

Celebration LINK

May 2006

Time for a different model of church?

Whenever I read the church press these days - which I usually do weekly in an attempt to keep abreast of what is going on - I always seem to come away from it feeling a bit depressed. Quite often I give up the attempt and just do the crossword or the Sudoku.

What makes it depressing is not just the boring nature of a lot of the content. It's the endless story of feuds and squabbles which seem intractable. Indeed, the press themselves seem to be part of the problem, perpetuating hostilities by giving various opinionated individuals column space.

I suppose some people feel they are defending the faith, or maybe just engaging in a battle for the soul of the church. Either way, it makes very little difference. One is left with the question, what does any of this have to do with Jesus Christ? How does it build up my faith?

What we read about the church, globally or nationally, often seems far removed from the business of dealing with ordinary human beings and their problems at local level. Yet there probably is a connection, reflected in the different ways in which 'church' is understood.

At the extremes, we might say there is the institutional model of church and the eclectic model.

Locally, the institutional model lays great stress on structures, forms and procedures. Authority and control are concentrated, often in the hands of a single individual but also in committees and

officially authorised people. Ministry and ethos generally are subject to controls which are more about preserving order and tradition than with responding to changing needs.

The eclectic model of church is all-pervasive today. It may include many of the features of the institutional church, or it may take one of the newer forms. It is the model of church in which individuals self-select and go to the church of their choice.

In both these models, what is important is belief and the way things are done. It is not surprising, therefore, that these are the matters considered to be of supreme importance when it comes to national and international debate.

Of course, both these models of church have been a fact of life for generations, but it is only in comparatively recent times that they have begun to cause serious strains, even threatening to tear the church apart.

There are no doubt many reasons for this: for example, the toxic combination of moral relativity and increasing openness in public life, which has the effect that issues of right and wrong are not only up for grabs but also politicised in a kind of 'in your face' sort of way.

Institutionally, this ensures that what is of supreme importance for the church is the battleground of beliefs and ideologies, while from the eclectic point of view it hardens the mindset that we don't need to live with each other into a settled conviction and even - so we tell ourselves - a matter of conscience.

Hence my feeling of depression when I read the church papers. It never ceases to amaze me that protagonists in various disputes seem so unaware of the total absence of the Spirit of Christ that is created by their wars.

It goes without saying, of course, that the model of church which has nurtured us through many years of community is not the institutional nor the eclectic one, but the body of Christ. This can lead to some surprising results.

For example, the condition of openness is often felt to be a problem for today's church. Everything is out of the closet, so to speak, so that time honoured ways of coping with difficult issues no longer work. They cannot be swept under the carpet; they have to be confronted, and what might at one time have been tolerated cannot be so treated any more. Decisions have to be made, for or against.

But actually, in the body of Christ model, openness has the opposite effect. In community, openness is pretty much a given; you can't easily escape from other people, or even from yourself for that matter. But the effect is not to make everyone condemn each other and keep each other at arm's length. On the contrary, it leads to acceptance of the other, born out of the recognition that we are all frail and limited human beings.

Openness has a humanising effect, but it only works in that model of church. It works because people are committed to each other and understand that they

Parish life



During Lent this year we took part in a home produced course based on the film *Touching the Void*. This is the epic true story of two climbers in the Andes, who scaled a peak only to have a devastating accident on the way down. One man fell, shattering his leg and ending up hanging by a rope over the edge of a precipice. His partner, unable to pull him up, had to make the decision to cut the rope to save himself. Falling into snow in the mouth of a crevasse, the injured climber had to make a decision of his own: to die where he was or use his rope to lower himself into the blackness in the hope of finding some way out at the bottom. Choosing the latter, he spotted a chink of light and crawled for days until he reached the base camp which his partner was just about to abandon.

Each week we used part of the story as a metaphor for our life's experience: summits and plateaux, for example, or life changing decisions. Or just decisions to carry on as opposed to giving up. It was quite a salutary experience to reflect on a long and colourful community history, with many ups and downs, in that light. But the real benefit was in sharing with others. When you draw back the curtain of our private lives, so many people have amazing stories.

Thanks to the presence in our congregation of someone from South Africa, our local church has been interested to develop a relationship with St. Faith's Anglican parish in Durban. Last year a gift was sent towards the work there, and we later had an opportunity to meet with the Rector of St. Faith's, the Rev. Thembinkosi Gumede (right).

We were particularly interested to learn about ministry to children and people with AIDS. We were told that because AIDS is a taboo subject, the reality is that poverty, lack of education, unemployment and AIDS are all facets of one big problem. As often as not, the presenting issue is not illness as such but the inability to feed a family. Hence, part of St. Faith's ministry is the distribution of food parcels.

Although drugs are now available, because of ignorance people are often not diagnosed until they have passed the HIV stage, at which point they are likely to be told there is nothing that can be done for them. Our church's gift was used to help a woman with two small children who was too sick to work. Food was provided to help her regain her strength, but unfortunately she eventually died.

Such needs are a bottomless pit, and the more help is provided, the more the demand. But the human touch of compassion provides something lacking in less personal, even if more effective, programmes, and it is surely part of what the church is there for. Interestingly, Mr. Gumede said he had no access to foreign aid income.



Future planning

Recently, the CCCT Committee of Management discussed a number of projects planned for the next year or so. Other commitments have effectively stalled plans for website development in the last 18 months, but we hope it will now be possible to restart work in this area.

This fits in with Community discussions on this subject (see facing page). The web has changed all of our lives in the last five or six years, to the extent that it is hard to remember the days when all communication was through paper or telephone.

There is little choice, therefore, but to try to get to grips with it, despite the fact that technology which comes as naturally as breathing to young people represents a steep learning curve for the older generation. But that does not mean we are unenthusiastic!

In many ways, the web is an ideal medium for a situation where physical limitations restrict the possibility of interaction. As we have already found with the existing website, two way communication can happen with more people than previously might have attended a meeting.

The Trust therefore expects to invest more in publishing and web related projects over the next couple of years, as well as updating some of our (ageing) office equipment.

The Trust also supports the ongoing life and ministry of the Celebration UK house through education and training. One example is a course at St George's College in Jerusalem, which Phil & Margaret Bradshaw hope to take in 2007. This is not an arbitrary choice. It emerged in discussions with the Community and its Spiritual Adviser, Daphne Grimes, who has a long standing relationship with St. George's.

Christian Resources Exhibition

The CRE is quite a good mirror of what is going on in the church these days, more so in the seminars perhaps than through the exhibition stands. This year there was a lot of material on the variety of 'fresh expressions' of church - a name particularly associated with the Anglican initiative but not by any means limited to it. They seem to be growing in number year by year.

Some of these efforts make very sophisticated use of the latest means of communication. We do not aspire to those heights, but we were interested in the web building tools on offer from some Christian companies.



Maintaining our links

In April we attended the wedding of our old friend Basil Matthews to Cheryl Parker in San Francisco. Basil, who was formerly Abbot of Elmore Abbey, is now an Anglican priest on the staff of the Church of the Advent of Christ the King in the city.

Celebration were very much in support, in the shape of Bill Farra and May McKeown from Aliquippa, and Phil & Margaret Bradshaw of Celebration's UK house. Also in our party were John and Soledad Farra from Houston. John has known Basil from earliest days, when we were based at Yeldall Manor in Berkshire.

It was a truly joyous occasion. Basil had given us a quick tour of the city the day before, and on the day itself the weather was kind to us despite a bad forecast. A highlight at the reception was a rendering of 'Psalm 151' by Basil's sister and niece. Afterwards Basil and Cheryl went for a short honeymoon at Yosemite National Park.

It was also good to meet up with another old community friend, Louis Newton, from Post Green days.

Of course, while there we also took the opportunity to talk community business. This included plans for a visit to Aliquippa in July, and the vision for using the web. We want to try to make available some of the archive material that we hold. A big start has been made at Aliquippa with putting the early books into digital form, but we also have large photographic records on both sides of the Atlantic. We would also like to find ways of using the web to stimulate dialogue with those who have been part of our history.



Soledad and John Farra, during an eve-of-wedding celebration restaurant meal for Basil



Cheryl and Basil receive a wedding gift from the Community, while Bill Farra looks on.



Cheryl and Basil after the wedding



The Celebration contingent

(l. to r.): Margaret Bradshaw, Bill Farra, May McKeown, Phil Bradshaw



Louis Newton chatting with Margaret

belong to one another. Where they are separate, whether by practice or by principle, openness merely reinforces the impulse to keep one's distance.

There are two kinds of openness: one is *disclosure*, where information is made public, and the other is *receptiveness*, where that which is disclosed is accepted as opposed to being rejected. In the institutional and eclectic models of church, disclosure leads to barriers. In the body of Christ model, disclosure is met with receptiveness - which does not mean that we necessarily agree. But it does mean that we progress toward understanding, and stay in relationship rather than separate. In that process, we may discover to our surprise that it is we who are changing.

Another example where the body of Christ model leads to a different result than either of the other two models is the relative importance of right and wrong. As the church press shows, in the present climate, right and wrong tend to acquire an absolute significance. Even those who are not disposed to make an issue of things find they are forced to, if only to counteract the absolute claims of their opponents.

This is typical of the institutional and eclectic models. In the body of Christ model, however, concepts of 'right' and 'wrong' have relative importance. It is not that they don't exist. This is not the same as the supposed liberal 'anything goes' attitude so detested by conservatives. It is the recognition that all our insights are of necessity provisional, not only because no individual or section of the church has perfect knowledge, but because the Spirit of God cannot be confined by absolutes.

That is the one thing we should have learned from Jesus. The Spirit will always trump law, because law ultimately makes sinners of everybody. We may think we are on the right side - on *God's* side in fact - but if we take comfort from that we had better beware, because we can never escape the charge of being transgressors. The Spirit is not against law; indeed it fulfils it, but not in the

way that we do. It fulfils it perfectly, which as Jesus showed means there are times when stated law needs to be re-defined or reinterpreted or even set aside altogether.

Where this is not happening, the Spirit of Christ is not present. Adherence to law is then actually in opposition to God, because it denies the very things on which the law is based: justice, mercy, forgiveness, acceptance and so on. From this angle, we might say the unforgiveable sin is the choice of law against Spirit - unforgiveable because there is no forgiveness in law; only culpability. Forgiveness and acceptance belong in the realm of the Spirit.

Where people insist on their point of view, or their criterion of correctness, to the extent of refusing to be in communion or associating with those who don't conform, in effect rules are set up which have the character of absolute law. The result is similar to the situation that Jesus encountered. In the name of God, the real God is obscured or even banished from the scene. But, as Jesus also pointed out, those who live by the law are also judged by it.

In a very down to earth and homely way, this truth was discovered by us in community life. In community jargon everyone, from the highest to the lowest, had to deal with their 'stuff', which included everything from character flaws to religious prejudices. Unity in Christ was the fundamental premise for all relationships. Far from being an airy-fairy theological idea, it was that which made community life different from conventional secular life, whether in church or out of it. It was a spiritual thing, which is precisely what Jesus was trying to communicate when confronted with a variety of 'laws' whose rightness only had the effect of dividing and alienating.

'Law' has its own peculiar character. In those terms, there is no difference between a law that says murder is a crime and one that says Jesus is the Son of God or even one that says this is the way we do things here. In every case

there is a definition of correctness and some implication for those who don't conform. I'm sure many of those who engage in furious religious disputes don't feel they are living by law. Nevertheless, that is the implication, when such convictions are allowed to strain relationships to breaking point. There is simply no room for the Spirit of Jesus.

The body of Christ model insists on unity in Christ above law - whether that law is expressed in institutional rules or the ideologies of religious parties or the eclectic preferences of people who go to a church of their choice. Without that, the body is no longer healthy, or even dead. That may not worry those who derive a sense of identity from their beliefs, but Jesus' vision is about how God is seen in our humanity, not about adherence to religious doctrines.

The witness of community life is that the body of Christ model is not something mystical. It is actually very earthy. It means not dismissing people because of what they believe or say, or do or don't do. It means recognising the weakness of our own humanity and belief systems, and our incompleteness without the giftedness of others who have flaws just as we do. Put positively, it means affirming the dignity of all.

I said at the beginning of this article that there is a connection between the way we understand 'church' at local level and the religious wars that we read about in the church press. How we see things locally has been learned by osmosis, or at least we have never been taught anything different. The body of Christ model is a real possibility, but it needs to be actively taught. If it is, it will be a genuine antidote to many of today's problems.

Can that be done? Well, community life at least uncovered some of the principles, which is the reason I write as I do. But that is just a catalyst, not a blueprint (yet another 'law'). All it really needs is for people to catch a vision.

Phil Bradshaw