

*Sermon 4<sup>th</sup> July 2004, St Michael's Clergy Guidelines Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and soul and mind and strength, and thy neighbour as thyself...*

Along with every other priest in England, I have been sent this booklet called *Guidelines for the Professional Conduct of the Clergy*. It has the Church of England's trendy logo on the front – perhaps we should all start to refer to the modern church as *New Church of England*? This logo looks depressingly like the symbol for the Euro. And, as you can see, the booklet is decorated in purple – which lets us know that it comes down from the bishops. But enough of this small talk, let's see what it says.

The Foreword says at once that what is being aimed at is *best possible practice* – so we might guess we are in for a tirade of management-speak and indeed we are not disappointed. It goes on: *There is a risk in all pastoral work. The place of the meeting. The arrangement of furniture and lighting. The dress of the minister, especially for visits that he undertakes at night.* I must say I don't recognise myself here. *Furniture. Lighting. Dress.* It sounds like *Lights. Camera. Action.* And it suggests the priest is some sort of amalgamation of interior designer, film director and catwalk model. The visiting at night bit conjures images of Count Dracula. There is more enlightenment to follow: *Improper questioning or physical contact can be emotionally and sexually abusive.* What sort of parsons are they training these days? This booklet reads as if it has been written for investigative journalists and predatory sex-maniacs. It reminds me of the story about the woman who asked the priest to kiss her. He refused. She persisted: *O go on Vicar, give us a kiss!* He replied, *I will not - in fact I shouldn't really be in bed with you.*

A more serious objection to what we might otherwise dismiss as just the latest bit of Episcopal tomfoolery is the statement: *The clergy are not at liberty to share confidential information with their spouses, family or friends.* Do they think I really need to be told that? *Confidential* means that it's not to be shared with anybody. Ah but some anybodies are more equal than others, for the instruction goes on to say: *The content and process of a pastoral relationship may need to be shared with certain other people such as a supervisor or supervisory group, consultant etc.* So information so confidential that I may not breathe a word of it to my wife or to one of you – my friends, who might actually be able to help – this confidential information may of course be discussed with the Stalinist bureaucrats who make up the plethora of diocesan committees – supervisors, supervisory groups and consultants. There is a place for them – and I know where that place is.

I am told I - and the word used is *must* – *familiarise yourself with the requirements of the Data Protection Act of 1998 and act accordingly, seeking advice from the Diocesan Data Protection Officer.* Oh yes, they can afford to employ a Data Protection Officer – but they can't afford to pay the clergy. This represents the sovietisation of pastoral care. My dear people, let me assure you now that, whatever you tell me about the state of your soul, your bunions or your constipation, the Diocesan Data Protection Officer will never get to hear a word of it. This booklet is a strange mixture of idiocy, baby-talk and nasty bureaucratic diktat all mingled with religious clichés. For example the next paragraph tells me I must *proclaim afresh the good news of Jesus Christ.* I wonder, do I need to consult the Data Protection Officer about this too? Well, I shall certainly send him (or her I suppose?) a copy of this sermon.

They tell me: *The clergy should ensure that church services are thoughtfully prepared.* What – presumably using the cut-and-paste method of picking bits here and there from the dumbed down new *Common Worship* which they try to foist on us as if it were the best thing since holy bread? Let me prepare you for something subtle. They speak of clergy *who are not married, including those with a vocation to celibacy.* Am I hearing this right? I thought Christian moral teaching said that *all* who are unmarried should be celibate?

Here's some more sociological jargon. They say: *There is an urgent need for the church to respond to current social pressures for greater regulation of the professions.* No there isn't. The mission of the church is to administer the sacraments, to preach and teach and to exercise pastoral care. It should not be blackmailed into following contemporary social trends – only like some Prince Consort, one dutiful pace behind. The church's job is to lead, not to follow. The only one we follow is Jesus Christ. Then they say the clergy should be *subject to scrutiny.* But who is going to do the scrutinising? *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* As Juvenal said, *Who is to guard the guardians?* Are we to start to distrust the priests and instead put our faith in these formless, bossy diocesan committees of supervisors and supposed experts? Isn't a Diocesan Data Protection Officer as likely to succumb to sexual temptation as the local vicar? Besides, we hear every week of some police expert on paedophiles who has himself been arrested for paedophilia.

The truth is that ultimately someone has to be trusted. We should trust the ancient professions, including of course the priesthood. To be a professional does not simply mean that you get paid. To be a professional means that you profess something of value; you are concerned with values. And no matter how many reams of *Guidelines* produced will make the slightest difference to the numbers of those who offend – a very small minority in any case. For there is a fundamental logical flaw in the very idea of guidelines. Those who would never offend don't need them; and those who are determined to offend will take no notice of them. Imagine, some do-gooding authority, too big for its boots, decides that it disapproves of burglars. So it thinks it will put an end to burglary by issuing *Guidelines* like this: *Do not purchase striped vests and black masks. Do not carry a jemmy or a bag marked 'swag'. You are not to break into people's houses in the night while they are asleep and remove the household silver.*

Or let's take an actual example of government legislation in the recent past. After the killings at the school in Dunblane, they banned handguns – and the result is that shootings and crimes involving firearms have doubled since the Act was passed. Did they really think that the passing of legislation would encourage villains to go round to the police station and hand in their guns? No, all that has happened is that innocent men and women have had to surrender their sports equipment.

Every attempt to introduce *Guidelines, Scrutiny and Best Practice* always results only in an exponential growth in the number of tiresome and useless bureaucrats: ask any teacher, ask any nurse. School reports now take up more space than the classrooms themselves. Twenty-five years ago there were 500 senior managers in the NHS. Now there are 70,000 and, as the persistence of the MRSA bug shows, not even this army of clipboards can get the doctors to wash their hands.

Actually, we have had our *Guidelines* for 3000 years and these are called the Ten Commandments. These are *commandments*, not, as modern Christians think, *suggestions*. We are commanded by God to fear, love and obey Him and to love our neighbour as ourselves. I have been counting: the Ten Commandments take up one fiftieth of the space which this booklet takes up. They are clear and simple. We all find that they are difficult to keep. So we need to pray for God's help and we need to practise being good, as St Augustine says, until we actually make progress in being good. It's not called *Guidelines*. It's called discipleship.

The Preface to these *Guidelines* says we must *keep them readily available for reference*. After this service I will return them promptly to the smallest room in the house. I don't want them, thank you very much. And I don't need them. I will instead say the simple prayer I say every day of my life – and I respectfully ask you to adapt this to your own use: *O God, make me a good priest, a good husband, a good father and a good friend.*