

Re-imagining Church

Welcome to the session Re-imagining Church.

The rest of the title of the session rightly raises questions. It reads ‘legitimate or fraudulent, opportunity, necessity or danger?’ I offer my view of those questions, dig into two theological bases for this re-imagination, explore why it has been necessary and explain the contribution made by fresh expressions of Church to this topic. There should be plenty of time for ongoing conversation, sparked by the content.

Re-imagining

Let’s start by taking the word re-imagining. There is a combination of factors within that word that I like because what they combine is both boundaries and permission. There are hints of both continuity and change, of faithfulness and creativity. Why the boundaries, continuities and faithfulness? Why only speak of RE-imagining church – why some sense of going back? The Church belongs to Christ and not to us. We are not free to make it other than what he lived and died to create. It was founded by him, or technically instituted by him. It continues to be given life by the Holy Spirit, technically the Church is constituted by the Spirit; we are not at liberty to mess with that. We should not imagine without borders as did John Lennon in his iconic song by that name. ‘And no religion too’ – I think not.

Yet our title word does contain ‘imagine’; that suggests permission, change, creativity; a journey towards what is not yet, but which could be, because we can already think it. Or it maybe that we have already actually seen it, and suddenly realise it is what we have been yearning for, beyond our past experience. Equally do not think everything has been static and immutable until very recently and that a stable apple cart of Church has been upset only by those dratted fresh expressions of Church. Let my own story as a cradle Anglican illustrate this.

My own story

The local church of my childhood and early teens was very Anglican. It was part of a parish in Putney, London. We went to ‘church’ – that special building set aside for public worship. A quite nice male clergyman did all the important bits and the real action happened at his end of the building – whether word or sacrament. We used the 17th century text, with some bits of the Communion sung to Merbecke. There was a bishop somewhere in the background but he only appeared at special occasions. If I went on holiday – virtually all of this was repeated elsewhere. It was a national standard. Although at my grandmother’s church in Sussex I met Matins for the first time and a strange experience called chanting – which was all the words on one note and a sort of musical wobble at the end that I didn’t know how to do.

In the following 50 years of my Christian experience nearly all these definitive landmarks, to measure was it church and was it Anglican, eroded away. My vocation seems to have been to track them and write about them. Sometimes I have become part of commending them to others. Serving in three parishes in three different dioceses, I have met many of these changes at first hand. As I look back I now see they were elements of re-imagining church.

So now we have network churches as well as parishes. I know many Christian communities chose secular venues to gather for community, worship and mission. I have rejoiced in the advent of women clergy and I have tracked the trajectory towards many lay-led churches. I have lived through Series 2 and 3, the ASB, Common Worship. I now observe and commend a belief that it can be Anglican to hold to liturgical values, that in turn lead to choices of liturgical shapes and only then to liturgical texts to en flesh the values and shapes. To use an image we have moved away from centrally devised liturgical ‘meals on wheels’ to teaching people how to cook in a balanced and healthy way.

Curiously what seems still to be there is the Bishop. It is a wry comment in the fresh expressions of Church conversation that Anglican now means whatever a Bishop approves of and has relationship with. In case you think that is impossibly minimalist and dangerously radical, there is a very early precedent. The English love precedents; it is part of the gradualist way we like to do change. This instinct for the sufficiency of Episcopal endorsement is early: It comes in the early 2nd century, from an ecclesial bastion called Ignatius; ‘but whatever he (the Bishop) approve, this is also pleasing to God.’ His letter to Smyrna section VIII.

Change and the Church of England

Change even in the Church of England is not new. Historically we knew it at the Reformation whereby our church was nationalised by Henry 8th and became Reformed Catholic under Edward and Elizabeth. It didn’t stop there. Note the view of Paul Avis. Among other things he is Theological Consultant to the Anglican Communion Office and Editor in Chief of the journal *Ecclesiology*. His books have tracked 3 different ways, overlapping in time, by which we have changed what we understand it is to be Anglican. An Erastian view of *Nation as Church* held sway from the Reformation until 1689, expiring in the 1830s. In it to be English was to be Anglican. Gradually he argues it was replaced by the *Episcopal succession* model – that our orders of ministry proved we were part of the universal church. However both John Newman and later Pope Leo 13th in 1896 declared our orders ‘absolutely null and utterly void.’ Free church theologians could add you can’t prove Bishops out of the NT anyway. So Avis suggests a 3rd paradigm – the *Church of the baptized*. The problem with that one is that it is true of all Christians and there is little explicitly Anglican about it.

Change involving re-imagination has happened. It is part of our story. Lurking in Anglicanism is the ability to evolve. But past history might just be tradition – are there deeper reasons? Let me offer two.

Some changes in the New Testament

The New Testament contains such re-imagination and thereby implicitly affirms it. I’ll explore only one source, the writings of Paul, mainly taken from his letter to the Romans, perhaps his nearest work to a systematic theology. Within it there are a number of strands and I’ll only give the headlines because the second source is perhaps more important. Yet Paul deals with some significant questions and their re-imagination.

- A major strand of the whole letter to Rome is who are God’s people? Are they Jews only? Who can belong is a major order question. Now a surprising even shocking shift has occurred. Christ is Lord of Jews and Greeks [Rom 10:12]. It is as though a wild olive has been grafted into the old natural stock [Rom 11].
- Perhaps fitting with that, which in our English bibles we fail to notice, the language used for scripture has also changed from Hebrew and Aramaic, to Greek. The letter to the Romans is in Greek. In the succeeding centuries that will also affect how theologians think.
- Similarly the place of meeting, and what we call it, has moved. The Christians have left the Synagogue, and some Roman and Greek converts were never there, and gone to their own place and a term of their own – one they nicked from Greek city states, Ecclesia. Both are gathering words but Ecclesia is also those called out. Rom 16:23.
- Related to this is another re-imagination, which occurs partly because of change of context. Acts 2: 46 has the first Jewish followers of Jesus meeting in the Temple. The shift across the book of Acts is from concentration in one Temple in Jerusalem, to dispersal in homes around the Mediterranean, even in small tenement-based church. Rom 16:5 may be an example.
- When they meet has been re-imagined. The day moved from creation-based Shabbat to resurrection-based Sunday. Rom 14:5 says precise days no longer are 1st order questions.

Who belongs, what language is used, where, by what name and when they meet have all changed. There is even more.

- How salvation is understood changes too, not just from OT sacrifice to the work of Christ. Different models of Atonement are used to fit varied contexts. Contrast the legal models like justification, favoured in Romans, with the predominance of sacrifice in Hebrews. Re-imagination of how to talk about what Christ has done for us is going on.
- Consequences of responding to Christ changed too and here came big trouble. Circumcision was dropped as being necessary. Paul knew it was not just a sign but was even a very part of the covenant. Yet he can write Rom 2:30 exalting faith rather than circumcision. So Baptism becomes a re-imagination of circumcision.
- Living out the Christian life changes. Many food laws were suspended. Inner attitudes to these externals become the touchstone [Rom 14:14] including who you may eat with.

Note that this re-imagination was not universally accepted. Yet in the starting story of the Church, re-imagination is widely at work. Yet there is a more theological basis to undergird this.

Learning from the incarnation

The Incarnation has a significant contribution to make if we ask whether re-imagination leading to genuinely fresh expressions of Church are theologically possible. For our Christology should shape ecclesiology. One promising place to start is Philippians 2 which celebrates glorious and sacrificial changes. It might be put thus. Out of a divine love, and the passage explicitly calls us to emulate it in spirit, he who was in the form of God, and equal with God emptied himself taking the form of a slave. He who was in nature God was found in human likeness. He who is eternal became obedient to death, indeed a shameful death.

I know I may be the first person to put it in this way, but the incarnation leading to the life of the God/Man was, I suggest, a fresh expression of the second person of the Trinity. To drive home the point, our understanding is that Jesus of Nazareth did not come down from heaven. God the Son came to earth, in a characteristically bipartite process between the Spirit and the young woman Mary. That's God's way. Humans are dust and breath. Covenants are with divine and human partners. Jesus then came to birth on earth in an existence was different to that experienced by God the Son prior to that event. Central to my point is that in the incarnation, the divine identity of the Son was neither distorted nor eclipsed, yet nevertheless this incarnation had not been seen before. In that sense it was not only change, but it was novel. It was not a change that destroyed or compromised God the Son's identity but rather, in these senses, freshly expressed it. This brought human re-imagination about how God could act.

You might be wondering why the 3 pictures on the screen. The images are all of what we loosely call water. None is of them not water, yet one is of steam, the next of a stream and the third of ice. Both the steam and the ice look, feel, and even behave differently to the stream because of the change of localized climate in which they exist, but they all remain H²O. What endures is H²O, what changes is the form. Who is to say which is the more real?

The story of Christ Jesus then continues in the broader sense of the word Incarnation – meaning his life lived out among us. Christ Jesus the God/Man is presented by the Gospel writers as living out two contrasting factors. On the one hand is the pre-planned shown in Jesus' strong sense of call; sharply focused in events like his baptism. It is also exhibited in patterns like his intentional moving on to proclaim the Kingdom despite apparent success in Luke 4:42-44, the deliberate setting of his face to Jerusalem, Luke 9.51, and the sense that all these things had to be so, as relayed to the disciples on the road to Emmaus Luke 24:6-27.

On the other hand Jesus seems to live a reality that life is not all pre-planned. John's gospel shows him actively seeking and responsively following what the Father is doing and authorizing him to say¹. Jesus also experiences changes. He appears limited by the lack of faith in Nazareth, disappointed from time to time with his disciples, surprised and delighted by the faith of the Roman Centurion. His suffering and struggle in Gethsemane and Crucifixion are presented as real, not pretended. All these features show experiences of change. Then comes a supreme change. The paradox is captured by the lines of the hymn, 'tis mystery all, the immortal dies.' Moreover the pattern of change continues, in that he is raised from the dead by God the Father, the language of the NT is not that he raises himself.

Across the narrower and broader senses of Incarnation, both continuity and change are at work. The RE half of our topic word today resonates with continuity whereas imagination connects with change. The *continuities* include Christ's divine identity, his relationship to Father and Spirit, his moral perfection, his commitment to the mission of the Trinity and to the disciples. The *changes* are in whatever was set aside by becoming enfleshed, the ups and down of where the mission took him and notably through his own predicted process of dying to live. Here is a precedent and a pattern to follow. The identity and practice of Jesus, in the Incarnation, shows that continuity and change can be held together. Creating fresh expressions of church, by non-identical reproduction, is both consistent with this and might even be expected from it. The continuity reflects faithfulness in God's character, yet there are changes within the fulfilling of the divine mission.

So then church also is called to hold onto its foundational identity, but to follow in the steps of Christ and become, shall we say incarnated, but not photocopied, into all human cultures.² We, like him, need to open to change as God the Son was born of Mary as Jesus, The process will be bipartite, two sourced, just as was true for him: Christian context and secular context. It is the incarnation that opens up the possibility of doing principled change whilst keeping essential continuity. It will take re-imagination to do that.

Tactically why the need to do this?

Bishop Steven Croft has suggested five contextual reasons. Their strength is that a Bishop thinks this and it comes out of a desire to connect with society as it is, not as we might wish it to be. He notes the nature of Sunday has changed so we need to discern the best times to meet. How people choose to relate has changed and now it includes networks that we should enter. We are now a nation of many cultures and should choose to engage with as many as we can. Our story is no longer known among the young and the non-churched, so we need churches that start that far back. Yet there is also spiritual hunger and how do we connect with such explorers. The weakness is that all this could be written off as a desperate search for relevance and what Church truly is may be in danger of being abandoned. Therefore in talking to you I did not begin with this but explored the principle of whether church can and should change.

What are we learning

No one could easily say that Rowan Williams does not think about what church is. So a quotation from him has additional significance.

'what has been so extraordinary, so life giving and wonderful in the last decade or so, is more and more stories coming in of how those fresh encounters happen..... God is showing us examples of *what the church is*, in startling new ways, because we are seeing what corporate forms of life actually happen when people meet Jesus'³

¹ Not least John 5:19-36 and 12:49-50.

² The Catholic theologian A. Dulles, *Models of the Church*, p. 68 argues in Church as sign of the redeeming grace in Christ that 'the Church must incarnate itself in every human culture'.

³ Archbishop Rowan, UK Church Planting Conference, June 2014

So what have they shown us? Let me quickly construct a table showing the contours of the re-imagination, which kinds of fresh expressions of Church are revealing this to us and then note where there are precedents elsewhere.

1 Day time and venue are now all more flexible. The instinct behind this is to take context seriously, for which the Incarnation is the theological basis. Most of the following types don't meet on a Sunday.

A deeper change is to think that our past instinct for parish and territory is not an ultimate value. It is one way context works. There is nothing wrong with parish, what is wrong is to think it works for everyone. So we have seen the birth of churches from shared relationships, quite often related to shared stages of life.

Another deep change is moving away from thinking that congregation is the norm of communal church life. What is deeper is realising that church is multi-level. Cells, clusters, congregations, deaneries, diocese etc. That then gives flexibility over unit size to respond to a context.

Yet we've seen these changes before: mid-week communions and the house churches showed variety of day and venue. Chaplaincy and cross cultural mission always operate aware of context. Anglicans have always resisted congregationalism. This is but sharpening a past trend.

2 The next element, about the end of passivity is not unique to fxC but is characteristic of them. It is related to leaders no longer being control freaks, which sadly is true of too many clergy, dressed up as quality control. Many kinds of fxC exhibit freedom to explore in worship and a trust of lay people.

Perhaps this is related to the next point that community around Jesus is central, not worship, this represents significant re-imagination, is shown by various kinds of fxC and could be a lecture topic in itself. I give you the headline here and let it be picked up if wanted in questions.

The next factor is congruent with the 1st 2 on this page. With a less passive people and community being central, less than half of the fxC have an ordained leader and yet are church.

Have we ever been there before? Passivity was challenged by the advent of 1970s Family services, the writings of Allen before WW1, and in 1960's Donovan the Jesuit missionary. Similarly in the world church, the Base Ecclesial Communities of which there are 100's of thousands, place stress on the quality of community as do most forms of monasticism. In 1982 John Tiller urged changes of understanding of ordained ministry to enable local ministries to flourish. There are precedents to learn from. This re-imagining is evolution not revolution.

3 Congruent with much of what I've shown you, discipleship is what we are looking for as characteristic of being church, not attendance. Again a vast subject, but it is encouraging that on average 70% of the fxC we have surveyed have taken some steps down that road.

This next point about non-identical reproduction of churches is also its own topic – and indeed my own Ph.D. area. It's not a knock down explanation, but here's an image of what I mean. We know our children are ours, but they are not us. The same should be true of succeeding generations of church. This is partly how the re-imagination of Church takes place.

With the dissolving of Christendom, we are no longer at the centre of events, but consider that the edge is a natural Church location. The pre Christendom strand runs through Galilee and catacombs, engaging with lepers, slaves, women, and the mentally ill. A number of fxC engage with the poor and cultural groups not much regarded by society.

What of precedents? The method in Methodism was about discipleship in accountable groups. The path from non-identical reproduction of churches into their own maturity was traced in the self thinking of 19th century CMS leader Henry Venn. A number of groups in church history have had a prophetic effect by their connection to, and even search of, the edge.

Perhaps what is new is that such a wide range of angles of re-imagination are occurring at much the same time. Yet I want to say that the heart of it has not changed one iota. Again I borrow part of Archbishop Rowan's words in 2004; 'we are seeing what corporate forms of life actually happen - when people meet Jesus.'

As such Rowan has encouraged us to think that there is a sense in which Church is a verb. It is something that happens; when an encounter with Jesus Christ occurs that is life transforming. But it changes people in a specific way. Over 60 years ago another writer put it this way: 'The Church exists for nothing else but to draw people into Christ, to make them little Christs'⁴

The technical term for this is Theosis and this may be the greatest re-imagination of all. Churches are the nursery in which we are to grow up to become more and more like Jesus. A marvellous if demanding read about that goal, seen through various chapters of Christian history, is the book *By The Renewal of your Minds* by Ellen Charry.

So our re-imagination is not free to depart from that goal. If it does it is avoidance and corruption. If the goal of people meeting Jesus is being served, then the patterns and structures to express that are much more flexible than once we thought. We should re-imagine that.

 Use of Canon Richard White's 'Dream' text
 As end piece after questions?

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* p. 166.