

## CLERGY LUNCHESES

### Reasons for the hope that is in us and challenges to mediating that hope

#### Introduction

Every now and again one encounters a book which somehow resets one's vision as a minister of God's Church. I suppose my most profound experience of this was in reading Bill Vanstone's *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense*. I don't know how many of you have read it but it seems to me it has a remarkable vision still for us. The basic question that he asks is a very simple one – what is the Church *for*? His father was a priest and he remembers the depression of the 1930s. In those days Vanstone saw the Church as the *universal soup kitchen*, designed to pick up those who could no longer cope on their own so the Church did so through the grace of God. Then once he himself was ordained he found himself on a tough housing estate on the edge of Manchester. He asked the question again. This time the answer was about *community*. This estate was an entirely new development and they were starting from nothing with regard to community life. He felt it was the church's task to offer that. Some years on in that same place he realised that the second answer was inadequate in itself. Both answers were part of the truth but neither was the deepest statement of the church's role. He encapsulates that deepest role (and this is the basis of the book) as being the *community that witnesses to the tragedy and triumph of God's love in the world*.

At any moment – in both larger and smaller aspects – the world is poised to go in the direction of triumph or tragedy. Ultimately it is God's redeeming love in Christ that shows that triumph will be there, but along the road there will be a number of tragedies still to be redeemed.

Just recently I have read another book which has helped reset my vision once again. I recommend it because it sets the scene for ministry in the Church of England in the context in which we work at present. It is called *Praying for England* and is edited by Sarah Coakley and Sam Wells.

Why did I find it so worthwhile? First of all, I suppose, because it is so perceptive in understanding the opportunities and aspirations but also the challenges and difficulties that we face. Secondly, it is capable – in at least two or three cases – of making its point through story. So Stephen Cherry's account of the response of the Church to a despicable murder in the town of Loughborough is very powerful indeed. Jessica Martin's description of her own daughter's drug addiction is similarly powerful if heart-rending – and there are other stories interwoven throughout the book which are equally useful in helping us to understand our role. The three themes that are picked up more generally are set out by Sarah Coakley at the beginning. They are: *Prayer, Place and the Poor*.

I am not going to repeat the argument of the book blow by blow but I do want to begin with something on prayer and worship. After that, I will move on to two other places where I have found *encouragement* recently – that is the Lambeth Conference, and the analysis of our current situation by the sociologist Grace Davie. Finally I shall look at some of those areas where we are clearly *challenged*. So, first, encouragement:

#### 1 Worship and Prayer

In her initial chapter Sarah Coakley repeats words from Evelyn Underhill written to Archbishop Cosmo Gordon Lang on the eve of the 1930 Lambeth Conference. She wrote: 'May it please your grace: I desire very humbly to suggest with the bishops assembled at Lambeth that the greatest and most necessary work that they could do at the present time for the spiritual renewal of the Anglican Church would be to call the clergy as a whole, solemnly and insistently, to a greater interiority and cultivation of the personal life of prayer..... *God is the interesting thing about religion, and people are hungry for God*. But only a priest whose life is soaked in prayer, sacrifice and love can, by his own spirit of adoring worship, help us to apprehend Him.'

I am not here to suggest that you need further encouragement to prayer, although I suppose we all need a little help with that at times in our lives. I simply wanted to focus on that sentence in the middle of her quotation: *'God is the interesting thing about religion, and people are hungry for God.'* I am convinced that that is still the case. So then – worship, prayer and time for silence stand at the very heart of what we as a church and as priests can offer.

We are lucky in this diocese to share our work with good and *prayerful* colleagues. And so, as an aside, let me say that it is important that we continue to support each other in this where we can. I simply mention this because I know from personal experience that if we have someone to pray with – be it a lay person or another priest – it can make all the difference in the world. I admit to having lived a very privileged existence in terms of prayer. I have always had people to pray with. For that reason I feel particularly concerned to support those who would be encouraged by praying with others. If you think that this would help you, do let me know and I am open to suggestions about how we could take this forward.

But, *returning to the main point* – if people are hungry for God and if God is the interesting thing about religion then it is important that we offer people a chance to encounter God. We *already* do this and we can deepen it further. That seems to me encouraging.

## **2 Lambeth Conference**

Interestingly enough Sarah Coakley takes that quotation from words offered to an Archbishop of Canterbury before a Lambeth Conference. As you will know both the Bishop of Pontefract and I have just recently experienced the latest Lambeth Conference in Canterbury. I sent round to you all a reflection on that gathering and would want to repeat how *encouraged* I felt as I came away from it. Of course there are still problems and difficulties within the Communion but there seemed to me to be a very clear resolve to stick with each other – to work through those problems rather than allow for an easy fragmentation. That is why the words of the chief rabbi about covenant, urging us to be a strong witness by being together, were so moving during the conference. It is also why the Archbishop of Canterbury came away from the conference with both his personal standing and the standing of his office enormously increased. He was courageous in not allowing anyone to drive us apart but at the same time in not trying to offer easy answers. We can all come away encouraged by the Lambeth Conference. It was a symbol of us staying together, of us working together throughout God's world. (This became even more sharply focussed for me by our trip to Mara in October). I hope that each of us who was at the Conference will go back to our own dioceses and try and act in the same way as the Archbishop of Canterbury did as a true 'instrument of grace.'

## **3 Insights from the Sociology of Religion**

Perhaps the most interesting chapter of all in that book which I just mentioned is that by Grace Davie – some of you will know her work from the past. Interestingly enough her father-in-law Donald Davie, who was a poet and also Professor of English both in the United States and then later back here in England spent all his childhood in Barnsley. He was a good local lad! Grace will, I hope, be coming to our clergy conference next year and so I don't want to say too much now.

She argues that discussing establishment as an issue only gets us so far. In fact it is more constructive, she says, to grasp the ways in which the historic link between church and state can be used *creatively* in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. So she sees us as being a place where debates happen which society has stopped talking about – we have a vicarious function. For example, we hold beliefs about death and hope which others will at certain times want to tap into and we are there for them at those times.

Of course, in our contemporary situation all this demands from us flexibility and the ability to change in the way we minister. The world is not as it always was and we face within this diocese similar challenges to those faced throughout the Church in England. We have to be realistic about the state we

are in. Part of that realism is about being honest about the really good things we have to offer – again these are reasons for *encouragement*.

#### **4 Clergy Numbers**

Here the encouragements I see far outweigh the problems. In many ways we are hugely blessed as a church. In some parts of Europe the numbers offering themselves for ordination have been in free fall. It is true to say that vocations to the ministry in the Church of England have remained remarkably healthy. The latest figure suggests that the numbers have increased further including numbers of younger ordinands. All that is excellent news and we will hope to encourage further vocations to meet the challenge.

Nevertheless it would be naïve to ignore the challenges that face us. Let me begin with clergy numbers. I have made it clear from the very beginning when I arrived here that I want to keep stipendiary numbers as high as it is conceivably possible to do. I am clear that a strong stipendiary core is essential to our mission. I am also clear that we should be immensely grateful and encouraged by the number of self-supporting clergy who have offered themselves. In any calculations we make as we move forwards with *Transformational Plans* and *Investing in Our Faith* their role is vital.

Nevertheless it does not alter the fact that ultimately we are facing significant drops in numbers in dioceses. More are retiring than are being ordained. That means overall numbers in the Church of England are still reduced and *that* means we in this diocese must take our own reduction. The figures that we received most recently for the diocese suggest a reduction by some twenty-nine clergy over a five year period. That sounds particularly drastic if you assumed it all happened at once, but if we can plan over five years it should be less so. Nevertheless it will be a relatively painful process. We have asked the deaneries to look at this so that when decisions are made on where there should be redeployment it is a decision that is made jointly or, perhaps better, corporately. It does not simply come from on high. This will not be an easy process but I am still clear that we shall go for as high a number as we are allowed within the Sheffield allocation. We shall aim to have as strong a stipendiary core as possible.

#### **5 Finance**

My own particular ministerial profile might suggest I have no experience of raising money in the Church of England but not so. At Portsmouth Cathedral I was Canon treasurer and it meant what it said. I chaired the Finance Committee and I inherited a deficit of £200,000 in that year and the figures were increasing. I led fundraising campaigns in Portsmouth and also in Norwich as dean. I have tried to be equally committed since I have been here.

One of the real problems is that clergy find themselves crushed ‘in the middle’. The Diocese needs to collect Parish Share – the laity often seem to fail to understand what is being asked of them. The priest is in the firing line from both directions.

That is why, then, we are hoping to roll out a stewardship and discipleship package building on the *Transforming Lives* and *Everyday God* material – with also some practical suggestions for ways forward. It would be good if we could appoint in each parish someone responsible for giving specifically and not simply leaving that all to the treasurer. We realise that some parishes will not have that expertise around and for that reason we very much hope we can encourage people within deaneries to work across parish boundaries.

*Investing in Our Faith* is about us *together* asking how we can further help our faithful to see that finance is ultimately nothing less than ‘a spiritual issue’. It is important therefore to help people to put their giving in context. Perhaps you heard me say at one of the archdeaconry meetings that I am suggesting

that we call the Parish Share ‘a contribution to the Common Fund’ to move us towards this greater sense of mutual responsibility.

## **6 Why? What’s it all for?**

The question I might ask is ‘why are we raising this money and why are we concerned to have a strong stipendiary core with an equally effective self-supporting diaconate and priesthood along side that?’ The answer is, of course, so that the Church can effectively pursue its mission and work with God as he establishes the Kingdom. It is our task as the Diocese of Wakefield in South and West Yorkshire. It is about us putting ourselves where God is at work and following him.

So what might the diocese look like in the end? These are the 6 points I made at the archdeaconry meetings:

- 1) It will be a leaner diocese with fewer paid clergy.
- 2) After all the transformational planning, it will be a better organised diocese with us working together more efficiently at a local level in deaneries and across parishes.
- 3) There will be more collaboration between lay, self-supporting and stipendiary ministries.
- 4) There will be more people in Church.
- 5) It will be a diocese marked by the energy and vision of the Christians who worship here.
- 6) It will be a diocese which is outward-looking, and an outward looking diocese will be a growing diocese.

In these brief reflections I have tried not to duck any of the issues. I realise that there are real challenges facing us. Nevertheless I am absolutely convinced that all of this is do-able if we get the message across effectively and if we also take note of all the encouragements that there are around – I mentioned some at the beginning of these thoughts. My hope is that during this gathering we can work together and think together of ways to make these challenges more effectively met. I realise that we all have our own disappointments and difficulties but let us not take this opportunity simply to share those. Instead where there are difficulties and disappointments let us try and offer one another real means of trying to face them so that we can effectively live and proclaim the gospel as each of us has been called to do as we promised at our ordinations.