**Church and Kingdom** – **address for Urban Theology Union AGM Nov 2020**

Back in 2003, when I was beginning my work as Bishop of Wakefield, various messages filtered through to me – indeed some messages came to me direct: So, for example , a number of people said ‘I gather you’re against Church growth?’ or other very similar comments. Of course, there then followed some (hopefully) constructive conversation, attempting to tease out what precisely they meant and then to offer them an intelligent and positive response. I suppose my initial internal reaction to such challenges was: ‘What an extraordinary statement! Why would I ever have offered for ordination if that was true? Wouldn’t all of us want to see the Church grow and more people respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ?’

Then I began to dig deeper. Maybe they realised that I’d not signed up for the ‘Church Growth’ movement? Maybe the succession of slightly unusual posts I’d occupied – theological teaching, Ecumenical Secretary to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Director of Ordinands, Dean of Norwich, suggested that I was not bothered about the growth of discipleship and congregational outreach? Maybe, I guess, those who were asking had looked at my pedrigree and assumed that I was cast in a ‘liberal theological mould’, which they believed did not pursue the road of ‘saving individual souls, and asking people if that had committed themselves to Jesus as their Saviour and Lord’?

There is undoubtedly a real divergence here which is perhaps the main focus of today’s session. It is a divergence which was captured classically in an article in the journal ‘Theology’, back in 1979. The article, was by Paul Gibson, a Canadian Anglican theologian. Paul’s article was titled *A Partisan Plea for Liberal Mission.* I shall not try to precis the piece now, but I can describe the aim of his article. Paul’s key point is that *liberal* and *liberality* imply an essential freedom to choose. Surely a liberal theologian would not want to press anyone or indeed proselytise anyone since surely that stands in absolute contradiction to the very word liberal. But the irony, at the same time, is of course that the liberal Christian would hope that as many others as possible might also be attracted to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, clothed in the same liberal garments that she herself displays. Now that may feel to be something of a caricature, but it’s not far from the essence of the ‘partisan plea’ for which Gibson argues.

Effectively, this debate, disagreement, controversy focuses on the Church/Kingdom issue. It is not simply about individual versus corporate salvation although that is part of the story. This bifurcation between the individual and the full mass of humanity is itself an oversimplistic and distorted view of the nature of the Christian message. Instead the two things seen together are very clearly reflected as far back as in the theology of St Paul. So, for example, in Romans 7, Paul sharply defines that battle which goes on in each individual’s soul.:

‘I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate……who would deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.’

Here, Paul directly acknowledges the individual challenge and the promise of ‘justification’ or ‘right-wising’ as Rudolf Bultmann put it in rather ugly terms. Individuals are challenged to respond to Christ. But Paul also sees the crucial significance of the corporate, or universal aspect of what God has done for humanity in Christ. It is perhaps most richly stated in the much-quoted words from the fifth chapter of the Second Letter to the Corinthians:

‘Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he/she is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, and entrusting to us the ministry of reconciliation.’

A similar message emerges in the first chapter of the Letter to the Colossians, whether we believe it to have been written by Paul, or by a very close disciple. Here we are challenged by the entire ‘Christ Event’, or what Bultmann in equally ugly words to those I quoted earlier, described as the ‘salvation occurrence’. This was an event of cosmic, universal proportions; it was nothing less than a transformation of our humanity into the nature of Christ himself.

But, thus far in all that I have said, there has been no reference to *Church* or *Kingdom.* Where do we find it in Holy Scripture? Of course, in the later New Testament writings, some notion of the Church, *ecclesia,* that is a gathered community, does emerge, and certainly in the gospels, *Kingdom* is an essential concept, although it is not immediately translatable into a ‘kingdom theology’, as that term is so often used in Christian social ethics. Nonetheless, without doubt, the concept of *reconciliation* is central in both Testaments. This,in itself implies an imperative issuing from the gospel.

This brings us to the work of a key theologian who speaks to this whole debate. He is, one Frederick Denison Maurice, an Anglican writing in the nineteenth century and one of the founders of a proto-Christian Socialism. Maurice was ever the controversialist. Son of a Unitarian minister, he became an Anglican and initially embraced the teaching of the ‘Oxford or Tractarian Movement’, later rebelling against it to some extent. He taught in a number of institutions and eventually became Professor of English Literature and History and then Theology at King’s College, London. Later he was stripped of his Chair – partly on account of his Christian Socialism but perhaps more importantly because of the impact of his writing in both *The Kingdom of Christ* and in his *Theological Essays,* which were both seen as falling short of orthodoxy. Almost certainly too, misunderstanding arose from his writing style, which is extraordinarily convoluted and notable for its prolixity.

In terms of our focus today, perhaps most crucial of all was his writing on ecclesiology, that is, his understanding of the Church and sacraments. His teaching on baptism takes us to the heart. In a letter to a Quaker friend, he broaches the subject head on, rejecting what he sees as the claims of Evangelicals and then similarly offers a critique of Pusey and the Tractarians, whom indeed he misrepresents to a degree or indeed simply misunderstands. Evangelical teaching is rejected because of its rootedness in the faith of the individual; what he believed to be the Anglo-Catholic approach is rejected because of its apparent insistence on baptism bringing about a change in the nature of our humanity. But what did Maurice himself believe? In this letter to his Quaker friend, he writes:

‘In my last letter I maintained that Christ, by whom, and for whom, all things were created, and in whom all things consist, has made reconciliation for mankind.’

So, for Maurice, already established in Christ’s work, is a relationship between every human being and God in Christ, right from that person’s birth onwards. In other words, we are born into a state of grace. Baptism pours further grace into that relationship as the person becomes part of the community of the Church. Such teaching dismisses the terror of infant children dying outside a state of grace having died before being baptised. Jeremy Morris summarises F D Maurice’s view thus:

‘Baptism begins the believer’s life in the *Kingdom* and instantiates for the believer a union with God already true through the reconciling life and ministry of Jesus Christ. Baptism, for Maurice was egalitarian, in that it dispensed with the idea of all spiritual gradations between human beings. All human beings had a spiritual ‘eye’ which could be closed by self-will, or opened through baptismal fellowship.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

Elsewhere Jeremy Morris writes:

‘It was a fundamental axiom of Maurice that God had created human beings for communion with each other and with himself. This relationship constituted the primary truth of theology under which all other doctrines stood.’[[2]](#footnote-2)

Having then set out Maurice’s approach, this offers a foundation for our understanding the sharp division of opinion on personal and corporate salvation. Maurice argues that God’s love is there for us from our birth, God is already working for the Kingdom, going before us; *we* do not establish the Kingdom for God.. We are offered the choice of working with God for the Kingdom into which we are joined in baptism.

How might this affect our view of the Church? Let us bring on the next witness in the person of the German Protestant theologian, Ernst Troelstch, who was writing in the early years of the twentieth century. Troeltsch’s work straddled the boundaries between theology and sociology. Here we shall focus only on, and thus his understanding of consequent models for the Church. Troeltsch saw two main divergent models which he believed described different understandings of the Church – he calls these the *communal* and *associational* models. The communal pattern assumes, after the mould of F D Maurice, that all human beings are from the beginning created in and for God’s grace – we are all born into a relationship with God in Christ. Thus, the communal model assumes both that God is already in the world working to establish the kingdom, and that therefore every human being is the responsibility of, and lies within the focus of, the Church’s apostleship and ministry. Of course, individuals may deliberately exclude themselves from the Church’s purview either by ‘closing their spiritual eyes by their own self-will’ (to use Maurice’s phrase) to the path of faith, or by being adherents of a different creed or faith community. This inclusive approach has been very much the pattern followed by the Church of England since the Reformation.

The *associational*  view of the Church is rooted in differing models of a gathered community, of an eclectic church. Here, in its most extreme form, the church sees its role as the agency that snatches individuals as brands from the burning fires of hell, or brings them safely into the ark of the faithful and thus into a ‘personal relationship with Jesus’. As the impact of secularisation has increased, so has the attractiveness of this second model correspondingly increased. The implied ‘liberalism’ of the communal model is seen to be too complacent, insufficiently proactive in terms of the salvation of individual souls. Effectively it was this associational model that governed the drafters of the Church of England report *Mission-Shaped Church.* Undoubtedly, when well organised, churches founded on this model can be highly ‘successful’, albeit exclusive in approach and unashamedly understanding themselves as a gathered church. Baptism is the one and only gateway.

Each of these models will perforce beget a different pattern of mission. The associational *modus operandi* will focus primarily on increasing the numbers in the pews – that is the aim and effectively the starting point: mission means more people. Other implications will follow but this is the primary focus, alongside the nourishing of the internal life of the community. Such an approach most often uses the phrase *being church –* its crucial to note the omission of the definite article there. Through that omission, ‘church’ becomes an end in itself. It produces an inner-directed pattern where all the rigmarole of church (too often seen as a club for those of a like mind) consumes the life of the community. The aim was outreach but effectively the result is ‘inreach’. In a moment we shall see the impact of retaining the definite article and speaking of ‘the church’, or better still ‘the *Church*’ by which one is identifying with the Church universal and not one self-contained local community.

The *communal* model sees mission through the lens of care and engagement with the whole community – being *the Church* – now applies – such a phrase requires a predicate; what are we being the Church for…? To leave the phrase ‘the Church’ hanging with no predicate is vacuous – the Church is called to be the instrument of God in Christ in the world. That is what the Church is for. Through care and witness to Christian values, sometimes requiring political action, and often challenging assumptions in the ambient culture - the Church - it is argued, will draw others to Christ. The curtains opened in the last generation, in terms of the `Church of England, with an initiative set precisely within this perspective in the form of the report commissioned by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, *Faith in the City.* It is a classic derivative of the communal approach which led to the establishment of the *Church Urban Fund* and provoked government to take action in the inner cities.

On my arrival in Wakefield, similar challenges beckoned. Grimethorpe, the place where the film *Brassed Off* was set, is one of the most powerful examples of the challenges which the local church, that is the diocese, had to face at that time. Grimethorpe had been a thriving community of some 13,000 souls. By the time of my arrival, twenty years after the divisive Miners’ Strike, with deep mining now almost gone, Grimethorpe was down to just 7,000 inhabitants, with a decimated community spirit. Those who *had work* drove off daily to warehouses on the M62 – but many were workless and not unemployed – by now there were some families who had been living as two generations with worklessness. The impact on the social psychology of that pit village was devastating. Here then was the first focus for the Church and its ministry and mission.

Its only immediate resources were the parish priest and a rather barn-like Victorian church building. Father Peter Needham was a charismatic character (I use that word in its non churchy sense) and he immersed himself in the community. Early on I was invited to go and preach at Evensong and then carry the Blessed Sacrament through the entire village, finishing up at the Working Mens’ Club, the old miners’ gathering place, where I gave benediction to a packed house. All along our route the people had crowded in the streets to be part of this spectacle, but more than that, this was a symbol of renewal. Alongside this we worked with local doctors, social services and community groups –most of them led by women. (Arthur Scargill’s estranged wife was a GP and churchgoer – Scargill himself was by now ‘persona non grata’ in much of the former mining community of this part of South Yorkshire).. We were able to assist in the process of drawing down grants for renewal and social support. Eventually the interior of the church building was adapted for other uses without interfering with the main worship space. Here was a communal church pattern exemplified, where the local church saw its role as seeking out God’s presence and working with the God of our Lord Jesus Christ in the community. Interestingly enough, gradually the congregation grew – not exponentially but significantly – in what had before seemed a very Godless climate.

Alongside what I have described thus far, we all also owe much in this area to Roman Catholic social teaching, reaching back for more than a century to Pope Leo XIII’s ground-breaking encyclical, *Rerum Novarum.* Teaching issuing from the concept of the *Common Good* has also been seminal and is rooted in a communal view of mission. Two other notable writers outside the Roman Catholic Church showing a similar communal focus include Reinhold Niebuhr in the USA with his emphasis on *Christian Realism,* and with his very challenging, seminal 1932 book,  *Moral Man and Immoral Society,* which indicated the difference in the behaviour of groups as opposed to individuals in relation to politics and social ethics. From the Anglican stable, perhaps the key contributor was William Temple who was a member of the Beveridge Committee whose work presaged the emergence of the ‘Welfare State’ and the 1944 Education Act. Temple’s *Christianity and the Social Order* sowed the seeds for this and Temple and Niebuhr were reciprocally interdependent! Temple’s concept of ‘middle axioms’ attempted to apply a ‘Kingdom theology’ which allowed Christian values to be applied to the life of society as a whole – a thoroughly communal model.

Of late, another challenging model has emerged with the work of the American theologian Stanley Hauerwas. Hauerwas is trenchantly critical of ‘ liberal ‘models like those of Niebuhr and Temple. He argues that engaging with the values of contemporary culture compromises the challenge of Christian theology and indeed Christology (ironically there is overlap with the very different starting point of John Milbank and the ‘radical orthodox’ school). Instead, Hauerwas argues, the Church must simply ‘be the Church’, and if its life and witness has a challenging impact on society, then so be it, but the essence of the gospel can be the only starting point. Such an approach has different implications once again.

As a Church of England deacon, priest and bishop, I admit to remaining entirely committed to the communal model of the Church and the patterns of mission that it implies. All people, I believe fall within the gracious love of God in Christ, all are part of the responsibility of God’s Church – not, of course just the Church of England! Nonetheless, there is no doubt that an ideological application of this principle will have its own serious flaws. A concern for a growing Church with a healthy and growing kernel is essential if the gospel is to survive. We can learn from elements within the associational model and should not simply discount all concern with the salvation of individuals and their relationship with their Creator and Redeemer. New ways of attracting more to the Church community are essential, perhaps through pilgrimage, and through other initiatives including street theatre, political engagement, performances of *The Way of the Cross etc,* may catch the Zeitgeist. There is no philosophy more illiberal than that of the fundamentalist liberal! We must remain open to learn from those with whom we most vehemently disagree!

Stephen Platten. Berwick-upon-Tweed. November 2020

1. Jeremy Morris, *F D Maurice and the Crisis of Christian Authority.* Oxford University Press, Oxford.2005.p.82. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Op cit.p.64 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)