

Sermon, Taking Stock at the Church of England. Trinity V 2006

We're getting near the end of term and it's time to stand back a bit and take stock at the Church of England. The Church is always in the news for the wrong reasons: women bishops dispute, gay bishops dispute, unilateral disarming bishops dispute and more besides. The place is a mess, a shambles.

There is always a rash of laughable insanities – though you hardly know whether to laugh or cry. Truro cathedral is the latest to re-invent itself as an all singing, all dancing rock and roll music hall. Evensong is not bringing them in, so they're going to have an Elvis impersonator instead. The Dean says the service will examine the spiritual side of Elvis. That should take about two seconds. Then what? The rationale for such blasphemous idiocy is that it will bring people to church. Well, I dare say I could fill the church if I provided free beer and 24/7 football on the big screen. But again, what would be the point of that? Simply getting people into Church is no good unless what they get when they're in there is the Gospel.

But let's leave aside the mere lunacies and look at the nastiness. For the last forty years the Church has been run by a bigoted selfish clique of militant modernisers and feminisers. There are two views on women priests and women bishops – for and against - both of them very respectable, but I'm not going to discuss them this morning. I do want to draw attention to the nasty way in which the modernisers and feminists are determined to deny any other point of view but their own.

Canon Penny Driver was recently made Archdeacon of Exeter and the event was reported in the church magazine *New Directions*. There was a special new liturgy for this service – well, there would be, wouldn't there? One prayer says "God made the world and mothered it". Pretty banal. But we've suffered worse provocations. But then the prayer continued by saying that "Christ was loved by women and feared by men". Where have we heard those rhythms before? The reporter in *New Directions* tells us: in the old days on the black and white telly in *Robin Hood* who, riding through the glen, was "feared by the bad, loved by the good..."

So you see how those who oppose women's ordination are cast as the baddies. By implication they are said to be against Christ, anti-Christ. The prayer concluded with thanksgiving "for those who work for change". This is more violence and bigotry. Why not give thanks for those who work to keep things as they are? Change is not invariably for the better. Hitler and Stalin changed things. Do we give thanks for them, then?

For forty years the Church of England has been in the hands of a partisan, biased, modernising clique. But this is a self-interested, uneducated phalanx of sheer nastiness and debunking of the basic understanding of the faith which yet calls itself "liberal". And we have seen the results. Church attendance has collapsed – but not here. Religious education is virtually non-existent. Millions of children don't even know the Lord's Prayer. The real Bible and the real Prayer Book have been replaced by liturgical trash – much of it barely literate. And there have been so many new forms of worship that no one knows any prayers by heart any longer. If the devil himself had dreamt up a plan for the destruction of the Church, he could not have done better.

Most of the bishops belong to this modernising tendency. York is inhabited by a ludicrous figure, a paranoid clown, who has signed the Macpherson Report which defines a racist incident as “any incident so described by the victim or by any other person”. So if I invite you for a cup of tea, you can accuse me of racism. The concept is worthy of Goebbels. His press officer recently tried to get me sacked from my column on *The Northern Echo* for that I had said the Archbishop described the Church of England as “institutionally racist”

Sentamu’s apparatchik denied that Sentamu had ever used that phrase. I photocopied the preface to a recent book in which Sentamu uses exactly that phrase. Sentamu himself wrote to me still denying it, the printed word under his own name. You said it yourself Archbishop. Lies. Lies. Lies. It’s worse than Blair and cash for honours.

Canterbury is occupied by a man struggling to use the English language, the Regius Professor of Obfuscation. He is usually described as intelligent. He is not intelligent, He is an academic. I was inclined, therefore, as one does of academics, to think him merely anodyne and harmless in the usual way with bishops. But then I read some of the things which this effete and silly man actually wrote. Dr Williams is the Archbishop who says (in his book *Writing in the Dust*) that Islamic terrorists have no choice except to go on suicide bombing missions.

Isn’t that an appalling judgement, Archbishop, on all those Muslims who do not think the answer to their difficulties is to blow up New York? He also encouraged us by his wisdom in saying that earthquakes and tsunamis make him doubt God. Bring back Job – all is forgiven. The bishops are the ecclesiastical version of the liberal – really totalitarian - elite in Britain which hates everything traditional, which despises the institutions and forms that have defined us for centuries.

So what is to be done? First, let’s count our blessings. We have our beloved parish church of St Michael where we have not bowed the knee to Baal – where we do things properly in words and music. I recently wrote a report for the PCC and in it I was proud to write that we have a devoted and theologically informed congregation. This is because we concentrate on the Sacraments and the Word of the Gospel and we take time to think about the faith together every week.

And in Richard Chartres and Peter Delaney we have a fine Bishop and Archdeacon. I am able to work closely with them, to take them into my confidence on all parish matters. They are marvellous in their spiritual, administrative and financial support for us. They paid for the new kitchen, loo and choir rooms. They have bestowed on us generous grants for the renewal and repair of the church fabric. *Circumspice*: everywhere you look in this church shows evidence of the benevolence of our local hierarchy. But Richard our Bishop and Peter our Archdeacon will not be here forever.

I shall not be here forever either. (I’ll just wait until the cheering has died down!) In six or seven years time I shall have to retire – because the General Synod has passed a law to say that all clergy must retire at a certain age. What’s it got to do with them? And you know what happens when the Rector retires. The churchwardens are asked to fill in a form saying what sort of replacement the people would like. And I guess the churchwardens here would ask for a traditionalist, a Prayer Book man who would also keep the use of the King James Bible.

The dirty tricks department will then come into its own, as it always does. The authorities will delay and stall and say they can't find another old fogey like Mullen. The churchwardens after a year or more, tired of having to manage the interregnum and find a priest every week to take the service, will probably reluctantly compromise. Or a new man coming in would promise to use the traditional books – only gradually (or not so gradually) phase them out. He would typically mouth lies such as “for an experimental period only”. In the meantime, the congregation, weary of uncertainty and the echoes of bickering, would dwindle. Pastoral care would inevitably suffer, and all the progress we have made together over the years would be threatened.

What are the other options facing clergy and layfolk in the Church of England today? Many get sick of it and just lapse. Others compromise and accept the consolation of a Prayer Book service but at some ungodly hour on the fifth Sunday after Pancake Tuesday. Others pack up and become Roman Catholics. I know many of these do so out of admiration for the orthodoxy and intelligence of Pope John Paul II and now Pope Benedict. I too admire the faithfulness, courage and theological acumen of those two men.

But the reality in your average Roman parish is that they have fallen into the same modernising, debunking, dumbed down, guitar and singalong twaddle as the Church of England. Besides, this is the Church of England which has nurtured me these fifty years and more and I will not be driven out of it by the demythologisers, near atheists and usurpers, the fawning Zeitgeist-mongers, the empty-headed liturgists, the aisle-dancers and the ridiculous social-gospellers of the church into which I was born

I will tell you what I will do and I invite you to join me and help me. I will stay and fight my corner. I can't do anything about the pathetic bishops and the loony trendies – those who, as they say in Exeter, “work for change”. But I can do a great deal about what goes on in our church and parish. I promise you I will continue to exercise the traditional ministry in Word and Sacraments that we have today. I will encourage you to become more devoted to Our Lord.

I will work even harder at preaching and teaching and writing so that we are always an educated and informed people. I will – (I hope it goes without saying) attack relentlessly the nonsense, the mediocrity, the buffoonery and spiritual wickedness in high places. I will do all I can in the way of pastoral care. I will try to increase and build up the fellowship and friendship, the cheerfulness and welcoming style of St Michael's. And I will not tolerate the machinations of anyone who works against this character and ethos: *pomposity, self-aggrandisement or any other manifestations of self-regard*

So whatever the modernisers, the dumbed down and those who work for change do, we have reason to rejoice. For here we worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness and we enjoy a fellowship that – believe me as one who has seen a great deal of the Church of England over forty years - we enjoy a fellowship that is a rare thing. The Bishop of London always signs off his letters to me by saying “Thank you for your partnership in the Gospel”. Let me say the same to you this morning. My dear people, my friends, thank you for your partnership in the Gospel.

Now then, let us go forward in His Name and his Power