

A NEW REFORMATION?

In his autobiography Jeremy Paxman tells of an encounter between John Major and Boris Yeltsin. John Major said, 'Well, Boris, in a word, how is Russia?' 'Good,' said Yeltsin. 'And in more than one word?' asked Major. 'Not good,' said Yeltsin.

The same could be said of the church in this land, good and not good. People's responses are similarly split, from those who say 'revival is just around the corner', to those who say 'Keep calm and carry on, but if necessary, the last person turn out the lights,' to, at the far end, those who say, 'The whole system is bust; let's start again.'

I'm clear that the basic task of the Church remains the same, to work for the transformation of all life under God, both human life and the life of society. So the task of ministry remains the same too. We have to be concerned about three things: *the glory of God, the pain of the world, and the renewal of the Church*. I sometimes think of that in terms of colours. The glory of God is gold; the pain of the world is red, and the renewal of the Church is green for green growth etc. So we have these three colours to use as we learn to paint in the Master's workshop. And what we try to do isn't painting by numbers but producing something beautiful for God that's appropriate to our setting, our time, our gifts, our opportunities and so on.

All that doesn't change. The glory of God is phenomenal, and we've caught a glimpse of it in the incarnation, the cross and the resurrection. That glory covers the earth and our task is to point to it, to God, and say 'Just look!' The pain of the world is ever present and its scale is terrible, but again the incarnation, cross and resurrection have within them the seeds of a response that absorbs, transmutes and redeems even the worst wounds of the world. And the renewal of the Church needs constant attention, as Karl Barth's slogan said, 'Ecclesia semper reformanda' – the Church must always be reformed, because it always has to speak to its context. The gospel always has to be delivered to a new address.

So why is reform more urgent now?

Firstly, because its life and ministry is under an impossible strain. Here's an announcement that appeared recently in the Church Times for a House-for-Duty post in the diocese of York. House for duty means Sunday plus two days in the week..... It's crazy. The parochial *principle* may be intact but this parochial *practice* is beyond silly. At the same time the finances of most churches and dioceses are in severe difficulties, the hair colour of most congregations is increasingly grey (or absent), churchwardens and treasurers are almost becoming endangered species so hard are they to find, and the systems of the Church of England seem subject to organisational atrophy.

Why is reform more urgent now? *Secondly because (speaking for the Church of England) we're not getting through to the people of England.* Most people in society show no interest in the church. Just 3% go regularly to a Church of England service. Many have no knowledge of the Church's language, its story, its formative role in British values, and no particular sympathy for what they see as a regressive institution. We've lost the confidence of the nation, even as moral chaplain to society, because many people see their moral values as being nobler than those of the Church.

Why is reform more urgent now? *Thirdly because the culture has moved on.* Jonathan Sacks shrewdly said, 'How can anyone still need religion if: to explain the universe we have science; to control the universe we have technology; to negotiate power we have politics; to achieve prosperity we have economics. If you're ill you go to a doctor, not a priest. If you feel guilty you go to a psychotherapist, not to confession. If you are depressed you take Prozac and not the book of Psalms. And if you seek salvation you go to our new cathedrals, namely shopping centres, where you can buy happiness at extremely competitive prices.' So the Church's hold over the public imagination has been melting away. To paraphrase Dean Acheson, we've lost an Empire and not yet found a role.

And yet, and yet.... the need for a vibrant Church is greater than ever in our land. For one thing *you can't understand society here, or in the world as a whole today, without understanding religion and its power in people's lives.* Between 75 and 80% of the world's population has a belief in the transcendent that deeply influences their lives. Living in the West disguises that fact from us. Religion influences the world stage massively, both for good and evil, as we know. Anything natural and good can be twisted until it becomes unhealthy, whether it be the instinct of hunger, thirst, ambition, sex - or religion. But the one thing you can't do without is some wise understanding of the dynamics of faith.

Secondly, we need a vibrant Church because our technology is outstripping our values and leaving society with massive problems. The issues of cyber bullying at the personal level and cyber terrorism at the national level; the issue of robots taking over half of human jobs, and fighting our wars for us, and maybe even overtaking humanity; the issues of financial transactions that unbalance the world's economy in a moment, and of fraud where the figures stagger the imagination; the issues around the manipulation of human life through the genome and other amazing technologies, the issues simply of the right to life and the right to death – all these are hugely complex issues and need supple ethical minds and the wisdom of the great faith traditions which are used to complexity and can prevent society throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

You may know of the man who left church one morning and said to the vicar, 'Thank you for that sermon, vicar. I never understood that issue before. I still don't understand it – but at a higher level!' It's at that higher level that theologians are vital contributors to contemporary debates.

And the third reason a vibrant Church is essential is that the search for meaning is eternal. People always have and always will cast around for a framework to live in. The big human questions never go away. What's it all for? What does it all mean? Am I just a random collocation of atoms? What does my sense of incompleteness point to, or my desires, or my sense of awe and wonder? What do I do with my loneliness? How then shall I live? These are all religious questions and the Church is one of the most important resources in addressing them.

So we've looked at three reasons why reform of the Church and our current expression of faith is particularly urgent now, and we've looked at three reasons why the need for a vibrant Church has never been greater. So what's to be done?

Predictably, perhaps, I have three suggestions to make. I could come up with a lot more but I think brevity is more important than comprehensiveness. And modesty too. +Patrick: 'I think this is the only time in my life when I really know what I'm doing...' So I'm not claiming that these three suggestions are the three absolute priorities. What do I know? But I offer them.

First, I believe we have to talk about the Kingdom rather than about the Church. The Church is a turn off to everyone apart from us. And the Church is simply an agent of the Kingdom anyway – a vital one, certainly, but only an agent, not the goal itself. The Kingdom of God is a healed creation, said the theologian Hans Kung, it's a world order where Godly wisdom motivates a global society in which justice, peace and human flourishing are embedded in the culture and its institutions, where every life is cherished and brought to fulfilment, and where love, mercy and compassion are the common currency.

So Christian faith has to be spoken of more as a movement than an institution. We live in a 'dark night of institutions'; none are trusted, whether it be the political and legal systems, the press, the police, or the Church. But underneath the institutional streets of the Church, the hidden streams of faith have always run free. New wells are often sunk into these streams and the fresh water of the Spirit gushes up, whether it be in the Desert Fathers, the Reformation, the eighteenth century evangelical revival, the Oxford Movement, Liberation theology in South America, the Taize community, Celtic spirituality, new monasticism – so many. And they've all been much more like movements than institutions. Yes, we need institutions to pass on the treasure, but the liquid gold of the gospel is what matters rather than the different moulds it's put into. People will be interested in a movement much more than an institution. A movement of faith in God, focused on Jesus, lived in the Spirit.

And that movement has to speak of a God who is much larger and more radical than the tame, domesticated God we sometimes seem to offer. We mustn't whittle God down to small pieces that our small minds can handle. I love the way the American writer Annie Dillard speaks about going to church: 'Why do we people in churches seem like cheerful tourists on a package tour of the Absolute? Does anyone have the slightest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? The churches are like children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It's madness to wear hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Sidesmen should issue life-preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews...'

This God we worship, after all, isn't a toy god, another object in a field of objects. God is the Ground, the Source of all objects, the inwardness of all things. Mark Oakley wrote that God is in the world as poetry is in the poem. Or St Bonaventure: 'God is within all things but not enclosed, outside all things but not excluded, above all things but not aloof, below all things but not debased.'

This is the God at the heart of the movement, the God of the Kingdom named after him.

My second suggestion for the reformation of the Church is based on a phrase used by Brother Sam of the Franciscans. He once said, '*Monastic life may seem utterly out of tune with the spirit of our times and yet, if we're entering another Dark Age, it may be to the wisdom of such a way that*

the Church of today needs to turn. I sense that the renewal of both Church and society will come through the re-emerging of forms of Christian community that are homes of generous hospitality, places of challenging reconciliation and centres of attentiveness to the living God.'

Those three qualities in the Christian Movement (known as the Church): hospitality, reconciliation, attentiveness to God.' First then, *the Church needs to be known as having a warm welcome for absolutely everyone, not just those who look like us or know the right code words.* God's favourite word is 'yes', a fact deliciously expressed in this poem by Kaylin Haught....

*I asked God if it was okay
to be melodramatic
and she said yes
I asked her if it was okay to be short
and she said it sure is
I asked her if I could wear nail polish
or not wear nail polish
and she said honey
she calls me that sometimes
she said you can do just exactly
what you want to
Thanks God I said
And is it even okay if I don't
paragraph
my letters
Sweetcakes God said
who knows where she picked that up
what I am telling you is
Yes Yes Yes*

At the moment this issue of saying 'yes' is focused on the Church's welcome, or non-welcome, to LGBT people, and it's here that we can see the gulf that's opened up between us and the society we're here to serve. My children, convinced Christians, haven't a clue why we're so hung up on this. We're often told we mustn't just follow the 'spirit of the age'. The question surely is, might not the spirit of the age be at one with the Holy Spirit, leading us into all truth? God is outrageously hospitable; you see it in every chapter of the Bible. We must be too.

Brother Sam said our Christian communities must also be places of challenging reconciliation. In many ways the world seems to be coming apart at the seams. Divisions are becoming more marked all the time as nations, international institutions, political parties, neighbours, everyone, marks out their territory and gets ready to defend it by any means necessary. The recent dismal campaigns over Europe in the UK and a President in the US have been classic examples of superficial slogans intended to divide people into right and wrong, us and them, included and excluded. We seem to love binary analysis. Everywhere in the world, particularly in the middle east, in Nigeria, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan etc, the crying need is for reconciliation. And locally in this country communities are dangerously fragmented on issues like Brexit and immigration.

But the Christian Movement, the Church, has a ministry of reconciliation at its heart. Justin Welby, our Archbishop, has made over 70 visits to Nigeria in his work of reconciliation over the years. Desmond Tutu was the defining voice of reconciliation in South Africa both before and after the end of apartheid. Places like Corymeela have a distinguished place in the peace-making process in Northern Ireland. And each individual church has a role in bringing, and holding together, couples, families and communities, working for a fair and just society, committed to social action. Because behind all this is God's great work of reconciling the world to himself, and then giving us the ministry of reconciliation. In a world that's falling apart we have a crucial role as ambassadors for Christ, saying yes, the centre can hold, if the centre is Christ.

So Brother Sam said our Christian communities would need to be hospitable, reconciling and *thirdly centres of attentiveness to the living God*, or as I would put it, passionate about God. The well-known spiritual writer Evelyn Underhill wrote to Archbishop Lang on the eve of the Lambeth Conference in 1930 in order to make an appeal to the assembling bishops about priorities, and she said, 'may it please your Grace, I desire to humbly suggest that the interesting thing about religion is God, and the people are hungry for God.' Absolutely! As long as it's the real thing, not that toy god I spoke of, and not a God of lofty power, but of gracious presence, not of distant majesty but of passionate involvement, not of ritual religion but of a reality more real than I am to myself.

In a world of constant noise and speed, many people are longing for stillness. In a culture that measures success in all the wrong currencies, many people are longing to know how to pray. In a world of lethal injustices, many people are longing for a sane community committed to justice and love and prayer. So to offer all that, we have to be irredeemably fascinated by the mystery of God. If we aren't, then why should anyone else be?

So far then, I've suggested we need to talk about the Kingdom rather than the Church, a movement rather than an institution; and that Brother Sam's priorities of generous hospitality, challenging reconciliation and attentiveness to the living God are bang on the nail. So third and last, **I believe we need in the Church of England some serious organisational simplification.** A friend of mine once said to me, 'You know, John, there's nothing wrong with the Church of England that the Second Coming can't sort out.' But I'd rather not wait that long.

The typical template for the parochial system was a rural village of around 300 souls, a Lord of the Manor, a church, a school and a parson. That parson would take services, visit the sick, go to the village school, take tea with the gentry and write books on botany in his spare time. That picture withered ages ago. I outlined some of the difficulties earlier on. We need a new, flexible approach to parochial ministry, one that values our incarnational commitment to every community in the land, and values too our wonderful buildings – as far as possible – but doesn't put the church cart before the gospel horse.

I wonder if we might see something like this in fifteen years' time. First, some *Resource churches* with a body of people, plant, prayer, ideas, administration etc to support an area, possibly a deanery. They're sometimes called Minster churches. Then we might have a number of lively *parish churches* which aren't dependent on the Resource church but can minister effectively

within the fellowship of the deanery. Then there might be quite a lot of *Festival churches* which come into their own at the major festivals and can be used for weddings, funerals etc but don't have all the paraphernalia of a parish church. And then finally we might have a lot of *house churches*, going right back to the early Church where, for the first 300 years, there were virtually no churches, just houses where people met to break open the sacred writings and the sacred meal. Resource churches, parish churches, festival churches, house churches – a different, flexible model of church life for a new season. New wineskins for the new wine of the gospel.

Interestingly, it was a Roman Catholic, Brendan Hoban who, for me, put it so well. He said: 'we need a change of attitude: from patronage to partnership, from dictation to dialogue, from control to trust, from the static to the dynamic, from playing it safe to being willing to take risks, from the institution to the community, from law to love, from being self-centred and worrying about survival to being outward-looking and concerned with humanity.'

So, that's for starters. Groucho Marx ended a talk by saying, 'So those are my principles. But if you don't like them I have some others.' Well, yes and no. There's heaps more to say, but those points at least I'm fairly sure need exploring. Perhaps my last word would be this: keep calm and carry on – carry on telling the story, the story of Jesus, the centre and pivot of history. That's the story that turns the world upside down.