

purpose to the narrowly didactic. The eye-opening benefits of poetic and dramatic rhetoric is a hugely significant contribution which is more likely to arise from the set piece monologue than a small group discussion.

I share Stuart Murray's conviction that sermons should not be abandoned, but integrated into a more varied and holistic approach. "What if we have one well-prepared sermon each month and spend four weeks reflecting together on its implications?"<sup>151</sup>

If the preacher is delivered from the treadmill of week in week out sermon preparation, this creates space for better researched, more imaginative, better crafted sermons. If such sermons are seen as rhetorical discussion starters designed to provoke reflection, testing and fleshing out by the congregation, then the monthly balance envisaged by Murray and advocated here has the potential to deliver the best of both worlds.

### **Conclusion: less is more**

Let us have less preaching and better preaching. Our post Christendom context challenges our understanding of sermonic form and sermonic purpose. What is needed is more interactive engagement with the word of God and more poetic, rhetorical, imaginative, biblical preaching. We should stop doing it so often and learn to do it with a flourish.

## **THE ECOLOGY OF THE FAITH COMMUNITY**

### **Tim Marks**

This year, I have been working with the Diocese of Chelmsford to help them evaluate their clergy leadership training programmes. A question naturally arises: **What is Christian leadership for?** Some clergy were derailed by the question. Others said it was to create a new community. This is important. It means more than an increased congregation. It means more than church growth or the more tentative gatherings we call 'emergent church'. There is a

---

<sup>151</sup> S. Murray, *Church After Christendom* (Paternoster, Carlisle 2005) 220.

permanence, a stability about a community. Something earthed, something rooted.

So how is Christian faith community built? What are the tell tale signs that indicate that this faith community is in a healthy place? Why is belonging to, being formed by and contributing to faith community essential rather than optional. This seems increasingly important to me to answer, as one who, after moving from the front of the church in 1996, found being a congregational member at the back of the church suffocatingly boring, and left for a while in favour of a more individual journey.

I remember the impact of two faith communities on me, after being brought up in both the nonconformist and Anglican traditions, but seeing no more than church going. I remember the close knit, curious, praying and supportive missionary community in the Charles Johnson Memorial Hospital in Nqutu, Zululand in the late 1960s. I had not encountered this solidarity, this demand and this seriousness before. It was profoundly shaking. I understood that I did not understand the Christian faith. And I remember as a Bible College student standing to sing “Eternal light, eternal light” in a small chapel in Birkenhead and being caught up by 100 Christians seeing what they sang. I knew they did because I saw it too. I had not known that believing and faithful singing could create an internal landscape, vast and joyful.

I understand more and more that trying to live a life of faithful trust in Jesus Christ today, almost smothered by the capacity of post modernity to stifle serious questions, is almost unbearably difficult. I feel I hardly know what it means to be a Christian. It’s like forgetting the sun during those days of low cloud. Sometimes, when mist hangs low in Malvern, we climb through it on the great hill and burst out into sunshine at the top of the Beacon. According to Walsh and Middleton, “Christianity as lived in faithfulness always requires discernment of and serious struggle with our particular cultural context”.<sup>152</sup>

For those of us at the point of ministry where the faith journey has been over many decades, the context has changed enormously: Post Christendom; postmodernity; affluenza; climate change.

---

<sup>152</sup> *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be.*

As a theological tutor in the 80s, I was passionate about exploring the vast range of thought and experience in Christian spirituality. Some of us tried to pioneer retreats, courses, experiments of lived depth. An ex-student of Moorlands Bible College introduced himself to me as having been at my 'Catholic appreciation classes'. Now it seems common place. Vast outpourings of literature on prayer and silence and learning to be spiritual have occurred. Now I worry about narcissism: me and my precious soul; me and my MBTI, my Enneagram number and my signal strengths; me and my personal narrative so ephemeral I need to stick self-defining buttons all over my personal journal. I sound like a grumpy old man, even a cranky cleric, but I don't deride all this. I'm just scared it gets subverted into something different from hearing the voice that says, "Choose you this day whom you will serve".

I have started to think once more about the necessity of being formed as a Christian by a community. What is Christian leadership for, both ordained and non-ordained? It is to create a faith community that has the power to enable to us to live thankfully, with faith and hope and love, subversively, tellingly, in a spiritual wasteland, in which, as we offer the wholeness of our lives to God regularly, we do so together with those who make a similar high risk gamble and we are shaped by their testimony.

A critic might say, "No big deal, Tim. You started off a Congregationalist, wandered away amongst the Anglicans and have latterly rediscovered the congregational principle again. Congratulations, but no big deal." Well, there is a bit more. Brueggemann warned us in the 1980s that, in postmodernity, all church belonging would be 'intentional'. Jackson Carroll, in *God's Potters* says that in the States there is a convergence in all denominations towards a *de facto* congregationalism based not on church polity, but consumerism. This is not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about ministry being a job, blue collar stuff (as Eugene Peterson calls it). The job is to build communities who raise questions, live different, look odd maybe and don't care. If that is the case, then much that passes for ministerial formation is worse than useless. We don't know much about doing this within the Anglican community. Within postmodernity, having a personal spiritual journey, practising meditation, believing in angels, hoping for miracles, going on a retreat with a personal spiritual trainer or a life skills coach, spending huge sums on going to

Toronto or Dharamsala, doesn't raise more than a ripple of interest. It's healthier than smoking weed, man. It's your choice.

For a Christian this is not trivial or wrong or mistaken. There are two dangers for us. The first is that a scary and wonderful exploration has been turned into a risk averse commodity, compliant to Health and Safety regulations. The second is that all this stuff is a means, not an end. The end is the witness to and obedient service of the dangerous and amazing resurrected Christ in a living faith community. Individual lives make a difference, but not the difference faithful, earthed community makes. Faithful community is like marram grass. Once rooted, and the restless, sterile sand stops blowing around, dunes build, birds, frogs, insects move in. Life happens. A new ecology starts.

So here's a cheer for the writers who put together *Practising Our Faith*. The writers took up a thought that Craig Dystra lays out in *Growing in the Life of Faith*. The challenge is that the fullness of what it means to be Christian, to be formed and shaped and honed into Christ-likeness, happens best in community. More than that, it is in such a community there will be certain practices. Dystra suggests fourteen distinct practices, but the team of writers hone them down to twelve. "Christian practices are things Christian people do together over time in response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world".<sup>153</sup>

They address fundamental needs and conditions through concrete human acts. They show us how our daily lives are tangled up with the things God is doing in the world. They are beautiful and non-esoteric. In healthy Christian faith communities, we honour the body and reverence the physical. We share hospitality and learn to welcome the stranger. We are ecologically sensitive, treating the planet as our home, our household. We are different - we say yes and no. We keep Sabbath, protecting times of being, thanking, receiving the amazing YES of God. We are people who bear and share a testimony to the covenant love of God. We strive to discern the will of the Lord and make strategic plans. We work at community building, shaping life together. We are people of extraordinary forgiveness. We bring our wounds to God and each other that together we may find healing of body and mind and soul. It

---

<sup>153</sup> Dorothy Bass in *Practising our Faith* (Jossey Bass) 5.

takes a community of faith to help you to die well. And we sing, we sing our lives back to God in praise and delight and joy.

The UK churches are, in general terms, in dreadful shape, living on borrowed time. In these conditions, standing still with courage and faith is heroic. But we cannot live without hope and a clear sense of what competent ministry strives for. Dystra quotes Edward Farley about the nasty doubts that surround the efficacy of the texts and practices of faith. “Are Christian theologians like stockbrokers who distribute stock certificates on a non-existent corporation? In this situation, the reality of the corporation, its size, type, power and promise, turns out to be simply the broker itself”. The question, he says, is whether in our heart of hearts, we are thinking of the church as a tomb or a path.

We need hope. We need intellectual and spiritual clarity. Peter Drucker said “Nothing is more useless than to do efficiently that which should not be done at all”. I am of the opinion that when the multitudinous activities of the clergy are weighed out, the gold dust will be the time spent building community, teaching the practices that form and shape the faith community and the people who live it. A writer described the Blessed Margery Kempe as one who combined the twin occupations of being a saint and a public nuisance. Maybe she should become the new patron saint of the clergy who want to build faithful communities who rock the boat, disturb the peace and live the presence of Jesus in these narcotic times.

## **THE LOST ART OF CONGREGATIONAL DISCERNMENT**

### **Author unknown**

One of the defining characteristics of Baptist life is that we gather together as a church to find the mind of Christ. Our forebears were persecuted for demanding the right to independent assembly, unencumbered by set prayers, or the intervention of bishops and other authorities. They felt that God had a specific word for the gathered group of believers in a specific context: “Whoever has ears; let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Rev 3.15). They risked imprisonment, torture and death for the right to