What is the Church For?

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I feared, when I offered to give this paper, that I had spoken too hastily. Should I have waited, before putting forward the suggestion that we reflect on what the Church is for? Should I have perhaps paused to ask myself, and all of us, whether there is a Church at all, at least one that fits the heading of Church as we have grown used to understanding it? At the same time, I sense that there is little to be gained by going over these questions, which are being rehearsed if not always publicly, then almost certainly in the minds and hearts of believers and non-believers alike. The closure, or partial closure, of so many churches during the pandemic afforded us with plenty of time and opportunities for wondering about these things. So I am going to begin my own discussion of what the Church is for by inviting us all to reflect on what Sundays felt like for us during lockdown.

Those of us who are used to taking an active part in leading worship on Sundays will have experienced a range of feelings beginning perhaps with a sense of unexpected 'recess', an unanticipated holiday from the habitual round of parish duties that fall to us on Sundays. But in time this feeling of relief, if that is what it was, will have become something else. Once the pleasure of not having to get up in time for the eight o'clock had begun to wear off, some of us will have felt a sense of loss, the absence of something unique and irreplaceable. The hours we would have spent taking services, or perhaps going to them, are not so easily replaced by walking the dog or reading the Sunday paper, or even by spending more time in personal prayer. Furthermore, I think it is safe to say that for many of us, the absence of Sunday, as we normally experience it, rendered the week that followed even more monochrome, in the context of lockdown, than it might otherwise have been. What is it then about Sunday, and about Church, that we actually missed?

It would be easy to say that we missed the community, even if on a normal Sunday we spend little time engaging with it after the service is over. We could also say that we missed the habit and rhythm of either taking services or attending them, of filling that particular slot in a day which may otherwise feel just like any other day, as it came to do for many of us during the long months of lockdown. But I think there is something unique about church, and thus about the idea of the Church as the wider body, as *ekklesia*, as the worshipping community, that we missed without perhaps realising how uniquely it pertains to the experience of church on a Sunday.

I would hazard a guess that what we were missing was the pull of God, the pull of the Holy Spirit drawing us to a certain familiar place. The Holy Spirit acts on us, I believe, in a way that is not dissimilar to the moon's pull on the oceans. From what I sense in conversations with parishioners where I live, there is something irresistible in the tidal pull of God on a person who is in the habit of going to church on a regular basis, even if that person

rarely mentions the word God at any other time of the week. Where there is an interruption to the particular 'pull' that the Holy Spirit exercises on us through our local parish church it would suggest that the Church (with a capital c) has ceased to be what it is essentially meant to be.

The Church, at every level of its life, is meant to be a 'tent of meeting', to put it in scriptural language, a place where all those present will in some way know the presence of God, experience that tidal pull, even if they never speak of it or even, perhaps, acknowledge it to themselves. Their local church may be a vital place of encounter for them with the living God, even if they appear to prefer a protective kind of anonymity in regard to their faith and their particular faith journey.

A person's faith is ultimately secret, something which the Church with its enthusiasm for mission and building its own Sunday attendance numbers often fails to take into account. But it is, nevertheless, the Church's job to nurture this tentative response to the pull of God that people, clergy included, associate with being in a church, whatever other reasons they may have for being there.

I do not think there is any real distinction to be made between what a person who attends church on Sunday may be experiencing of God, and the kind of transcendence experienced by the casual visitor who visits a church or cathedral, ostensibly to admire its architectural lines and stained glass windows. A church is a sacred space which exercises a certain 'pull' on people. If this is so, we cannot get away from the fact that the idea of Church (with a capital c), is associated in the minds of many people with this Godward pull, even if it is an unconscious association, a sort of instinct. This would suggest that there is a powerful connection to be made between a church building, and the often small gathering of people who turn up there on a Sunday morning, and the idea of what has come to be known, somewhat pejoratively, as the institutional Church.

The institutional Church is that facet of the universal Church (the Church that spans the centuries) that is made visible in such a way as to allow God to connect more deeply with people. Those who are called to serve in this visible capacity are therefore called to be the interface that makes this connection definable and real. For this to be possible, they need to be what Kay Northcutt in her book *Kindling Desire for God* describes as sacramental, 'an embodied image through whom God attracts'.[1] They need to be a certain kind of person, rather than an individual who has acquired certain skills.

It is the embodiment that makes the sacramental meaningful. And here is where the confusion lies when it comes to what the institutional Church signifies for many people, whether or not they attend their local church on a Sunday. The institutional Church does not, on the whole, appear to embody anything that attracts people to God. The reason for this does not lie in lack of skills among those who work for it, still less in any particular defect of character. It lies, rather, in a general fearfulness about what the Church is called to be and how its representatives do, or do not, fit its purpose – to facilitate a tidal pull towards God.

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[1] Kay L. Northcutt *Kindling Desire for God – Preaching as Spiritual Direction*, Fortress Press (2009) p.29

Two areas of concern emerge from these considerations: The first pertains to that greatly over-used word 'mission'. The idea of mission is now all but subsumed under managerial goals and objectives all of which return us, ultimately, to the question of how to keep existing structures of governance in place without closing too many churches. It is not hard to see where the institutional Church, which now thinks of itself increasingly in organisational terms, feels its priorities lie. Skills have now replaced gift in the Church's increasingly secular mindset when it comes to selecting and deploying clergy.

Ever since the Harries Report was produced in 2012 the emphasis has been on 'streamlining' and centralisation. I refer here specifically to the Church in Wales and its ongoing attempt to develop ministry areas with little or no prior consultation with the people who keep the local churches going. The Harries Report saw the dismantling of the parish system and the centralisation of ministry and finance as the only way forward for the Church of the future. It also, incidentally, saw the need for a complete overhauling of the existing hierarchical system of governance and with it, presumably, its arcane line of authority.

The move to streamline and centralise has, inevitably, met with a great deal of resistance from people living in the countryside, especially among those who have given years of time and effort to support their local church which they see as a focus for the community. It also, at the time of writing, could not have anticipated the radical changes that may yet take place in rural areas as a result of an increasing number of people working from home on a permanent, or semi-permanent, basis in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic. The local church, serving the community in diverse ways, and not only as the place for Sunday worship and life-transitional events, could become a vital cohesive element in the life of changing rural communities. But all of this is made difficult when decisions must be approved by a remote body of managers who rarely visit the churches they control.

In short, what the ministry area plan is potentially doing is creating the worst form of idol. An idol is a lifeless thing that enslaves people by persuading them that they cannot survive without it but which, in the process, also kills off whatever motivated or inspired them to buy into it, or into the organisation it purports to serve, in the first place. This, as Lauren Berlant argues in her book *Cruel Optimism* can happen in almost any context.[2] The idol can be food, money, success or, she might have added, the managing of people into controllable entities that will deliver what is asked of them, including money, on time and without question. The Church is becoming one such entity. Hence, the apathy created by bureaucracy and the dead hand of managerialism is death to the spreading of the gospel. It also distances the organisation from the people it exists to serve, and on whom it relies for its own continuing existence. What we have then is a situation which runs counter to the idea of a Church founded on the principle of love which runs on the unpredictable but life-giving dynamic of the Holy Spirit. So how might this situation be reversed?

This brings me to the second area of concern in regard to mission. Management requires certain skills. Mission and the building up of a Church which embodies the Spirit of

[2] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism,* Duke University Press (2011) Introduction p.1

Christ requires the deployment of gift. The two are not incompatible, but they must work together, with gift taking precedence over skill. Skills can be acquired with training. Gift is what it says it is. It is a given. By gift I mean those aspects of a person that make him or her transparent to Christ and so enable them to be a *theotokos*, a Christ bearer, to God's people. Gift is not limited to age, gender, sexual orientation or churchmanship. It is something which informs and defines what a person is and thereby works itself into, and possibly through, any skills they may have. The Church is much in need of gifted persons at every level of its life. But where will such persons be found? What gifts does the Church need in order to become something more than an organisation, to breathe life and hope into a troubled and angry world? Where are the people of vision? Where are the holy leaders?

One of the main impediments to the discernment of potentially holy leaders, or of gifted people to the service of the Church, lies in the selection process itself and the structure and culture of deference on which it depends. The latter is an area of particular concern. A hierarchical system based on outdated understandings of obedience, rather than on collegiality and shared responsibility, is an impediment to growth, as it would be if such methods were still being adopted in secular organisations. Furthermore, one could be forgiven for thinking that the selection of people to the ordained ministry is predicated on secular objectives. We seem to be looking for competence at the expense of holiness. This is not to say that the ordained clergy do not try to fulfil the traditional role of pastor to the people of God, but the growing amount of administration, not to mention the legalities that surround issues of health, safety and pastoral relationships place huge demands on them personally. This is not to deny the need for safeguarding measures, but it is important to understand the level of stress that clergy endure in an effort to comply with the regulations, or even to avoid inadvertently falling foul of them. As a result of this, anxiety now drives much of the Church's life. Ministry has become a job which, like any other job, a person is in danger of losing if they make mistakes or fail to fall in line with whatever is required of them by the higher authorities.

Much of this anxiety would be dispelled if the idea of the episcopate and of the priesthood itself could be uncoupled from that of power and status. Power and status belong together in the Church and are as strongly associated with the role of the ordained as they ever were. It is just that the magic and the mystery of yesteryears has simply been replaced with the goals and objectives of modern marketing speak, ostensibly linked to mission but worked out in centralising agendas that defeat that very purpose.

So it is at this point that we need to re-address the question of what the Church is for. If its primary purpose is to bring the Good News of the abiding presence of Christ in the world of today, as I believe it is, then some re-ordering of priorities, and even structures, needs to take place. Perhaps we could begin by filtering out all those notions that we associate with success from our language and thinking.

Managerialism is geared to success, although this is usually referred to as 'growth'. Churches that do not grow are therefore deemed to be failed churches and will either be closed or subjected to some form of cloning, usually the colonising of one church by another

more successful and 'vibrant' one. But if we are serious about making known Christ's presence among us, then we need to look to the places or situations where he has always been present, where love has been genuine. These were seldom ones we would associate with vibrancy and success, with the need to 'get on' at any expense. They were often quiet one-on-one encounters with individuals in desperate, sometimes embarrassing, circumstances. They ended in the ultimate place of failure and rejection, although that was not, of course, the end of the story.

In other words, Christ is to be discerned and known in places and situations where love is genuine, where people make time and space for one another, in churches which are not driven by the need to survive but by the need to present holiness of life as something to be desired in the world of today. Those who serve in such churches will know how to preach and minister to the world in ways that enable wisdom, which is the deepest level of discernment attainable, at all levels of life.[3]

You may wonder how this could be possible, how such great things could be dreamed of, given the steady decline in church attendance and the financial pressures churches are under.

Here, I am reminded of a visit I made to Taizé many years ago. On arrival, there appeared to be a central altar in the middle of the large tent that we were gathered in but half-way through the worship, the entire congregation turned 180 degrees so that those who had been at a distance from the altar were now near the front. This happened three times during the course of the service until we were all back to facing the original altar. To me, this summarises what the Church should be. Nobody should be at the back. All should be close to the heart of the Church's life. At Taizé, they do not dismantle one altar in order to focus on another. They introduce another altar alongside it, and then another, and another. This in no way compromises the worship. It strengthens it, because every single person in that space can identify with the central altar, in one place and in every other place, as it were simultaneously. The key to understanding what makes this work as a model for being Church lies in the small child who, when I visited, was led by Brother Roger, then the Abbot of Taizé, to the centre of the space. This was more than a liturgical statement. It was a model of leadership for the Church today.

The crucial factor in regard to how this example of truly common worship might serve as a model for the Church lies in the fact that were it not for the thousand or so people who were there that morning, there would be no worship. There would be no church. Altars and clergy, no matter how splendidly gilded the altar or church, or good at their job the incumbent cleric or bishop, do not make the Church. The people make it. Clergy and bishops exist to love and serve God's people and to model the love of God in their own distinctive personhood, one that is transparent to the person of Christ. The child being led into the centre of the tent by Brother Roger served as a model for this kind of transparency.

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[3] Maggie Ross, *Pillars of Flame: Power, Priesthood and Spiritual Maturity*, Seabury Books (2007) p.107 ff.

This suggests that if the Church is to endure in the dangerous and hard-edged world and society we now live in, its structures and methods of governance must enable, rather than constrict, the free movement of love between those who have power in the Church and those who do not. A top-down hierarchical system, remote from the people it is called to serve, will not do this, but wise, broad, consensual decision-making, and the actions that stem from it, might.