

Title: What is new in the Church?

Theme – Reaching Outside the Church to Serve the Wider Community

Yesterday was the feast of St Gregory the Great, the collect used traditionally for St Gregory's day urges the church to "*Preserve in your Church the catholic and apostolic faith they taught, that your people, being fruitful in every good work, may receive the crown of glory that never fades away; through Jesus Christ*". St Gregory was the Pope who commissioned St Augustine to lead a mission to evangelise Britain in 595AD, we as members of the church today have much to learn from figures such as St Gregory as we seek to build the Kingdom.

The reason I felt it timely to mention St Gregory in my address to you today is due to the increased sense of friendship between the Anglican and Roman Churches epitomized in January by the loan from the Vatican Archive of the crozier of St Gregory. This was sent by Pope Francis as a sign of ecumenical encouragement to the meeting of Anglican Primates in Canterbury and was a symbol of the bonds that spiritually unite our two Churches. We as the Church of England need to be working together across our communities, to work in partnership alongside the other denominations and faiths, demonstrating our ability to work together in unity for the common good of society.

The Archbishop of Canterbury has urged the Church as a whole to redouble its efforts not only to encourage vocations but also to speak about faith and encourage evangelism. The church needs to double the number of those presenting for ordination training just to maintain the number of priests we have today in our 16,000 parishes.

At the February meeting of the General Synod the Bishop of Burnley challenged the Church drawing attention to the fact that in parts of the country such as on many council estates there is no Anglican presence. We as the national church have not reached out, he said, as we are called, 'to serve the people in most need' instead we have left this job in many areas to other denominations, while they are doing fantastic work, the Church of England could be doing more, not just giving money to

charity but offering practical, tangible support. The Church of England remains committed to the belief that it should be a beacon of service in every community in the Country but it can only do this with the help of its congregations.

The theologian John Westerhoff in his book *“Will our children have faith?”* suggests that Christian communities need to face three ways.

- 1) Face the past, the God who was;
- 2) The present, the God who is
- 3) The future, the God who is to come.

Without a sense of memory, a sense of present reality and vision we forget who we are and where we come from. A church without a vision for its community and for its future is one that has nowhere to go and is directionless.

Since becoming the Second Church Estates Commissioner (which is rather a Gilbert and Sullivan esq title for a job which is really the link between the State and the Church) I have seen and learnt about many fascinating initiatives underway to revive parts of the church which are struggling, maintain that that is growing and imagine where the Church should reach out next.

Each parish needs to be thinking along similar lines, looking out to the future alongside celebrating the achievements of the present and the past. Being part of the Church of England is not about ‘Us’ as individuals, the committees, events and activities it is about who we serve and what we enable: the Kingdom of God, acting as His hands and feet. Without this ability to convene and serve the wider community the Church of England will not flourish and grow.

This country like many across the world is seeing the rise of powerful figures who claim to be the ones who can make their nation great again and as the Archbishop of Canterbury said at a recent conference in Harrogate, “We are living in a time of uncertainty, there is nothing new about that the world is always uncertain. But there is an economic and political uncertainty which will have huge consequences for us.” (Trump that if you will). Powerful figures are rising to office to make their nations

great again. Like Peter, we need recognize that there is only one certainty in the world and that is Jesus Christ. *“If we are God’s body, we embody the one who was and is and is to come. We have to be the people, who, when we are seen from the outside, people say, “That’s what Jesus is like” not as individuals but as the people together.”*

In my capacity as one of the Church Commissioners I am privileged to hold events for the Church of England in Parliament to show to other members the fantastic work going on often unseen and unknown by many parishes.

I have discovered that in London & Southwark Diocese have identified the need to help those who are unable to afford the price of housing in the City. In response the Dioceses have set up a Housing Trust to which local families and individuals can apply, the Diocese makes available houses and properties it has purchased as a reduced rate enabling these people to live within their community.

Our great Cathedrals are reinvesting in their buildings to offer a better spiritual life to those who visit as tourists or as pilgrims, the Cathedral at Chester has turned around its £1Million overdraft in 2 years by removing its entry charge, and holding public arts events, a falconry center and this year will be opening a micro-brewery on the site Cathedrals medieval brewery (See Chester Cathedral’s Presentation on Sustainable Cathedrals).

Our church buildings across the country are hosting post offices, village shops, cafés, arts centers, crèches, and nurseries, community spaces as they seek to return to the vision of the parish church as the center of community life. They are installing disabled access, building kitchens and toilet facilities all of which are essential in a space at the heart of a community. St Barnabas Parish Church, in Erdington which caught fire five years ago has risen like a Phoenix to provide a welcome and much needed services to that community.

Our Church schools are continuing to educate over 1 million children a day across the country and are finding new ways to open schools as free schools to serve specific needs in areas where faith school provision is in

high demand. It is worth noting that 80% of Church of England Schools are ranked as good or outstanding. Now we just need to tackle the 20% which are not!

Nationally the Church of England is also working with credit unions, food banks and refugee asylum support networks. In Solihull, in my constituency, the Churches are together providing a drop-in facility for asylum seekers who have to sign in each week to prove they have not absconded! The Church is engaging with the government on matters relating to housing, immigration, welfare, healthcare, policing and local government legislation along with playing an active role in the recent debate on Sunday trading. The range is huge, well beyond the “bats and belfries” role I was initially told about.

Life in the local and national Church of England is reviving there is vibrancy, as the famous writer and theologian CS Lewis write in his book “The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe”:

**“Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death,
And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.”**

This passage has many interpretations with Aslan as a Jesus like figure, but is also seems appropriate for this time of year as the church approaches Holy Week and the renewal of the Church with Christ’s death for us on the Cross. The Archbishop of Canterbury recently commented that as servants of Christ, we are the washers of feet, not lovers of publicity, we are his servants. We are servants not stewards and our task is to be faithful. Not to give thought to our own legacy, but to bear faithful witness to Jesus Christ.

I note that St Mary’s newsletter states that this is an inclusive and welcoming church, which in today’s society is much needed. Parishes across the county and churches like St Mary’s will come together and reach out with a vision to their community. To be a success this must be done in partnership with the other denominations and needs to reach those in most need.

We must look outside of our own comfortable communities, as Christians we should be prepared to visit the sick and offer support to those in need. It is not good enough for the Church to just carry on with the same faces sitting in the same pews from week to week and in the same seats at that! We need to galvanize our communities to find the young and the old, the sick and talk to them, bring them to church and let them experience a loving and accepting community.

Someone who had a big influence on my life was the author of “Chasing the Dragon”, Jackie Pullinger who has spent nearly half a century working with gang members in Hong Kong and recalls “God wants us to have soft hearts and hard feet. The trouble with so many of us is that we have hard hearts and soft feet”. God wants us to have soft hearts – hearts of love and compassion. But if we are to make any difference to the world, this will lead to hard feet as we travel along tough paths and face challenges.

In 2016 both the Archbishops of Canterbury and York have asked that between Easter and Pentecost communities hold a week of prayer for evangelism. I hope you will be inspired to join other parishes across the country in this endeavor to pray for the future of the Church, each one of us is the legacy of Jesus Christ, we are his legacy. He simply asks us, his servants, to live in a way that displays his sacrificial love, strength of hope and is a witness of Him to this world.

What thought have we given to this? What will we leave behind of lasting value in the service of God? If tonight was our last supper how might we be remembered? If you don't think it's what God would like there is still time to do something about it; let's make this our lenten choice. Ultimately, it is not about ourselves but how what we do points to God.