

When he opened the Second Vatican Council, Pope (now Saint) John XXIII set the Council's agenda with a word and a phrase which have had a deep and lasting effect on the Church throughout the world. The word was *aggiornamento* – the living and communication of Christian faith in a way that could be shared and understood by people of the 20th century; and the phrase described the underlying philosophy: it can be translated as 'the deposit of faith is one thing; the way it is expressed is another.'

The shockwaves which moved through the Roman Catholic Church worldwide also had their effect on other churches, some of which had been trying for decades to make themselves and their teaching more accessible to the rapidly changing world of which they too formed a part. The post-war movement for liturgical reform had its expression in the Church of England in the Family Communion movement, and in some revolutionary places, this had already been preceded by the bringing of the action of the Mass closer to the people. The creation of the central altar of this church in 1944 was very much a trailblazing act. Dilworth-Harrison was indeed passionate about bringing the beauty of the liturgy to a place where the congregation could feel a part of it, and his little confirmation books, containing as they do an accessible method for young people to pray the liturgy of the Prayer Book themselves, are among the best such works I have ever encountered.

However, there is a problem with reforming movements which we have seen throughout this brief survey of Church history: when change happens, people move at different speeds; some dig their heels in and stay put; and some even start moving back to an imagined past where things seemed much safer and more established.

Throughout the 20th century, the Church of England, and eventually (as it became) the wider Anglican Communion, struggled with the issues of the day. Movements such as that of Marie Stopes, which aimed at bringing reproductive health to the many poor and depressed areas of the UK during the inter-war period, came as a challenge to a Church which struggled with the idea and the consequences of the availability of artificial contraception. The 1930 Lambeth Conference opened the door to its limited use; as we know, the Roman Catholic Church, having looked to go in the same direction in the late 1960s, eventually decided not to do so, and in its official teaching artificial contraception is still banned.

It took until the 1990s for the Church of England to begin to allow divorced people whose previous spouse was still alive to marry again in church. Until this point, it had been stricter in its discipline than the Roman Catholic Church, which at least offered the chance to have the previous marriage declared null if a reason could be found, and very much more so than the Eastern Orthodox Churches which allow for the 'death' of a previous marriage so that a further marriage may be entered into.

Reform of the Church's liturgy was a more obvious consequence of the 'updating' of the Church in the 1960s. While the 1928 revision of the Book of Common Prayer had failed to become official, plenty of later permissions were given which aligned practice in parishes to the structures suggested in 1928, and in 1966 came the experimental Series, 1, 2, and 3, followed in 1980 by the Alternative Service Book, and then in 2000 by the provisions of Common Worship, which have been in place for an unbelievable 25 years.

Of course, as we know, while churches of every variety spent their energies trying to get themselves better understood, the level of attendance remained in a steady decline right through the 20th century, and as Sunday Schools moved from afternoons to mornings, no longer providing a convenient Sunday afternoon child-minding service, as other activities took the place of social climbing and 'being seen in church', and in the latter part of the 20th century competing activities and eventually Sunday trading attracted people's attention, the decline accelerated.

When I was studying in Germany in the late 1980s, the German churches were at the forefront of the divide between those who believed the Church would revive if it went back to sticking strictly with what it had 'always' done (at least in the minds of those holding such views), and those who believed the Church would revive if it got itself up-to-date in short order. Ironically, the decline of people identifying themselves as church members in that country only began to accelerate much later, when public abuse scandals unveiled the hypocrisy of those who taught one thing and practised another at the expense of someone else's young innocence.

I began to think then – and I still do – that a fault line was developing which would go right down the middle of the conventional denominational divides, so that instead of being divided on aspects of theology, as in most historical schisms, the Church would be divided over issues of morality in social behaviour and especially in sexual matters. This pattern is working itself out at this very moment in the Church of England, where those who believe that God through scripture abominates any form of sexual activity, other than within marriage between a woman and a man, have raised this teaching on marriage to a

touchstone of orthodoxy – right belief – a term which until now has applied to theology, i.e. our belief about the nature of God.

In the mean time, the Church of England has been full of initiatives aimed at reviving attendance and – crucially – finance. Mission-shaped Church, new ways of being Church, Fresh Expressions, pioneer ministers, church planting, and many others, in a context of a Church where bishops don't all have real dioceses, but some of them are for those who won't accept the ordination of women because the universal Church hasn't decided on it; one for those who say the Bible forbids women to be in charge (the Headship Principle); and there is now a suggestion for more bishops again, to accommodate those who won't accept the blessing of same-sex couples, and the probable eventuality of their marriage in church. There are of course counter-movements such as Inclusive Church and Save the Parish. It doesn't look like stopping any time soon. And the Church of England has proven to be just as bad at dealing with safeguarding issues as any other organisation, but it's committed its sins more publicly, causing among other things the recent early resignation of Archbishop Welby.

One attempted explanation of the Church's decline has to do with its inability to get the basic story of salvation told throughout society. There is a suggestion that getting Bible stories told more widely in schools and elsewhere might solve the problem. Hence the impetus, when we were last looking for a new Bishop of Derby, from some quarters, on looking for someone who would tell stories of faith. But I think the problem is far more fundamental, and it will not be solved by money, initiatives – however worthy – or recipes to create new ways of being Church, or even to restore the old. It goes much deeper.

And here I would like to commend a basic agenda given to us by that new Bishop of Derby shortly after her arrival here. Bishop Libby talked far and wide about the Church being the warp and weft of the society in which we live. Not the Church as a particular sort of social construct, or the Church as a positive force for social change. Nor the Church as an institution, needing to maintain and even update its structures, both the organisation and the buildings which are still so important to so many. No – before all those other things, it is the Church as the community of those who believe in God and have been reconciled to God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; the Church as the community of those who are moved by his Spirit to serve those in need and to work for good throughout the world. This is a Church where Jesus Christ comes first, and all else is a response to God’s saving love and grace given freely to us in him.

This is an agenda which over eleven years I have tried to pursue in this parish, and it is also one that – for just a bit longer than the time I’ve been here in Chesterfield – has been pursued in his own way by Pope Francis. As we see in his ministry, there is so much that Christians can do to become the warp and weft of society if we are first responding to God’s love in us. But only when the love of God comes first and last and everywhere in between.

Unfortunately, what I believe the Church in so many of its forms has been engaged in is an increasingly hopeless attempt to re-invent itself as a social construct. In fact, it actually achieved this with some success through the various revivals of the nineteenth century, which I referred to last week, but the social construct became the purpose of the enterprise, and as society moved on,

it could not. 'I don't believe in God' was and remains so often a statement that really means: 'I'm not convinced by the Church'.

There are now many people who don't believe the Church has a future at all. I am not one of them. When I thought of dedicating these Lent addresses to a way forward for the Church, I found myself needing to spend most of the time describing the Church's past – discovering how the community of faith has looked throughout history. This endeavour has no doubt appeared to some to be unnecessary, or daunting, or plain boring. But I am with Saint John XXIII; we need to know in great depth what we have received: the 'deposit of faith', in order to live and express it afresh today. Without that, the Church of today will reinvent itself as yet another social construct that will only last as long as it is relevant – or as Dean Inge of Saint Paul's memorably stated in 1911: 'if you marry the spirit of your own generation, you will be a widow in the next.'

What will the Church's future look like? I don't have the faintest idea – that is something best left in the hands of God. But I do have views on how we can best get there from here, and here are some pointers:

Don't insist on people believing more than is absolutely necessary. This is the lesson learned at the Council of Jerusalem, and I could add – looking at the Acts of the Apostles as a whole – don't fall out over things that are not absolutely necessary.

If the future institution is actually to be the Church, it needs to be led by people who have a deep grounding and insight into what the Church has been in the past. Those ordained as priests and bishops should be schooled longer and deeper in the Scriptures, and in the developing doctrine and whole history of the Church. That will offer the assurance that however the Church develops

outwardly, it will be true to the constant guidance of the Holy Spirit, and corrected by learning from the errors of the past as well as those things that have been good. If that is either too onerous or too expensive, then let that be a sign that leaders should not only be better, but fewer in number.

No activity – however good – should be labelled as Christian, or a Church activity, unless it is grounded in Christ. No more labelling of activities we would have done anyway, or which are aimed at getting people in, as ‘godly’ in order to make them look missional! And no more anything-shaped Church! The Church does not need to be anything other than the Body of Christ: that is surely enough.

Finally, let’s give over trying to centralise and control everything. The fact that we are in communion with each other in Christ doesn’t mean that we all have to look the same, or look down on people or places that look different. The Body of Christ which meets at the Crooked Spire, and those which meet at other places, should feel and be free to be a unique presence of Christ in this place and for this time.

Of course, like all the rest of these addresses, this leaves a lot uncovered, and a lot of questions still to be answered. But that’s all right, because most if not all of those questions are ones we continue to have to face as the Church of today, if there is to be a Church of tomorrow.

As always, let me end in prayer:

Go before us, O Lord, in all our doings with thy most gracious favour, and further us with thy continual help, that in all our works begun, continued and ended in thee, we may glorify thy holy name, and finally by thy mercy obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

PC, 6th April 2025