

What Future for the Church?

*A Lent Address Given in Collegiate Parish Church of St Mary
by The Revd Dr Vaughan S Roberts*

Isaiah 43: 14-21; Luke 5: 27-39

When our five speakers for the 2013 Lent Addresses were invited to explore: *What future for the Church?* they (and we!) couldn't have known how relevant that question would be. The addresses have concluded in a week that has seen the inauguration of a new Pope and installation of a new Archbishop of Canterbury. The worldwide Church in its Latin and Anglican forms has certainly been under the media microscope as people have speculated, prognosticated and investigated where the Church is and what the appointment of Pope Francis and Archbishop Justin might mean for the future.

In that respect, our first address from Professor Elaine Graham, a leading thinker in how theology relates to the public square, provided a helpful basis for the series. In her introduction she observed that: 'Religion is both more visible and invisible: both more publicly prominent and more vicarious; more elusive institutionally (and intellectually, theologically), and yet more cited, more pervasive. So this new dispensation represents significant challenges to existing assumptions about the way religious voices are mediated into public spaces.' She went onto to assert that Western culture is no longer Christian and it's no longer 'secular' either. A process of religious change has taken place, which in the past would have been called secularization. But with the re-emergence of many different forms of religious self-expression (what some sociologists call the re-enchantment of society) the older terms such as 'secular' and 'secularization' no longer do justice to where Western culture is now.

Graham went onto to look at three significant aspects of where we can see this change impacting upon our contemporary world. First, what she calls the lack of 'religious literacy' and the fact that many in our society no longer have an understanding of what religion is and what it does. Second, upon faith and welfare: and how in our current, financially-straitened circumstances governments want people of faith to make good the shortfall in social capital. And third in the equalities agenda – characterised by competing convictions and a 'hierarchy' of rights within a context of the greater currency of religious identity and widening gap between people of faith and majority. And we could see all three of those in play this week as our media – one of most religiously illiterate sections of our society – struggled to make sense of the events at the Vatican and in Canterbury; together with the approving comments about Pope Francis' and Archbishop Justin's interventions on behalf of the poorer sections of the world; and the frequent reference as well, to their views about human sexuality. Please note, none of that is implied criticism. It's a description of where we are and I think Professor Graham called it about right.

In that respect, our second address from Canon John Mumford well illustrates where significant parts of the Church are within this changing social landscape. His own biography – training as an Anglican minister, moving to serve the Vineyard Churches and

now being willing to share again in Anglican ministry whilst remaining a Vineyard pastor – highlights some of the changes within the Christian body over the past 30-40 years. I can't speak with detailed knowledge about John Mumford's personal journey but the rise of evangelical expressions of Christianity inside and outside the Church of England has been a characteristic of this period. And it also reflects the dramatic, worldwide rise of Pentecostal forms of the faith that Professor Hugh McLeod noted in his fourth address. The appointment of a new Pope and new Archbishop who've experience of the impact that this form of re-enchantment is making, reflects the fact that both the Roman and Anglican churches are alive to these changes.

Furthermore, John Mumford's 10 marks of a growing church not only parallel the similar 8 quality areas being used by the Diocese of Coventry (i.e. Empowering leadership, gift-orientated ministry, passionate spirituality, inspiring worship, holistic small groups, need-orientated outreach, loving relationships and functional structures) but also illustrate one of the ways in which churches are responding to the challenges of a changing world. In other words, some churches are adopting the same functional approach that has been taken up in other areas of life, such as education and health, of measuring inputs and outputs and providing a calibrated account of the perceived effectiveness of church life and church growth. As in those other instances of our communal life, advocates of this approach will point to the evidence that such an approach works, whereas critics will argue that these performance indicators do not tell the whole story and important aspects of church life are ignored or marginalised.

Our third address was most unusual in that our speaker had been to a previous talk, so he was able to anchor some of what he said in Professor Graham's insights. Canon Phil Groves convenes the *Indaba* discussions for the whole Anglican Communion. These conversations grew out of the last Lambeth Conference when Bishops from across the world were encouraged to listen to one another and the challenges they faced, rather than debating and voting upon the weighty issues of the day. It was decided that this was such a helpful experience that it should be developed more widely amongst clergy and lay people as well. Dr Groves has co-ordinated those conversations under Archbishop Rowan Williams and it's likely they'll become even more significant under Archbishop Justin if he seeks to develop a ministry of reconciliation across the Anglican Communion.

Phil Groves agrees with much of Professor Graham's analysis about the changing nature of religion in the public space and argued in his address that the Church needs to engage with society and to value its diversity. Canon Groves challenged us to think about two essential aspects of this engagement, i.e. to look at the *identity* and *relevance* of the Church? What is the Church and how is it relevant to society? For him, these key themes of identity and relevance are located in the passage from Philippians 2: 5-11 which speaks of the self-emptying of Christ in the incarnation and the Ephesians moment (particularly chapter 2 of that letter) where the early Church is challenged to embrace and live with its own diversity. For Dr Groves a flourishing Church is one that's relevant to society and fully engaged with its God-given diversity. If that can be achieved, he believes the Anglican Communion does have a future and a very exciting one.

The fourth speaker was Professor Hugh McLeod who has been Professor of both Church History and Modern History at the University of Birmingham, and one of the leading writers and researchers into the religious history of Britain in the 19th and 20th centuries. His most recent work on the religious crisis of the 1960s makes the startling claim that

the 60s was as big a religious rupture as the Reformation. This period was marked by four significant changes: (i) the rise of secularist language and pluralism; (ii) significant numbers leaving the Church – and as many women as men left (which McLeod sees as particularly important as it was most often women who had been responsible for inculcating the religious practices of the next generation) so this era marked a decline of the Christianization of younger people – including what was taught in schools. And this happened across Europe and US; (iii) rise of non-Christian religions in the West and the decline of traditional Christianity, marked by the symbolic John Lennon moment (‘the Beatles are more popular than Jesus’); (iv) important legal changes, particularly on abortion and homosexuality.

McLeod asked: was the 1960s entirely to blame for these changes as historians like Callum Brown have argued or was the whole 20th century one long period of decline as Alan Gilbert has contended? McLeod believes the 60s brought into focus, social forces that were already in play. So, following World War 2, there was a sense of patriotic pride manifested in a revived respect for national institutions (monarchy, church, army) especially in university students but that mood changed in 1960 with a re-drawing of boundaries between public and private life. New ideals emerged, notably: i) a counter culture which valued individual freedom; ii) political radicalization – reflected in the opposition to the Vietnam War and a rise in Marxism; and iii) what was then called “women's liberation” with a critique of Christianity and Judaism as forms of patriarchal oppression. The legacy of this period has been: 1) growth in the number of people professing no religion; 2) increased numbers of people representing other faiths; 3) the rise in alternative spiritualities; and 4) the growth of evangelical churches. These four aspects link in with the three elements that Professor Graham noted in the first talk.

Our final address was by Peter Owen-Jones who is probably best known for his several TV series: *Extreme Pilgrim* (2008), *Around the World in 80 Faiths* (2009) and *How to Live a Simple Life* (2010). He made connections with several previous presentations. In essence, he argued that the Church is not thriving at the moment and this has its roots in the English Civil War when religion drove politics. Afterwards that conflict, the Church of England was restored but in the pocket of the state. From his perspective, there's been no leadership in the Church since the 1960s, a period which marked the end of the Reformation. Since then the number of clergy has been falling, costs of ministry inexorably rising, the Church has been dying and those who speak out about this are marginalised. He sees three crucial problems: (i) Christianity's hierarchical model of God needs to be set aside in favour of one that speaks of grace, intimacy and unconditional love; (ii) the discourse of the Church has been intellectual whereas it needs to be spiritual, with a renewed engagement with creation and our environment; (iii) the Church must leave our past behind us including the buildings that drain the energy of ministry and instead build new churches that reflect a new understanding of Christianity that embraces democracy, equality and openness to the world.

So where does this challenging series of five addresses leave us? We can put them alongside our readings this evening, in particular the words from Isaiah where God says: *I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?* And from Luke's Gospel Jesus says: *New wine must be put into fresh wineskins.*

So with those words about change in our minds, let me briefly suggest three things we can take away from this series. The first is to have a clearer understanding of what

religion and Christianity are and what they are not. Religions are not checklists of intellectual assent – we believe this, this, and this. Yes, religions do involve claims of faith but they're also practices, habits and customs. This can be particularly hard for Western Christians (and Western forms of atheism) to keep in mind because we've been through the Enlightenment and for many churches Christian *practice* involves reciting a creed. But Christianity is much more than credal statements – as the habit of coming to church itself indicates. It's inevitable that practices, habits and customs change over time and the rate of change since the 60s has been phenomenal. To resist those new things with all our might is like building sandcastles on the beach, regularly swept away by the tide. So we should be cautious about beating ourselves up about all of this because, as we look back over the period since World War II with the insights of people like Elaine Graham and Hugh McLeod, we can see the incredible social change over which we've had no control. If we don't pummel our chests or heap up sand, what can we do?

That brings me to the second thing – scripture teaches consistently that we should be open to the new things that God is doing. That is not to say that the secularising 60s and the re-enchanting noughties are down to the direct Divine influence but that change is an integral part of God's creation and not only do the biblical images of the *People* of God and the *Body* of Christ imply dynamism, energy and life, they also embrace notions of diversity which has been a consistent note sounded by all our speakers. We must be willing to learn the lessons that God is teaching us through the changes taking place and being willing to change ourselves, our Church, our communities to meet those changes.

And third, as well as being willing to engage with change, scripture also teaches that we should not discard the treasures of the past. So we must ask: what remains constant? Speaking personally, for me it's the story of Jesus and the new hope in Christ, which is itself a story of God's consistent love whilst at the same time being a story of incredible and profound change. As Canon Groves indicated, much more can be said about this because the question of what remains constant is one that sharply divides Christians and cultures at the moment.

What future, then, for the Church? Elaine Graham, Phil Groves and Peter Owen-Jones painted a fairly similar picture – with different colours and degrees of boldness. The future for the Church does *not* lie in clinging to past glories or systems. That world is disappearing or has already disappeared. It *does* involve engaging with God in our society and in what God's already doing there. And, in that respect, Justin Welby provided a compelling image for the future of the Church in his installation sermon this week when he spoke about how the Christian faith involves stepping out of the boat onto the stormy sea with a willingness to trust the Risen Christ.

This address contains summaries of addresses by Professor Elaine Graham, Canon John Mumford, Canon Dr Phil Groves, Professor Hugh McLeod and the Revd Peter Owen-Jones for which they hold copyright.

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