

Well, it's the end of term at St Michael's, an appropriate time to do an audit. Not of the parish accounts: they were all signed, sealed and delivered at the AGM last April. I should like to cast my net wider and try to provide an outline assessment or progress report on the condition of the Church of England today. Let's begin with the recent history of Bible scholarship: what the theologians have been teaching us about our sacred Scripture.

The problems started about 150 years ago when the so-called historical criticism school and the world religions movements got going. Between them these academics decided that the Bible should be understood by methods which were not themselves biblical. The historical school said that the Bible should be read *like any other book*. At a stroke they thereby removed any *authority* the Bible might be supposed to have. Some believed in universal religious forms, such as myths and legends and because these men shared the materialistic, anti-supernaturalist dogmas of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they could no longer believe in the biblical miracles.

G.K Chesterton exposed the irrational bias of these men long ago when he said, *It was not their freedom to dissent which allowed them to doubt the miracles and the Resurrection: it was their materialistic prejudice which did not allow them to believe.*

Well then, are the miracle stories of the Bible merely myths and legends as the biblical critics claimed? C.S. Lewis said:

*Whatever these men may be as biblical critics, I distrust them as critics. They seem to me to lack literary judgement, to be imperceptive about the very quality of the texts they are reading...If he tells me that something in a gospel is legend or romance, I want to know how many legends and romances he has read....*

*Turn to St John's account of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well, or the dialogue which follows the healing of the man born blind. I have been reading poems, romances, vision literature, legends and myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know that not one of them is like this. Of this text there are only two possible views: either this is reportage – though it may no doubt contain errors – pretty close up to the facts; nearly as close as Boswell. Or else, some unknown writer in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, without known predecessors or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern, novelistic, realistic narrative. If it is untrue, it must be narrative of that kind. The reader who does not see this has simply not learned to read...*

Lewis thus exposes the underlying ideological prejudice of the historical critics of the Bible:

*"If miraculous, unhistorical" is a prejudice the modern scholars bring to the study of the texts, not one they have learned from it.*

Those historical critics were fundamentally mistaken in their method. The fact is that if we are to understand the Bible, we must understand it in its own terms – not in terms of an abstract or overriding terminology which is quite alien. Let me give a different example to illustrate this. If you want to appreciate *Middlemarch* or *Anna Karenina*, you must understand first what sort of writing they are. You must understand that they are novels and not read them as if they were scientific sociology. Or if you want to know about cricket, you must handle a bat and a ball, familiarise yourself with the laws of the game, perhaps roll the pitch or whitewash the crease marks. You will not understand cricket if you think it is some sort of three-dimensional geometry exercise for men in white. But it is to absurdities like these that the methods of the historical critics lead – or I should say *mislead* - us.

They have demythologised and relativised the Bible and so abolished all its authority. Having committed that act of iconoclasm the theologians next turned their hand to worship. I'm not going to dwell on this. I have done so in detail so many times before and in so many places. Sufficient to summarise their vandalism by saying that they have abolished *the religious register*, that is the religious tone of voice. We know intuitively and from experience that there *is* a religious register. For instance: *Which holy estate Christ adorned and beautified with his presence and first miracle that he wrought in Cana of Galilee*. Anyone who imagines an adequate substitution for those words is *Jesus was himself a guest at a wedding* is merely a fool and a blasphemer and should be told to go away and wash his mouth out with soapy water.

Having destroyed the authority of the Bible and written doggerel travesties of *The Book of Common Prayer*, what did those in authority over us – bishops, synods and the like – do with their new found power and control of the church? They made it bankrupt. Under their stewardship the once prudent and responsible church management has turned us into a busted flush. Until about twenty-five years ago, the Church Commissioners paid the whole of the stipends and pensions costs of the parish clergy. And this, remember, was at a time when there were twice as many clergy as there are today. Then the Commissioners lost billions on the stock market. Worse, they sold off much of the church's property at the bottom of the property market – including the old vicarages.

If you see a sign now saying *The Old Vicarage*, don't expect to find there an old vicar. No – you will discover it to be occupied by an architect, a prosperous dentist or an antiques dealer. If you want to find the actual vicar, you will have to visit him in his standardised four-bedroom house in Legoland – and, a generation on, many of these new vicarages are costing the earth in repairs and renovation.

So, after this monumental financial and strategic incompetence on the part of those officials who are well-paid to look after us, now who pays the parish clergy? The answer is that you do. The hard-pressed parishes pay for everything. And how they pay! St Michael's, where we have

no endowments or rental income, has to find £40,000 each year and pay this to central funds. Think of it. It makes your eyes water. It works out at £800 per week. And if we cannot pay, what then? The authorities blacklist non-paying parishes so that they do not receive grants for fabric restoration work. They threaten the Vicar that he cannot count on holding his position if the parish is not paying up in full. This year the clergy have been granted a very modest pay rise – and half of this pay rise is being held back for clergy whose parishes have not agreed to pay a further percentage increase in the annual subs to the central bureaucracy.

While not being able to pay the clergy, the bishops and the synod have vastly increased the numbers of secular staff. London Diocese, for instance, boasts of more than ninety of these employees. I made myself unpopular with the hierarchy – what's new? – when I wrote an article last year in which I said that the administration of the diocese of Ripon where I was ordained forty years ago was in the capable hands of Squadron Leader Driver and his assistant Elsie.

Now we have a General Secretary, a Secretary, an Internal Communications and Website Officer, Press, Media and Public Affairs, a Director of Finance and Operations, a Head of Finance, a Head of Management Accounts, a Financial Accountant and an Assistant Accountant

And we have a Trust Accountant, an Assistant Trust Accountant, A Financial Support Officer, a Payroll Officer and three Financial Advisers. So many accountants and so little money. But then we enter the heart of darkness. There is the HR Manager, someone in charge of Reception, an Office Services Co-ordinator, a Synodical Secretary, a Head of IT. A Systems Manager, a Support Assistant, a Director of Property (who by the way doesn't answer the phone) a PA to the Director of Property, a Property Accountant, a Project Development Manager, a Head of Environmental Challenge, a Head of Property Management, a Residential Property Manager, a Commercial Property Asset Manager, a Maintenance Manager, a Property and Maintenance Administrator, a Gutter Maintenance Programme Administrator, a Head of Care of Churches Team, a Church Buildings Support Officer, A Care of Churches Team Administrator, a Head of Strategic Development, a Strategic Development Support Officer, a Director of Ordinands and Ministry Portfolio, a Director of Personal Development, an Officer for Children's Ministry, another for Community Ministry, a Chaplain to Deaf and Deaf/blind People, an Officer for Youth Development, four Community Development Workers.

The Diocese has a Chancellor and a Registrar, complete with backup staff; six Bishops and eight Honorary Assistant Bishops, plus six Archdeacons. Of the increase of their government there is no end. All an expensive and largely useless copy of secular bureaucracy. Useless? Yes, because while these apparatchiks increase and multiply, the annual church attendances are falling catastrophically. Oh, let us do something real and say the Creed...

