

Lent Address – St. Mary's Church, Warwick Sunday 26 March 2017

New Reformations – Luther 500: Challenging the Church Now

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It's a great pleasure to be back at St. Mary's, and I'm hugely grateful to Vaughan for his invitation to be here this evening.

One of the disadvantages of speaking towards the end of a series of addresses like this, is that what was new, radical, and breath-taking three weeks ago, has by now become blindingly obvious and even passé. Forgive me however if I begin with some quick elementary suggestions about the notion of Reformation, that I hope will put into context my subsequent remarks on virtue.

There may be some people here who wonder what a former vicar of All Saints' Emscote, a church, whose liturgical tradition, on the face of it, was not over troubled by the niceties of the disputes of the Reformation, might have anything of value to say on the notion of Reformation. This would, I suggest, be both to misunderstand All Saints', and to confuse the notion of Reformation with a simple conflict between Protestants and Catholics and their liturgical preferences. It's important to remember that the motivation for Reformation, for Reform, be it theological, liturgical or of governance, is fundamentally about making the church more truly itself. Indeed, a number of years ago I having a cup of tea with the then abbot of a large Roman Catholic Benedictine Abbey, who suggested that what the Roman Catholic church did at the Second Vatican Council was analogous to what the Church of England did at the Reformation. Reformation is needed when it is discerned that the church is no longer faithful to that to which we believe God has called it, either in corrupting its inheritance of faith, or in failing to integrate new knowledge and understanding that gives us new insight into the nature of God and the life of faith. The church is always getting it wrong, and constantly needs to be reformed, just like we as individuals are always getting it wrong and need repentance and the grace of absolution. Reformation is the institutional version of repentance – it is about the church seeking to return to a faithfulness from which it has strayed.

So if this is true, and if virtue might be the answer that returns the church to a greater faithfulness, what is the question? How has the church veered off course? What is the problem to which virtue might be the answer?

Most generations feel that they live at a turning point in history, and I don't think we should be shy in adding ourselves to the list. The twin events of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as US President are significant events that have the potential to shape the world we live in for some significant time to come. Most commentators agree that at the root of both is a reaction to the perceived failure of globalisation. Globalisation in this

context is less about the interconnection of people and our ability to see in real time events from the other side of the world on our televisions, than it is about the world becoming a single market place, and the relative ease of manufacturing products in very different labour markets and then shipping them around the world to be sold. This has created a layer of society in both this country and in the US, (and probably elsewhere), who feel excluded and forgotten about, and whose reliance on foodbanks is symptomatic of the problem. So what has really failed is neo-liberal market economics, and market capitalism in particular. Now I need to say quickly that I believe that a *socially-responsible* capitalism is probably the least bad system of regulation our common life that we have come up with, but there is an important distinction between this and the cut-throat market economics which took hold under Thatcher and Regan. What has died in recent years (and perhaps happily so) is the misplaced aspiration that, in the wake of the perceived failures of religion and of social hierarchy, secular capitalism would be our saviour. This has now clearly been demonstrated as not being the case, not least by the financial crash of 2008. In the absence then of any guiding principle, or to use the technical term, metanarrative, our nations our turning inwards, sometimes to a nostalgia for a past that may or may not have existed, for comfort, security and some sense of certainty ('at least we can trust ourselves'). So what this is leading to is a new protectionism ('America first!'), a new isolationism, and a fragmentation of the recent global order.

Closer to home, the ramifications of the failure of the market are felt in very real ways in most organisations, from manufacturing industry to the health service and education. The philosophy of the market has simply not brought greater productivity or efficiency to the health service or to schools, indeed many of those who work in such contexts would argue that things are as bad as they can remember. The new culture of management that seeks to make such organisations more market compliant, serves only to oppress and stress the workforce. The contemporary culture of statutory inspection is experienced as no less oppressive than the hierarchical or neo-feudal system by which things were run in the past.

So what has any of this to do with the church? Surely it is exempt from such dynamics? Well, I wonder. The problem for us in the church is that the culture of the market is so predominant in our society and in our way of thinking that we cease to notice it - it is the very water in which we swim, and we fail to notice that it is polluted. Churches now exists in the free-market of ideas, and I have to say that I think this is a very good thing – what we need to realise is what a culture shock that is. There will be, I suspect, a significant number of people here this evening who remember being taught scripture and the catechism at school, who attended Sunday School once a week, who were brought up in a culture in which Christianity, and generally the Church of England version thereof, was the predominant, indeed often the only, spiritual, philosophical, and religious framework for their lives. You were Church of England by default and church attendance wasn't necessary to validate this. However initially with the influence of immigration in the post-war era we became aware of other spiritual, philosophical and religious frameworks and the exclusivity of the Church of England was challenged, as indeed were so many other exclusivities. The old order was challenged and the new order was one of diversity and multi-culturalism, in which the church had to work quite a bit harder to justify its existence – no longer was it

place in society handed to it on a plate. What followed, as we all know, was a period of decline and at times of steep decline, falling attendance figures, ageing congregations, closed churches as people were offered a whole smorgasbord of options through which to express their spirituality, many of which seemed to speak to their experience and aspirations more accessibly than the Church of England did.

How did the church respond to this? Well it responded by seeking to regain its market share by committing to a programme of intentional growth, one which chimed happily with the emergence of evangelicalism as a dominant force within the church. All this began in the 1990s with the ill-fated Decade of Evangelism, by the end of which numbers were still falling, congregations aging, and buildings closing. And so it has continued, more-or-less unabated until now. There have been significant moves to make the church and its faith more accessible, and many of them not without some merit – I think in particular of the rediscovery of catechesis, and more recently social action and involvement. However, alongside this has been the both conscious and unconscious importation of many aspects of market capitalism into the workings of the church – an increase of bureaucracy and managerialism (often originating in senior leadership and cascading downwards), and concern with numerical auditing (colloquially known as ‘bums on seats’) and with it a sense that a church community is only as good as last year’s Usual Sunday Adult Attendance figures. While welcoming a renewed focus on Christian nurture and faith development, there has also been a temptation to commodify the gospel into marketable packages that reflect the theological predispositions of their creators. Underlying all of this is the Pelagian heresy that if we want it enough and if we try hard enough, we can save ourselves from inevitable extinction - we have made the grace of God unnecessary.

My great concern is that as fragmentation and protectionism followed the failure of global economic markets, so it will follow a church that has indiscriminately adopted market practices. To some extent we can already see this at work - the Church of England is still as divided on certain issues as it has ever been, and the political accommodations designed by General Synod are stretched to breaking point and do not address the theological disagreements that are their root cause; the Anglican Communion teeters on the point of schism; the ecumenical movement is sadly less vigorous than used to be the case, though there are signs of life in certain places; and independent non-aligned churches proliferate in great number.

So what’s that answer to all of this – what Reformation is needed? Well I would suggest that an appropriation of virtue rather than growth as the prevailing paradigm for the church would help. This would necessitate a move from an acquisitive culture (focusing on numerical growth) to an ontological, or character-based one (focusing on the church individuating to be the community it is called to be). I hasten to add this is not a rejection of mission or evangelism – the church is missional and evangelistic in its DNA – it is however a rejection of a model of mission and evangelism that has as its motivation, either consciously or unconsciously, the survival of the institution. But this will become clear as we explore the nature of virtue ethics...

There are two classic motivations for ethical action. Firstly, we do things because we've been told it the right thing to do – we follow the rules and obey the law, however irritating we may find it, and however much we may clench our jaws in the process – we focus on the means and the end can look after itself. Or secondly, we do the thing that has the best outcome for us, or for our group, or simply for the greatest number of people – we focus on the end and use whatever means are necessary to achieve it. (Caiaphas was being a utilitarian when he said: *"You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed."*). The first approach is called deontological ethics and the second utilitarianism, and most human behaviour fits into one or the other. However, there is a third approach, called virtue ethics, and this approach suggests that to make a good decision I need to be a good person, and that I will only know what a good decision is when I've become a good person. This means I am no longer tied to either the means or the ends, what is important now is my character as a human being – am I a good person? Virtue ethics invite us to develop ourselves as good people and then to trust ourselves in any given situation to make a good decision. For the virtue ethicist, doing the right thing alone isn't enough – it has to be done for the right reason as well!

So how do we become virtuous people, how are we formed as good people? Well the primary method of becoming virtuous, is to immerse oneself in a virtuous lifestyle – it's a paradox, we become good by doing good things. But we are helped on our way immeasurably by joining a community of others committed to virtue and goodness. Thus, the first requisite for virtue is community. One of the important aspects of community is that every community has its own story, and the community is where that story is told and relived. It's by our place in particular stories that we know who we are – and if one of the consequences of our current socio-political context is the fragmentation of communities, more and more people are left asking 'to what story do I belong? The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, who has done more than most to rehabilitate virtue ethics within contemporary moral philosophy, offers the following delightful illustration of how narrative create the context for meaning. He writes this:

I am standing waiting for a bus and the young man standing next to me suddenly says: 'The name of the common wild duck is *Histrionicus histrionicus histrionicus*.' There is no problem as to the meaning of the sentence he uttered: the problem is, how to answer the question, what was he doing in uttering it? Suppose he just uttered such sentences at random intervals; this would be one possible form of madness. We would render his action of utterance intelligible if one of the following turned out to be true. He has mistaken me for someone who yesterday had approached him in the library and asked: 'Do you by any chance know the Latin name of the common wild duck?' Or he has just come from a session with his psychotherapist who has urged him to break down his shyness by talking to strangers. Or he is a Soviet spy waiting at a prearranged rendez-vous and uttering the ill-chosen code sentence which will identify him to his contact. In each case the act of utterance becomes intelligible by finding a place in a narrative. (p. 210)

Both the context and the content of our stories, of our narratives, enable us to understand where we belong. MacIntyre goes on to describe tradition as an extended argument throughout history as to how we interpret our stories.

Now none of this will come as a surprise to members of the community of faith – we are familiar with the notion of community and of a narrative that creates our identity. We are familiar with the notion of tradition (and also I would suggest, tongue-in-cheek, with extended arguments!). Nor should we be unfamiliar with the other pillar of MacIntyre's prescription for the virtuous life – practices. Remember that we become virtuous by doing virtuous things ...we learn how to play a musical instrument by playing that instrument, we learn to speak a foreign language by speaking that language. For MacIntyre a practice is doing anything that enables us to get better at the thing we are doing. This may seem obvious, and you might wonder why MacIntyre even bother to note it, but the reality is that we do all sorts of things for reasons other than to get better at them. We might learn a musical instrument because there is someone in the orchestra we want to become friends with; we might become friends with someone because they are a potentially useful business contact for us; we might attend church to acquire an aura of public respectability to cover our otherwise disreputable lifestyle. Every action has a potential intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation is when we do something for a pay-off unrelated to the action itself whereas intrinsic motivation is where the pay-off is in the joy of the action or activity itself. Virtue invites us to do things for their own sake - to do the right thing for the right reason, not to use and abuse activities or even people.

So how does all of this play out when it comes to the life of the church? Well I think it has particular resonance when it comes to the church growth movement and its understanding of the mission and purpose of the church. For the deontologist, the mission of the church is simply to go out there and preach the gospel - those who respond to it will be saved and those who don't will burn in hell! The utilitarian will use any means possible to get others into church, if that means not banging on about sin or the devil too much and not making it too demanding, so be it – the important thing is to get people in.

Virtue ethics rejects both approaches - its sets itself the challenge of proclaiming the faith afresh in each generation, seeking to be faithful as a community to its inherited story and tradition, while realising that we are in an entirely new context that has no precedent. The only way forward then for someone committed to a virtuous approach is, by God's grace, to seek to develop holiness, wisdom and ministerial competence, and then to trust that in each of the individual day-to-day decisions we make, we may be people of sufficient Godly character to make wise and sanctified choices.

The church then, when seen through the lens of virtue ethics, seeks to mirror the example of its Lord and Master; it seeks to offer its very self as a tool in the redemption of the world. It seeks to be holding place for the community and wider society where healing and reconciliation can be found, where a vision of the Kingdom (that is the fullness of human life and relationship) is cultivated, nurtured and proclaimed. The former dean of Westminster, Wesley Carr, get close to this when he describes the purpose of the church as being "...to stand of behalf of others, for a moment at a point where, for whatever reason, they are (or

feel) unable to stand for themselves". The church seeks to hold the vision of God, not exclusively for itself, but on behalf of others.

So I suggest that virtue and virtue ethics offer a response to a church that has consciously and unconsciously got caught up in the mind-set of the market. If my diagnosis is correct, increased managerialism, bureaucracy and statistical and numerical auditing, rather than benefiting the long-term mission of the church, will actually lead to increased fragmentation and a corrosion of character that will evacuate it of its truest identity and spiritual character, and further comprise that on-going mission. Thus, we have a church in need of Reformation, and I offer the lens of virtue and virtue ethics as a possible corrective. But what are the implications of such an approach?

Well firstly, the church will need to put aside its market-based, acquisitive character – it will need to stop fussing about bums on pews, about its market share in the market place of faith, about power and influence within the establishment (perhaps seeking the authority of authenticity instead). This is easy to say and much more difficult to live out. It will involve recognising that communities of faith (like everything else) have lifecycles, and if a new vision that motivates and energises those communities cannot be discerned, it may be that the only new life will come through death - but that's a concept we are familiar with in the church. Virtuous character will help us make the decisions about where new life is to be found, and where good death is to be facilitated. The rejection of an acquisitive mind-set will help us see individuals as individuals and not potential members of the planned giving scheme, the electoral role, and/or the coffee rota. People are very aware when they are being commodified and will rightly reject those who do it to them.

We will need to reject, in so far as is possible, all those extrinsic motivations for membership of the community of faith and ministry in its name, and focus more closely on journey in ever deeper into the mystery of God. The 20th century spiritual writer Evelyn Underhill wrote to the then Archbishop of Canterbury prior to a Lambeth Conference and said:

God is the interesting thing about religion, and people are hungry for God. But only [one] whose life is soaked in prayer, sacrifice, and love can, by his own spirit of adoring worship, help us to apprehend Him.

It is by the church's spirit of adoring worship wrought in in individual prayer, sacrifice, and love that others will be drawn to God, in a way that no amount of strategy, or auditing or changing of the packaging will ever achieve, and this will lead to a significantly more authentic approach to mission and evangelism than one that is primarily preoccupied with the survival of the institution.

The costliest implication of this Reformation, but also its most joyous, will be the commitment that the formation of virtuous character calls from us, to cultivate holiness, wisdom, and right action [it's either virtuosic planning by the team rector, or happy a coincidence, that this address sits between one on prayer and one on wisdom]. A New Reformation, with the church challenged by the insights of, and a commitment to, virtue,

will demand a renewal of the life of prayer in the church that will lead to God's gift of holiness (not a word we should be embarrassed about) within his people; it will demand a renewal of the life of wisdom that can speak to the deepest longings of individuals, of our society and our world; and it will demand a renewal in ministry, that values the distinctiveness of both ordained and lay in witnessing by practical actions of compassion and justice to that Kingdom vision of fullness of life and relationship.

Lord of all power and might,
the author and giver of all good things:
graft in our hearts the love of your name,
increase in us true religion,
nourish us in all goodness,
and of your great mercy keep us in the same,
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
Amen.