

"Today I offer you the choice of life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life!"  
(Deuteronomy 30 vv 19-20)

## *Which will you choose?*



Kingdom people seek first the  
Kingdom of God and its justice.

*Church people often put church  
work above concerns for justice,  
mercy and truth.*

Kingdom people think about how  
to get the Church into the world.

*Church people think about how to  
get people into church.*

Kingdom people work to see  
the Church change the world.

*Church people worry that the  
world may change the Church.*

from the Diocese of Durham - 1999

OR



**The church is primarily  
a religious organisation**

**It is the job of the church  
to preach, to pray, to sing hymns  
and to encourage and develop  
the pious feelings of people. ...**

**Religion is not concerned  
with the whole of life,  
but with part of life. ...**

**We must increase our emphasis  
upon the church  
as a *religious* organisation  
with a *limited* purpose.**

David Nicholls *Your God is too big!* 1961

# ***CHOOSE LIFE!***



# CHOOSE LIFE!

## Introduction

*If we are to 'choose life', Churches in England still need to experience radical renewal. These papers challenge us to fresh thought and prayer:*

1. **'Kingdom' 119 : 'Church' 3**  
– getting things back into proportion
2. **Renewal from the outside in**  
– a review of our recent experience
3. **Baptised for ministry in God's world**  
– re-affirming the 'laos', Kingdom people
4. **"Feed my Sheep"**  
– taking other people's spirituality seriously
5. **Who (or what) do we think we are?**  
– a challenge to the Church of England

## THE JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY

For each individual, Christian discipleship is – or should be – a journey of self-discovery in the presence of God. It is a journey that never ends.

The same is also true of the community of Christ's disciples, the Church.

Too often in the day to day life of the Church, we can forget what we thought we knew. Too often the renewal we have enjoyed has been renewal *within* the Church rather than renewal *of* the Church. Sooner or later, the memory of this renewal is misinterpreted or stifled, as we who are the Church opt to use institutional power in an attempt to secure our own survival.

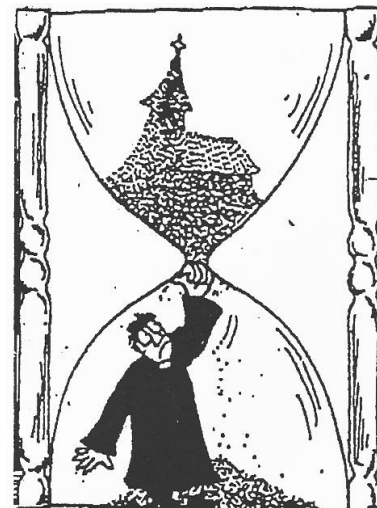
Every response we humans make to the leading of the Holy Spirit carries with it the seeds of its own misinterpretation:

- Could it be that the more we try to conserve what excited us in the past, the more we frustrate the ways in which the Holy Spirit may want to renew us today?
- Does what renewed one generation serve only to constrain the next?
- Does all renewal need regularly or even constantly to be renewed if future generations are to find faith?

In St John's Gospel, Jesus' prayer for his disciples is that they should be a witnessing community – '*in the world, but not of it*'. (See especially John 17, vv 14~23)

Throughout subsequent history, institutional Churches have often managed to reverse this – to be '*of the world but not in it*' – by choosing to ignore the deeper concerns of humankind in favour of using worldly weapons to fight internal battles over issues that others find almost meaningless.

## Up-ending the Hour-glass



**Parish & People** challenged and entertained members of the General Synod at York over a period of 22 years with a daily free-sheet **SYNEWS**. Readers were invited to suggest captions for the hour-glass cartoon from the Diocese of Europe/Old Catholic parish newsletter in Prague. Suggestions included:

- "Why not try the Upside-Down Kingdom?"
- "My hour is not yet come."
- "Temple(s) Fugit!"
- "A vicar whose church was of sand,  
Could not hold it up with his hand.  
Said the Bishop 'Repent!  
Mix the sand with cement,  
And then you can build one to stand."

**What caption would you suggest  
for today's Church?**



**CHOOSE LIFE!**

## 'Kingdom' 119: 'Church' 3

**'Kingdom' 119: 'Church' 3** - that's the score-line in the Gospels. That's how many times these two words are used. How does that score-line compare with mentions in the sermons you hear or deliver? ... in items on the agenda of your PCC? ... of your Deanery Synod? ... of the General Synod? How is it reflected in the budgets at each level of the Church of England?

The Archbishop of York spoke of the Kingdom 33 times in his sermon to General Synod members in July this year, and of the Church twice only in his closing paragraphs. Yet Church Times only reported his references to the Church, and did so twice.

**90**% of the ordained in the C of E spend 90% of their time pastoring 10% of the population - if that. Who is engaged with the 90% of the population for 90% of the time? National and diocesan resources devoted to the 'kingdom' concerns where the majority of people live their lives, budget lines committed to social responsibility and industrial mission, have shrunk almost to vanishing point.

**βασιλεία**, the Greek word translated 'Kingdom' in the Gospels, is not a worldly kingdom. The Kingdom of God or Kingship of God means the rule of God - not a territorial kingdom, but wherever the rule of God is accepted, and will of God is fulfilled.

**ἐκκλησία**, the Greek word translated 'church', is used just three times, and only in St Matthew's gospel; it would not have been the word Jesus is supposed to have used. In a Greek nation-state at the time of Jesus the Ecclesia was the assembly of all the members of the state 'called out' of their homes to gather together to determine the affairs of the nation. Today it is understood as the local gathering of people 'called out' of their parish to congregate in a building - or even, just the building itself where they gather.

**C**hurch-goers are commonly understood as those who go TO church. More honestly, if this is all they do, they should be called 'churchcomers'. *"What is the most important thing you do in church?"* a 20th century bishop used to ask. *"It is when you put your hand on the handle of the church door to go out."* That is church-going. That is where the mission begins. That is what Catholics used to hear at the end of Mass: *"Ite, missa est."* *"GO, the mass is done."* The last words of Jesus to his disciples were, literally: *"GO, disciple whole/all nations."* [μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη] - not: *'make individual disciples out of all nations.'*

A commonly heard mistake describing someone being ordained used to be: *"He (sic) is going into the church."*

At least that did not mean going into the building. A church notice board read: 'The Church of St Matthew Smethwick meets here each Sunday.' The church is the people, the λαός, the whole people of God, those who at baptism 'go into the church'. It is often said of the ordained: *'Once a deacon always a deacon'*. A priori: *'Once a lay person always a lay person'* with primarily lay concerns, rather than with what too often are the self-serving priorities of the ordained.

**50** years ago in *Honest to God*, John Robinson quoted the Roman Catholic Fr Yves Congar *"the things of this world are 'really interesting in themselves'."* [i.e. for their own sake]. Robinson writes: *"A genuine 'laicity' need not, indeed cannot, be confined to those who are not ordained. It must be the temper of the whole church, if it is really to be the representative of 'the Man for Others'."*

Bonhoeffer, the German theologian, who gave his life for the Kingdom, called Jesus *'the Man for Others'*. John Robinson wrote: *"That Christianity should be equated in the public mind, inside as well as outside the church, with 'organised religion' merely shows that we have departed from the New Testament. For the last thing the Church exists to be is an organisation for the religious. Its charter is to be the servant of the world."* Archbishop William Temple is famously quoted as saying: *"The church is the only human institution which exists for those who are not its members."* - he did **not** say *"... for those who are not yet its members."*

**I**s that how Temple's church sees itself? The Principal of Westcott House, Ken Carey, said that the recurring theme through the whole Biblical story is summed up in St John's warning: *"Keep yourselves from idols"*. Idols, εἰδῶλα in Greek, are images, mirages, gods who are false and yet for whom extravagant sacrifices are expected.

A sacerdotal class has always promoted new false gods; it has a vested interest in maintaining the cult with its observances, demanding the resources it wants for its maintenance. Jesus dared to upset the tables of the money-changers who charged a huge premium for a labourer to change everyday coinage into what he needed to pay the temple tax. Jesus set free the pigeons, needed for sacrifice, that were being sold for 14 times the market price.

Thus Jesus put at risk the business plan of the temple and threatened the vested interests of the clergy. They plotted to get rid of him - and they did. Do we too now wish to be rid of him and his priorities? Or do we share his explosive indignation at the blatant exploitation of the poor by those with power?

Religion, literally the binding of people, ties people up in a round of liturgical rituals. In 1961 David Nicholls, in an article entitled *Your God is too big!*, wrote: *"The church is primarily a religious organisation, and the Christian gospel caters for the religious needs of man. It is the job of the church to preach, to pray, to sing hymns and to encourage and develop the pious feelings of people. ... Religion is not concerned with the whole of life, but with part of life. ... We must increase our emphasis upon the church as a religious organisation with a limited purpose."*

Be careful what you wish for. David Nicholls has what he wanted. In the public mind the Church has largely become a religious organisation with a limited purpose. A religion, which is not concerned with the whole of life but with part of life, is predictably of no consequence to the majority of people. It becomes a part-time hobby for those who choose to pursue it. It sets up and cultivates idols, false ideas of God. Secularists are delighted when they see the Church, in spite of decades of sound theological education, colluding with the privatisation of religion. They can then safely ignore the Kingdom's challenges to their vested interests.

Before he was executed in May 1945, in his Letters and Papers from Prison, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: *"The Church is her true self only when she exists for humanity. As a fresh start she should give away all her endowments to the poor and needy. The clergy should live solely on the freewill offerings of their congregations, or possibly engage in some secular calling. She must take part in the social life of the world, not lording it over men, but helping and serving them. She must tell men, whatever their calling, what it means to live in Christ, to exist for others."*

Six decades later Church of England clergy to a large extent are now living on the freewill offerings of their congregations - as their sisters and brothers in other churches have always done. Increasing numbers of clergy are engaged in some secular calling. They are self-supporting, but their roles are primarily seen as keeping the cultic rituals going. Their ministry in the context of their secular employment is little affirmed. But yet again we find ourselves speaking of the clergy, rather than the essence and calling of the whole church, the whole people of God, to promote the kingship of God.

The members of a clergy seminar with the theme *'The Gospel for Today'* were invited to choose a passage of scripture on which to preach their one and only sermon. Not one chose the passage from Isaiah 61, which the quintessential layman, Jesus, chose for his address to the congregation in Nazareth as recorded in Luke 4: *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has*

*anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."* "Today," he said, *"this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."* That was Jesus' mission statement. They didn't want to hear it then. They tried to throw him off a cliff. Do we want to hear it now, or will we too be wilfully deaf?

#### THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION'S FIVE STRANDS OF MISSION

1. to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom.
2. to teach, baptise and nurture new believers.
3. to respond to human need by loving service.
4. to seek to transform unjust structures of society.
5. to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

To what extent is the whole people of God committed to fulfilling this scripture - today? *"The Son of Man has come not to be served but to serve"* is the essence of Love incarnate. *"Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."*

Brian Draper recently shared this Thought for The Day:

*"Jesus's life was less about providing the ultimate escape route to heaven, so much as engaging in and transforming the everyday."*

Does there have to be a choice between the Kingdom and the Church? Not necessarily - if the Kingdom is put first. The Iona Community is celebrating 75 years of proclaiming in deeds and worship the Kingdom of God as the top priority of the whole people of God.

In the 1970s a Roman Catholic parish in Birmingham had a multi-thousand pound debt to pay off for its new building. It none the less rose to the challenge to give £1000 a week to the work of the Salvation Army in Calcutta. The debt on the building evaporated as the church proved itself worthy of support by the community.

The minutes of that parish's Justice and Peace group in September 2012 reported on-line: *"The total for the Lent appeal is now in excess of £9m. We had been planning a £2m programme to ensure the provision of safe water for thousands of people. We are now significantly scaling up that programme which means that many thousands more people currently in dire need will be provided with sustainable water resources for the long term."*

How does the Gospel score-line - 'KINGDOM' 119 - 'CHURCH' 3 - compare with mentions in the sermons you hear or deliver? ... in items on the agenda of your PCC? ... and on the agenda of your Deanery Synod? How is it reflected in the budgets of your parish, and in the priorities of its members?

Let us make sure all the intertwined Five Strands of Mission are integral to the life of Christian people and thus proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom.



**CHOOSE LIFE!**

# Renewal from the outside in

For more than sixty years Parish & People has campaigned for renewal and, for almost thirty years, its main partners have been Church of England deaneries.

Now, as the four remaining members of the Parish & People team produce their final Deanery Resource Unit mailing, two crucial insights have become clear:

- **Whatever we thought we had learned, we must always be ready to unlearn.**
- **Whatever truth we thought we had grasped, we must be ready to give it back to God so that the Holy Spirit is able to lead us into deeper truth.**

Christ's disciples have been renewed by many positive experiences of the leading of the Holy Spirit, especially within the Church of England, over recent decades – but memories fade and new generations will need to learn the same lessons in new ways.

This paper sets out five aspects of our church life where what was once experienced as renewal stands ready to be renewed again at an even deeper level.

---

## 1. OUR EXPERIENCE OF WORSHIP

The radical message in the 1950s was *"The Lord's people round the Lord's table on the Lord's day."* The weekly Sung Eucharist was a novelty. Yet today many Anglicans seem to regard it as their birthright, complaining when priests are not available to preside!

The new Parish Eucharists, using modern language liturgies, were undoubtedly an experience of renewal. They brought a new sense of participation, as emphasised by 1960s church buildings that were often built 'in the round'.

But even today participation is still limited. Our congregations are audiences or spectators, rather than principal actors. The worship of the whole congregation is still controlled by a few. Is 'leading' worship a misleading concept?

**WHERE NEXT FOR RENEWAL?** *The offering we bring to God in our common worship should be the stories we tell each other about God at work in our lives. These stories can then be interpreted through Scripture – and will give us good reason to express our penitence and praise, and 'make Eucharist' together.*

*The climax of our worship will be when we are sent out to continue sharing in God's loving activity in our daily lives. Perhaps coffee should be served as we gather for worship and not at the end!*

---

## 2. OUR NEED TO COMMUNICATE

Parish magazines were invented in the 19th century when every child was sent to school and learned to read. Local newspapers also flourished, and the local Church of England Vicar became the accepted voice of the Churches on every issue. By the 1960s both society and the Churches were changing, and the local Vicar's privileged position was already being eroded.

In response, Church of England dioceses started appointing specialist Communications Officers. They had two tasks - to develop a more professional approach to media relations and also to try to understand how a genuinely 'Gospel' communication can flow between those inside and those outside the churches. Important lessons were learned:

- Effective communication is always two-way and involves more listening than speaking.
- Communication is always happening between those inside and those outside our churches – as well as between communities within the Church.
- Thus there is no neutral state. "No comment" is in itself a comment. If the communication is not good, then it is bad.

All this did much to renew our Churches, making them much more aware of how they are regarded by others. However, in a 1968 report from the Evangelical Alliance Bruce Reed commented:

*"The church is not failing to communicate. The church is communicating precisely what it is - a casualty of the onrush of social change and the breakdown of authority ... The failure is the church's incapacity to listen to what is being communicated to it emotionally by society."*

The church still seems unable to listen to the yearnings of those outside it. Over the years, institutional pressures increasingly mean that 'media relations' has just become a tool for protecting the Church's image. Churches then only listen to those outside in order to ensure that the right 'spin' is put on their message. Communication is reduced to presenting a sales pitch.



***WHERE NEXT FOR RENEWAL?** A deeper listening is needed. This will not just shape the image of the institution but will influence how the whole community of Christ's disciples lives out the Gospel. The Gospel is not a shrink-wrapped product on a supermarket shelf to be made attractive and 'sold'; it is a way of life to be shared and experienced. It is a gift of healing for broken hearts.*

---

### 3. OUR EXPECTATIONS OF MINISTRY

Both the quest for 'collaborative ministry' and developments in the ordination of women have in their own ways renewed the Church of England in recent years. But could it be that both have diverted attention from an even more radical renewal – the need to affirm the primacy of the ministry of all who are baptised, as they give practical expression to their discipleship in daily life?

Even in its recent 'Charter for Total Ministry', Parish & People accepts that its message is still too 'churchy'.

***WHERE NEXT FOR RENEWAL?** Will 'professional' clergy ever be ready to become servants of God's kingdom people, rather than directors or managers?*

---

### 4. OUR MEETING IN SYNOD

Those who dislike synods and church councils may be surprised that the introduction of Synodical government in 1970 was itself a moment of renewal. Perhaps the mistake was to model the new synods so closely on Parliament. A synod based on three Houses, meeting three times a year at most, and following strict formal disciplines, has little chance of developing as a mutually supportive community of Christ's disciples.

Where the synodical system was intended to unify a diverse Church, it has instead strengthened the hand of those who have been able to organise themselves in support of their party's point of view.

Diocesan and deanery synods have rarely been allowed to develop as vehicles for genuine two-way communication among Christ's people or for effective decision-making. Other streams of essentially top-down communication have always been too powerful, whether via Archdeacons or the Diocesan Board of Finance or by the Bishop direct.

***WHERE NEXT FOR RENEWAL?** While everyone is busy coping with the internal tensions of an over-complicated synodical system, who is listening to the needs of those who are on the edge of church life – or beyond? Will synods ever allow the very shape of Christ's Church to be renewed so that it expresses the good news of Jesus Christ in terms people can identify with and understand?*

*In this communication, the words we use or the opinions we hold are almost irrelevant; it is our manner of being as individuals and as a community that will count.*

---

### 5. OUR DESIRE FOR UNITY

The ecumenical movement has been showing increasing signs of 'burn-out' for more than a decade. An end to denominations and the formation of a single united Church now seem very unlikely. Some would wonder whether a single church institution was even desirable.

In today's world, church institutions are struggling to survive; spending too much energy on an 'inter-church process' seems positively unhelpful. But fighting for denominational survival is itself a problem; it places the Christian community in a ghetto, even though its only reason for being is to benefit those who are outside its walls. In a post-modern and highly diverse society, Christ's Church needs an organic diversity, as groups of Christ's disciples engage in a myriad of different ways with the people round them, showing their unity by bearing witness to God's reconciling love.

***WHERE NEXT FOR RENEWAL?** As Christ's disciples we need one another from across the Christian traditions. This will help us to hear how the Holy Spirit is calling us to engage with those amongst whom we live. Being sucked out of daily living to fulfil an agenda geared to denominational survival will never communicate Gospel and will ultimately be self-defeating.*

---

## FROM THE OUTSIDE IN

These five examples all suggest that it is time to view our calling from a different perspective – from where God is already at work in God's world. It is time to listen to the yearning that God is placing in the hearts of those who are not in our churches – and who may never be.

Christ's people now need to hear a new generation of prophetic voices interpreting God who is engaged in God's mission in God's world, and who is waiting for Christ's people in the Churches to catch on and catch up.

The tension is no longer whether voices 'top-down' or 'bottom-up' (or for that matter 'catholic', 'evangelical' or 'liberal') should be heard loudest within the Churches.

The way we organise ourselves and gather as Christ's disciples in the community of Christ's Church must be shaped by our experience of the living God working to establish God's kingly rule in daily life.

The radical challenge is to hear God speaking 'from the least of these my brothers and sisters' **from the outside in.**



**CHOOSE LIFE!**

# Baptised for ministry in God's world

## MINISTRY IN GOD'S WORLD

Many years ago a pioneering Vicar had a team of what we would now call Lay Pastoral Assistants. On one occasion the local GP contacted the Vicar and asked whether one of the team would be willing to help an old man shave in the morning. The Vicar replied that he did not think this sort of activity was appropriate for his colleagues. However, he mentioned it to a member of the team, who was one of the pastors for that part of the parish, expecting him to agree with what he had said to the doctor. The Vicar was surprised to discover that his team member had already been shaving this man for several days!

In his reaction to the doctor's request, the Vicar had seen lay ministry as a church thing, whereas the doctor had seen it as a community thing. The Vicar had been taught a lesson. It's a lesson many clergy still need to learn – and it has massive implications for Christian ministry and the present attempt in the C. of E. to "Re-imagine ministry".

## CLINGING TO POWER

It is too easy for clergy to interpret 'collaborative ministry' in terms of lay people bailing out busy clergy who are unable to resist overblown expectations of their role. It's easy because the clergy do not need to let go of any of their power.

Christ's disciples, however, are baptised for ministry in God's world; they are not baptised to promote a religious organisation in which power rests with the ordained at the expense of the needs of that world.

## BEYOND OUR IMAGINING

*There has never been a renewal of church life in Western Christianity without a renewal of prayer and Religious Communities. ... It has been said that we can only imagine what is already in our minds as a possibility, and it is in prayer, individually and together, that God puts into our minds new possibilities of what the church can be.*" (ARCHBISHOP JUSTIN WELBY, SPEAKING AT GENERAL SYNOD IN JULY 2013)

Christian ministry might be very different if, instead of looking at ourselves and the structures of the church, we looked at the world which we are called to serve.

Perhaps we should start with God: The prophet Micah asked a question.

*"What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"*  
(MICAH 6. 8)

How Jesus dealt with people, and how he interpreted the prophet Micah, both suggest a radically fresh approach to ministry.

Apart from our walk with God the important things are justice, love and kindness, rather than rules and trying to get people into some kind of church, be it traditional or Fresh Expression. Evangelism, which the archbishops are calling us to prioritise, is not so much concerned with church survival, but with proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God.

A question asked by the late Canon John Poulton was *"What are we asking people to become?"* The ulterior motive behind ministry (and the explicit motive of mission and evangelism) often appears to be to get people to *"join the church"* - whereas most people seem have very little intention of becoming involved in church life, certainly not the church as they see it.

In all this, church statistics – whether they show apparent success (bigger congregations, successful worship, wonderful groups etc) or apparent failure (shrinking congregations, closing churches etc) – are fundamentally misleading. They are focusing on preserving something that is overdue for transformation.

If we take Jesus and Micah seriously, church life will be uncomfortable, untidy, and shaped only by a purpose beyond itself. What we do may well not increase our congregations or our weekly collection (or pay for the Vicar!). But instead of concerning ourselves with ecclesiastical authority, church

tradition, synods and committees (and their survival) our priority will be dealing with people, communities and secular powers.

Jesus came face to face with the powers of evil during his last days, facing up not only to the Roman Empire, but also to the structures of a religion that had lost its way.

## A PROPHETIC CHURCH

Archbishop Justin has put himself in the front line in his work with the financial world. His suggestion that the Church should get involved in Credit Unions is not that the Church should run them, but that we, Christ's people, should get stuck in, using our time and resources (including our buildings) to enable local Credit Unions to meet the needs of more people in our community.

What is needed today is a prophetic church, which challenges the very structures of our self centred society. At present we do not have time for this – we are too busy propping up our institution.

*"If the church is to travel sufficiently light, and to be flexible for a mobile society.....then it must be free to deploy much if not most of its manpower not for servicing units of ecclesiastical plant but for serving within the structures of the world"*

(JOHN ROBINSON - *THE NEW REFORMATION?*)

*"The Church that lives to itself will die by itself"*  
(ARCHBISHOP MICHAEL RAMSEY, SPEAKING IN TORONTO IN 1963)

Christ's Church will fulfil its prophetic role not by standing apart and condemning from a distance, but by living and proclaiming the Kingdom of God from within this imperfect society. This must be done by every one of Christ's disciples, by the whole 'laos' (including clergy who are themselves first and foremost 'lay'). We are called to live by faith in God's grace in the light of what we have learned about God's purposes for God's world.

## THE MINISTRY OF ALL CHRISTIANS

These words by Barbara Brown Taylor in her book "Preaching Life" explain how lay people often react when they are reminded they are called to minister.

*Affirming the ministry of every baptized Christian is not an idea that appeals to many lay people these days. It sounds like more work, and most of them have all the work they can do. It sounds like more responsibility, while*

*most of them are staggering under loads that are already too heavy.*

*I will never forget the woman who listened to my speech on the ministry of the laity as God's best hope for the world and said, "I'm sorry, but I don't want to be that important."*

*Like many of those who sit beside her at church, she hears the invitation to ministry as an invitation to do more – to lead the every member canvass, or cook supper for the homeless, or teach vacation church school. Or she hears the invitation to ministry as an invitation to be more – to be more generous, more loving, more religious.*

*No one has ever introduced her to the idea that her ministry might involve being just who she already is and doing just what she already does, with one difference: namely, that she understand herself to be God's person in and for the world.*

## THE COSTLINESS OF GOD'S KINGDOM

God's Kingdom purposes are inextricably linked in the gospels with Jesus, his birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension. Traditionally we have tended to ignore, as the creeds do, Jesus' life and teaching; but it is there we discover what he had to say and do about life as his father intended.

God's Kingdom, we discover, is brought about by the pain and suffering, not just of Jesus himself, but also of his followers. On the cross he absorbed the anger, pain and frustration of the world. We are called to do the same.

*"We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies."* (2 CORINTHIANS 4. 12)

The way in which Christ's kingdom is manifested is in contrast to the way the world normally thinks and functions.

The kingdom of God is concerned with forgiveness, powerlessness, service, suffering and death. In other words, we must not be over-concerned with looking after Number One, or indeed the church.





**CHOOSE LIFE!**

## **“Feed my Sheep”** - Taking Other People’s Spirituality Seriously

### A TRUE STORY

*At the beginning of the Decade of Evangelism, around 1990, the members of a Diocesan Board of Mission did a rare thing. As they wondered what to do about the Decade, they fell silent for twenty minutes to discover what passages from the Bible came mind. The outcome took everyone by surprise: A single passage stood out – from the very end of St John’s Gospel, where Jesus enjoins Peter, “**Feed my sheep**”. Our task, then and now it seems, is not about getting people to agree a particular set of doctrines or to adopt the practice of regular churchgoing; it is about **nourishing their spirituality**.*

### A PROPOSITION

***Renewal will come to both Church and society when church people are less concerned about promoting religious observance and more committed to nourishing people’s spirituality.***

### SPIRITUALITY IS ‘HOW I COPE WITH LIFE’

Leaders in organised religion often dismiss the word ‘spirituality’ as so vague as to be meaningless. In church circles, it can seem easier to limit the term by using it to describe different ways of organising our prayer life – hence ‘Ignatian Spirituality’, ‘Celtic Spirituality’ etc.

Certainly the *content* of different people’s spirituality varies almost infinitely; its *function*, however, is very clear: As Fr Gerard Broccolo puts it in ‘Vital Spiritualities – naming the holy in your life’, “*Spirituality is simply ‘how I cope with life’.*” Even as Christians, we express our spirituality through more than just our prayer and Bible reading.

When we stick to our narrow technical definitions, we are in fact conceding the defeatist arguments of David Nicholls that “*Religion is not concerned with the whole of life, but with part of life.*”

CHALLENGE: **Dare we move out into the world where God’s ‘other sheep, not of this fold’ need to be fed?**

This is where ‘Kingdom people’ will be, those who ‘Choose Life’.

### GOD BOTHERERS

Here’s another true story: *In the early days of local radio, the staff members of the news team used to tease the volunteers from the local Churches who produced the religious programmes by calling us “The God botherers”.*

In Europe and the UK, it seems that most people can no longer find any meaning in speaking about ‘God’ except when they use it to express their feelings.

In popular novels today, characters who go to church or hold some kind of religious faith are almost always presented as in some way ‘odd’; and, where characters have expressed any emotional depth, this often seems to include a deep alienation from organised religion.

CHALLENGE: **Can we accept that those who find that the idea of ‘God’ has no meaning for them can still hold deeply felt emotions and values and are capable of growing spiritually?**

### THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

‘Coping with life’ is a life-long challenge, with or without any explicit reference to ‘God’. It involves coming to terms with other people, with oneself, and with whatever any individual comes to believe is the source of life’s ‘meaning’. Coping with life is a spiritual journey for which there is no one pathway. However, there are many tempting wrong turnings either side of the ‘narrow way’ that each of us is invited to find taking us forward from our unique starting point.

### CULTURE, CONTEXT AND PERSONALITY

At least three factors contribute to shaping who we are and provide us with our spiritual ‘starting point’; the *culture* of our time and place, the more immediate *context* of our family and community, and something easily recognized but hard to describe; our ‘*personality*’.

Shared wisdom for how humans ‘cope with life’ can be found in folk tales and fairy stories from all over the world – and not least in the Old Testament. The same values and themes recur – a shared understanding of

good and bad, right and wrong, and stories that tell of the victory of the weak and foolish over the clever and strong.

History shows how this shared understanding is frequently distorted. These distortions are recognizable as *'the spirit of the age'*. It is hard for any individual to resist being influenced by the **culture** of their generation in the society where they live.

*Disaster strikes when organized religion colludes with the culture of the time, using it to its own advantage! e.g. mainstream Protestant Churches in Nazi Germany or Catholic support for Franco's dictatorship in Spain.*

Individuals are also shaped by their more immediate **context**: their experience in families and local communities. Too many families, sadly, are dysfunctional – and 'community' within today's consumer culture is too readily assumed to be purely a matter of shared self-interest.

Individuals can be so trapped by their culture and their context that they do not even begin the journey towards maturity and spiritual growth; they are simply carried along by convention. Others will resist, but only by taking a negative and destructive approach to everything around them.

It is tempting to blame these unhealthy responses on people's personalities; but personality is only really an expression of *how we approach coping with life*, and not of the values that form the basis of any growing spirituality within us.

Attempts have been made to codify people's personalities with varying degrees of success. The main lesson to learn is that each person's approach to coping with life is individual and comes entirely naturally to them. The fact that I 'do it my way' does not mean that everyone else is either stupid or wrong.

However, it is significant that today's communities evidently self-select not just out of self-interest but also by drawing together people of similar personalities.

*Recent studies suggest that most church congregations self-select from people who are comfortable with an approach to life that involves 'playing it safe' and 'sticking to the rules,' who are happy to offer immediate practical care to others but are not easily drawn to address any wider underlying issues.*

**CHALLENGE:** How can we 'get under the skin' of people from other cultures who have not shared our upbringing (including people from other social, ethnic or faith backgrounds) and of people who may well find our preferred style of community life to be stifling and oppressive?

## TWO WRONG TURNINGS

In a consumer culture, an individual's spiritual journey can easily take one of two diametrically opposed wrong turnings: one way leads to self-preoccupation and the other to a religious clique.

**Self-preoccupation** is when an individual's search for spiritual well-being simply becomes self-indulgent, a hobby or pastime. Consumer surveys seem to assume that this is what religion is about when they list it as a 'leisure pursuit'. A whole industry now offers holistic therapy and counselling for 'body, mind and spirit,' avoiding any reference to 'God'.

**A religious clique** is what people join when they opt into a religion claiming to offer certainty. This essentially fundamentalist and assertive version of any religion (not just Christianity) is what is increasingly regarded by non-believers as the norm. It is also what is rejected by a large majority – even though they may recognise the importance of their own spiritual journey. For them organised religion stifles their spirituality.

## NOURISHING OTHER PEOPLE'S SPIRITUALITY

Our best hope of nourishing others on their spiritual journey is when they notice through our day to day conduct something gracious beyond ourselves – some evidence that we're not 'odd' or totally absorbed in our churchy concerns and churchy language. But this is something that can only happen precisely when we are *not* drawing attention to *ourselves*.

It is not up to us to determine how long it takes before they feel able to speak of the source of that graciousness as 'God', still less perhaps to name 'Jesus as Lord'.

However, we should be reassured because *God evangelises; we don't*. The more we think we are the evangelists doing God a favour, the more we get in God's way! It's not just a matter of taking spirituality seriously, but taking seriously what God is already doing within the hearts of other people as well. A maturing spirituality is being open to the working of the Holy Spirit inside us, whether or not we know or can name Her.

**CHALLENGE:** If we recognise that our evangelistic calling is to *'feed my sheep'* – to nourish other people's spirituality – where shall we start? What gets in the way? What will be our priorities? Who are we to undertake such a task?

At the very least let's start by listening: What, in their heart of hearts are people yearning for? How can we help them express that yearning – and fulfil it?



**CHOOSE LIFE!**

## Some final reflections

### Who (or what) do we think we are?

#### A PARABLE

*Once upon a time there was a great ocean liner, the good ship 'Christendom'. On board this ship, the faithful parishioners of the Church of England were the passengers, and the bishops and clergy were the officers and crew.*



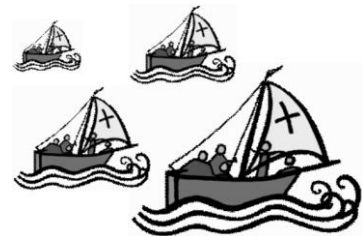
*Rather like Titanic, about a century ago, 'Christendom' was holed below the waterline. One reason it was driven onto the rocks was the death of millions in the trenches of the First World War. Another was the Church's failure to cope with the lessons of the Enlightenment and the progress of modern science.*

*Christendom finally sank around the 1960s. The Second World War had left a society broken apart by a mixture of hope and fear: Hope expressed as a naive belief in*

*'progress' – "if it's new it has to be better"; fear because there might be just four minutes before everyone faced annihilation in a nuclear war. Today in a fragmented society, Christianity is now just one religion among many.*

*Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, few of those on board appear to have realised what had happened. Even today churchgoers and clergy are still to be seen clinging to the wreckage or trying desperately to rebuild the liner.*

*The whole nation was affected by the shipwreck of 'Christendom', not just churchgoers. In our present-day post-post-modern multi-cultural world, the liner's churchgoing passengers are now needed to serve as crew on a fleet of lifeboats. The officers too must swap their gold braid and mitres for sou-westers!*



*The task now is to save our fragmented society from drowning in a sea of uncertainty, confusion and despair. There is no immediate prospect of restoring the liner.*

#### A LONG SLOW CRISIS OF IDENTITY

For almost a century, it seems, the Church of England has been facing a long slow crisis of identity. Cathedrals illustrate the problem because they are still able to present church as it used to be: Proper singing, minimal involvement by the congregation, and all done to the highest standards. Attendance at cathedrals is growing.

Anywhere else, it is hopeless trying to pretend that we are still living in the Christendom era. Instead we need to discover how we must re-think what it means to be a Church "by law established" – no longer adopting a position of privilege, but accepting a new and demanding vocation.

The Church of England has never wanted to be a 'denomination'. Yet the last fifty years (at least) have revealed increasing confusion, both inside and outside the church, about who we are and what we are meant to be doing.

#### "CHOOSE LIFE"

Throughout these final papers the headline message has been Moses' challenge to the Israelites on entering the promised land: "Choose Life." It was not going to be life as they had known it – a life of slavery and hard labour with little reward. However, despite the richness of the land they were entering, the Israelites soon discovered that 'choosing life' was no easy option.

Jesus goes further: “Whoever tries to gain (or ‘save’) his own life will lose it; whoever loses his life for my sake will gain it.” (MATTHEW 10.39 – AND COMPARE LUKE 17.33) We are invited to ‘choose life’ – yet the only way to find life in Christ is by being prepared to lose it. It’s a message for the Church of England as much as for individuals.

## THE CHALLENGE OF SELF-EMPTYING

- a) **for all the ordained, not just bishops**, God’s gracious call is for overview, not management; for an appreciation of the missionary diversity of all God’s people, the very opposite of the current desire to control every initiative church people take.
- b) **for congregations** – God’s gracious call is not for programmes and strategies, or for congregations to be deployed as managed agents of the Church’s mission. Instead local worshipping communities exist to provide wider circles of support and encouragement for those who seek to live their whole lives in service to the God who is already at work outside church structures.
- c) **for individuals** – God’s gracious call is to be free from the lust for power, arrogance in expressing opinion and anything that preoccupies us with ourselves or the survival of the church as we know it.
- d) **for committees and structures** – God’s gracious call is for a recognition that God’s mission

is done through people in relationships. This must include ‘reconciliation’ – a theme we may hear more about from Archbishop Justin. Gospel communication, healing and hope in our confused world need something more heartfelt than decision-making, policy-making or corporate management.

- e) **for all our self-assurance** (believing that we are right – and others wrong!) God’s gracious call may even be for a passionately Christian ‘agnosticism’ that accepts that as yet we see only ‘through a glass darkly’.

## SERVANTS OF GOD’S KINGDOM

By following a path of self-emptying, the Church of England might be more true to its vocation to the whole of England. We might rediscover our true identity in a society that long ago left Christendom behind.

Have we noticed that the Lord’s Prayer is above all a prayer of self-emptying? Does this paraphrase help?

*“Father in heaven, may we enhance **your** reputation, establish **your** kingly rule, serve **your** purposes ...*

*“For kingly authority, power and status (all the things we crave so much for ourselves!) **all** belong to **you** (not us!!) now and in every generation.*

---

## Moving On

With this final Deanery Resource Unit mailing, the members of the Parish & People team pass their responsibility for resourcing deaneries to the National Deaneries Network.



[www.chdg.org.uk](http://www.chdg.org.uk)

The papers which make up this mailing, with all recent P&P publications, are available for free download on the Parish & People web site: [www.parishandpeople.org.uk](http://www.parishandpeople.org.uk).

- You will be contacted later by email about future resources for Deaneries. Please make sure we have your address by sending a blank email headed ‘Deaneries’ to [subs@parishandpeople.org.uk](mailto:subs@parishandpeople.org.uk).
- The four remaining Parish & People team members, Christopher Hall, Peter Bates, Jimmy Hamilton-Brown and John Cole, thank you for your interest and encouragement over the years – and for the pleasure of meeting many of you at National Deaneries Conferences.
- Please continue to pray with us for the renewal of Christ’s Church and the coming of God’s kingly rule as the Holy Spirit chooses to lead us.