between 1988 and 2001 the United Reformed Church declined from 127, 000 to 90,000 members a decline of 21.1%. In the same period the Methodist Church declined from 431,000 to 327,000 a decline of 24%. The same is true of most other churches. During the time that Basil Hulme was Archbishop of Westminster the number of worshipping Catholics fell by about a half.

This decline can be expected to continue. For the Methodist and the United Reformed Churches the projections are that in 20 years they will be about the half the size they are now. This is almost inescapable point because of the average age of the members of both churches. In the Methodist Church for example 50% of the membership is over 65 years old. In a good many churches there is hardly anyone of working age and often no children. Looking at this positively as my mother said to me "Church is the place where you stand young longer than anywhere else". She's 84 and in her church she still thinks she's one of the younger generation.

And yet the fact that the churches are in decline doesn't mean that religion is showing any sign of dying out. 70% of people still say they believe in God. Now I don't quite know what means. For a good many people the idea of God is surrounded by confusion and uncertainty. But the sense that life has some meaning beyond ourselves is still deeply felt.

Look a bit more deeply and 40% of people say not simply that they believe but they have moments when God has been real. Take one example. On Friday I went to Oxford. It was one of those gloriously wonderful spring days. There was blossom on the trees; the country green was amazingly new and fresh.

The sense of the wonder of the beauty of nature came flooding through me. I thought of some lines of Edna St Vincent Millay

“Lord I do fear
Thou hast made the world too beautiful this year.
Prithee, let no leaf fall,
Let no bird call.”

30% of people have had moments when in the beauty of nature the sense that this world is too amazing to be here by chance came flooding through them.

O lord my God, when I in awesome wonder
Consider all the works thy hand has made

Then sings my soul, my savour God to thee
How great thou! How great thy out!

If you want another example of the way religion keeps coming back go into Smiths and look at the spirituality sections and look at the sale of books like the *The Da Vinci Code*, all the books on prayer and healing. If institutional religion is in trouble, spirituality is big business. A good bit of this is real junk. But why do so many people buy it?

It's almost as if there is something about us that yearns for God, almost as if we are “wired” for religion, almost as if there is an empty space inside each of us that can only be filled by God. St. Augustine was right, it seems, when he wrote 1600 years ago, “O God, thou hast made our hearts restless until they find their rest in thee.” The religious search is still there.

The next thing that's obvious is that the old denominations have less and less relevance to anybody. There was a time when it seemed to matter incredibly to people which denomination you belonged to. James Gilliom is a United Church of Christ minister in America. He tells how on one occasion he took communion to a nursing home. Not only were the 5 members of the UCC in the home present but all the other Christians in the home, including Roman Catholic and Orthodox, came to the service. They were some differences therefore in the way they received the elements. One man kissed the minister's hand, which is not a custom; thank goodness I've come across. One woman however was not so trusting. When she was offered the bread she looked at the minister suspiciously. “Which Church did you say you were from?” “The United Church of Christ”. With that she closed her eyes but before she put the bread in her mouth she said in a loud voice “Presbyterian”. Later when it came to the cup it was the same. “Ministering to you in Christ's name I give you this cup”. “Presbyterian!” Gulp.

Today increasingly people outside the churches look on that as pathetic and I have to confess so do I myself. The question that matters today is not are you reformed or Methodist. It's is there a God? Is faith real? How do I find an experience of God that can make a difference to me? And if people do go to Church they don't say, “Well I'm a Methodist I will go the nearest Methodist Church”. They look around for a church where they see something that attracts them.

You see it here increasingly here. New people coming into the area look at a variety of churches of differing denomination and then they find one where they want to be. Maybe there looking for a church with a particular kind of music. Maybe they're parents and they want a good junior church. Maybe they want a church where they can sense God present. People have cars. They are to drive past other churches to get to where they want to be.

One last point – what this means is that some churches are going to thrive and quite a lot are going to close. All sorts of churches may thrive but churches that offer nothing distinctive, or do nothing well will close. Let me give an example. A member of this congregation went to Brighton not long ago. She looked around at different churches. She went to one where there was no one of working age in the congregation. “We’ve determined,” said one to the visitor. “As long as any of us are alive we’ll keep this Church open”. Brighton is full of churches. Why should anyone go to a Church like?

By contrast in America in particular there have been a lot of studies on progressive mainline churches, which are growing. One of those is Plymouth Congregational Church Seattle. Set in a downtown where many churches are closing it has through a process of change so it reaching out to the community. Tonight and for the next 8 weeks we’re going to be looking at how they did it.

Out of this we need to be working on the challenge for us. The Church has a wonderful past. It is capable of changing in a way, which means it can have a amazing future. I suppose at a 100th anniversary the natural inclination is to say how wonderful it was then.

What great days they were. Personally I’ve never known a time when it was more exciting to be in the ministry than today. “Therefore since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

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