

'There's life in the old girl yet' The parish in multi-parish Benefices

- Paper by the Revd Canon Martin Coppen, Group Convenor

There have always been problems in relationships between the one and the many, the individual and the rest of society, the one state and the many it seeks to look after, as well as between individuals. Colin Gunton in *The One, The Three & The Many* (CUP 1993) takes this idea as a tool of thinking about both society and theology. Theologically, it is rooted in the relationship between God - the universal One - and the many expressions of his creation. In societies, on the other hand, Soviet collectivism and western individualism offer very different visions of the relationship between the State and the people, and people to one another. In the former, the individual loses his identity in the masses: in the latter, individuals lose their relationship with one another. Yet the triumph of individualism has brought a paradox, "the freedom of the many has simply led to new forms of slavery to the one", in turn leading to the loss of the particular. Maximising freedom of choice—the supermarket mantra— has virtually destroyed the local corner shop.

So, I want to look at the relationship between the one and the many, as represented in the individual parish within the benefice of four or six or eight or ten parishes. It could be extended to the relationship between the parish and the deanery of 23 parishes, the diocese of 300+. Remember, we are actually talking about the mission of the church in local places.

Anthea Jones in her attractive book, *A Thousand Years of the English Parish* (Moreton-in-Marsh, 2000) describes the extensive history of parishes in southern England (a very different story in the north and west). "People belonged to a parish." It was the unit of belonging — and that is still significant — but related to a parish church, the main unit of public prayer and worship. Attached terms, parish priest, parson - the representative person. p16: "The rector was the embodiment or *persona* of the parish church, which was a legal corporation". The incumbent is the least favoured, most dangerous term: he *encumbered* a parish, from the Latin *incumbere*, to lie or lean upon. The parish is the unit on the ground, each individual and distinct, with a unique parochial history, and different present balance between component groups [Timothy Jenkins, *Religion in Everyday English Life*], with a history of relationship to the wider world of the many.

Bishop Graham James, in *Mission and the Parish-Shaped church*, Theology vol CIX, No 847 January/February 2006, pp3-11, offers a defence of the parochial system with some reservations about 'fresh expressions'.

1. **Network culture** - in fact self-selecting, can be limiting, encourages nostalgia and fantasies (eg Friends Reunited). Interests are becoming ever more narrowly defined (Magazines: *Calcified Tissue International*). 'People can live in an ever narrowing ecclesiastical world ... confined worlds seem safe - but they are also suffocating.' p5
2. One of the **impulses to mission** is the concern that a parish church is in some way an incomplete worshipping community. 'What the parochial system has required of the Church of England in generation after generation is a serious engagement with the whole of society in which it is set ... [the parochial system] has always required inventiveness'. p6
3. **Sociology rather than theology** seems to be the tool to understand the church. Yet Raymond Brown, the great Catholic Johannine scholar, said, 'Western Christianity needs to look at the Old Testament for its models of the church.' p8 —particularly Bishop James suggests, the theology of living in exile.
4. **Theology of the exile** might explain why clergy feel marginalised. It is very hard to communicate the Christian story which so excites us. But must not enjoy exile, instead must always be longing for return - a different sort of society.

Exile theology might lead to two inappropriate ways of coping:

1. **Institutional**: over-managing the process of change
2. Clergy defining an **ever narrower role** for themselves as a defence against experiencing the exile: the desire to be in control of something rather than being 'done to' as Christ.

"In the light of this we need clergy with the flexibility to be, as St Paul puts it, 'all things to all people for the sake of the gospel' (1 Cor 9.22,23). They need to have an intelligent appreciation of the parochial system. They need to speak different languages. They need a sound understanding of contemporary society and an ability to offer a theological critique. They need theology to survive. They need more than a few new ways of being church. They need to be able to be used themselves in new ways. Then they will experience the exile, but not succumb to it or make it a comfortable home. They might even see the truth about the character of parochial ministry. They might even find a ready response." p10.

I would add another reason for regarding the parish as a unit of mission, particularly in changing times: what I have called 'the extended parish' (*Rural Theology* 3[2], 99-111, 2005). Parish seems primarily geographical, but in fact is a name for all sorts of attachments to an area and church. Many country parishes in north Hampshire are difficult for young couples to buy into, and social housing stock much diminished. Pondering on requests from young people living outside the parish for ministry, led to considerations of alien-residence and home; the settler and the pilgrim; the theology of hospitality to the stranger, and God's hospitality to us. The parish is a much more subtle concept of mission than is sometimes allowed.

But what of the relationship of the one to the many, the individual parish to benefice? A country parish is a historical reality which exists as a significant, particular place. A benefice is too large to be significant in people's love and imagination, too new and provisional to be particular. In fact, the benefice exists only in the prayers and mind of the priest who holds the construct in his/her heart. The difficulty is precisely that of being a *persona* to all: presence in one parish means absence in the rest. John V Taylor in his book on *The Growth of the Church in Buganda* (London, 1958), identifies a key moment in the history of the Church of Uganda at the end of the 19th century. His description might ring some bells. "... while missionaries did indeed

hand over responsibility into African hands, they always did so by withdrawing into a higher category in the administrative hierarchy ... Such withdrawal upwards became the stock pattern of development in the church until the present day. One might wonder how it was that there could always be room at the top. But in fact the problem hardly arose, because the number of missionary clergy began to fall off ... unfortunately a deep change of relationship was insidiously created by this development so that it was also a withdrawal from fellowship." (pp88-9)

There must be alternatives to the administrative model with its 'withdrawing upwards'. What about the ringmaster of a benefice circus, balancing different prima donna acts, creating a show which captivates the young and old? Or the Chinese parish-plate spinning act? Ian suggested that of a family, and that may be one of the best pictures. However, not every family looks outward in mission, nor do all of their members work together (*The Poisonwood Bible!*). Perhaps the idea of a community of parishes offers some possibilities. Gunton argues that it is the concept of the Trinity and the dancing relationship of love between its three persons which can hold the one and the many in relationship. The persons of the Trinity fully keep their individual nature, but they are what they are only in relationship with one another. Parishes are constituted in a system which gives them neighbouring parishes. Their identity is to some extent created from what they are not: they are not subordinate to their neighbours, nor superior to them come to that. But a parish also gains identity from what it is and what it thinks it is, and that identity need not be one of proud isolation and village rivalry. Perhaps we need to work out a thoroughgoing rural theology of the Holy Trinity in relation to benefices — though it is interesting that the Trinity stuck at the number three. Nevertheless, the pointers suggest the need to root it all in parochial prayer and a strong spirituality of the Trinity, to reach out in God's mission to the people and extended parishioners of a parish. If this is so, then it is for the wider church to facilitate and not complicate the family relationship. It really is time to sort out the administrative, representative and accountability structures of benefices: no more weighing down, instead a very light touch.

Some comments made in discussion afterwards

- Is not the Diocese the basic unit of the Church?
- Parochial and congregational, both words are regarded negatively in CofE discourse. But the latter has a very different weight in non-conformist thinking.
- The base unit of the Church is the body of Christ.
- There are differences between town and country thinking about church and parish. In a town, people opt in to the church. In the country, most see themselves as in: indigenous village dwellers do not need to go to church to show this.
- We are confusing 'institution' with 'organisation'.
- Withdrawing upwards: some lay people have the impression that Bishops have 'withdrawn upwards'

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