

**Third sermon preached at St Mary's by Vaughan S. Roberts  
on the results of the Second 8 Essential Qualities survey**

*Advent 3 2016*

Under the radar, away from the headlines about bye-elections and Brexit, there's a fierce, but typically understated, battle going on in the Church of England. On the one hand there's the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, and his programme for organizational change in the Church called *Renewal and Reform*; whilst on the other there's a group of clergy, writers and academics who're arguing that the Archbishop's approach is fundamentally misconceived. A key member of this latter group is Martyn Percy, Dean of Christ Church, Oxford who's been a Lent speaker here at St Mary's.

He and others, maintain that Justin Welby (along with *Renewal and Reform*) fail to take account of the substantial research into the changed nature of British society and are also sidelining theology and doctrine in favour of management fads and MBA theories. A hidden irony here is that the only detailed analysis of the Church I'm aware of published by Justin Welby, is in a book entitled *Managing the Church?* edited by Martyn Percy (Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

If this has passed you by then a sharp summary of the case against *Renewal and Reform* can be found in a book published earlier this year by journalist Andrew Brown and sociologist of religion Linda Woodhead entitled *That Was The Church That Was* – with the telling subtitle 'How the Church of England lost the English people' (Bloomsbury, 2016). If you're not inclined to read their 250 page account of how our culture and the Church of England parted company over the last forty years, there's a helpful update by Brown in last week's *Church Times*. In essence, he argues that Justin Welby's prescription for the Church of England is the same as Jeremy Corbyn's for the Labour Party – that is, both can be renewed by their enthusiasts and devotees. Brown believes this to be a fundamental error in both cases (<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2016/2-december/comment/opinion/the-corbynista-path-to-irrelevance>)

Now, whether or not we agree with the analysis here, it does form an important part of the background to our Advent journey at St Mary's where we're looking at the category of 'Need-Oriented Evangelism' which has replaced 'Passionate Spirituality' as our weakest category in the diocesan initiative of the 8 Essential Qualities for a healthy church. Last week we looked at three questions which produced the lowest response in our church survey earlier this year, which were:

- *I pray for my friends, colleagues and relatives who do not yet know Jesus that they will come to faith.*
- *New Christians find friends in our church quickly*
- *Our church tries to help those in need*

And this week we're looking at the questions which produced our **highest** responses. These were:

- *The evangelistic activities of our church are relevant for my friends and family who do not yet know Jesus Christ*
- *The leaders of our church support individual Christians in their evangelistic endeavours*
- *There is a lot of creativity in the evangelistic activities of our church*

Unlike last Sunday, I'm not planning to address each of these in turn because it seems to me that there's an important thread running through all three questions, which links with that debate currently taking place in the wider Church of England. So let's hear those questions again: The evangelistic activities of our church are relevant for my friends and family; leaders of our church support individuals in their evangelistic endeavours; there's a lot of creativity in our evangelistic *activities*.

The connection between the questions which elicited our top three responses in this category is a recognition that outreach, mission and evangelism need diversity – and we can see that in those key words: activities, endeavours and creativity. Here we're getting to the heart of the matter.

In the conclusion to his *Church Times* article Andrew Brown argues that the starting point for outreach has to be an experience not a label. He writes: 'An approach that Evangelicals frequently adopt is to claim that Christians have a wonderful experience that no one else has.' But he believes: 'What is more often needed is the opposite approach, to appeal to common experience, and then, if tentatively, call it by its Christian name.'

My personal opinion is that I'd agree with his analysis up to a point: there are different ways to reach out to people and draw them into the Church and a living relationship with Christ but these are not either/or, rather they're both/and. Some will seek and find a direct encounter with the Risen Christ, whilst others will discover that Christ has always been around for them and have a deeper recognition of that presence in the everyday encounters of their lives and our world. And this is where theology is important for several reasons, but let's just focus on one aspect which is directly related to: the surveys we undertake for the 8 Essential Qualities, the Archbishop's programme of *Renewal and Reform*, and the issues around management and leadership of the People of God.

A vital theological question is: How do we see this Church that we're surveying, reforming and leading? Because, if we don't have a clear understanding of that, then things easily go awry. There are many biblical images for the Church but one of the most powerful is St Paul's description of the Church as the Body of Christ. And that takes us into the heart of the diversity in our survey questions and in the kind of analysis undertaken by people like Andrew Brown and Martyn Percy. When St Paul speaks about the different parts of Christ's Body he's affirming both our *unity* and *diversity*. A body needs its different parts – the Gospel can't be proclaimed if there's no mouth, a hurting world can't be healed if there are no hands, those in need of counsel can't be heard if there are no ears. A body is most effective when it has a full complement of its working parts.

Perhaps that's why those three questions came out strongly in our survey. Again, speaking personally, I think we do value *diversity* in St Mary's. Of course, we can always do more and we could do it better but as we approach Christmas, the contrast between Carols at the Castle and Midnight Mass, between Advent Carols and our Crib Service, between our Christmas Tree Festival and a sermon series on outreach are examples of how this church embraces the unity and diversity of Christ's Body.

And that's something to be treasured, cherished and nurtured because not only will it provide the basis for our mission, evangelism and outreach it also provides the basis for our **whole** ministry as *People* of God in this place.