

Vicar's Report

to the Annual Meeting

St John's Camberwell, 22 November 2015

Part B: Looking Forward

NB: Part A is included in the 2015 Annual Reports document

TO SPEAK OF GROWTH

As we all know, our Mission Action Plan's number one priority is 'stimulating spiritual vitality'. And as I have said on a number of occasions, it is to this that I responded in my sense of call to St John's. If spiritual vitality is 'stimulated', then what must surely follow is some kind of growth. Which begs the question, what is 'growth'?

Though a word rich in meaning, 'growth' has tended to be defined in restrictive, narrow terms in our time, being almost completely reduced to statistics. The way we usually speak of it, 'growth' seems to be merely about having more *things*. An old economics text book on my shelf defines economic growth as "when an economy is able to produce more goods and services for each consumer."¹ The question, 'Is that a desirable outcome?' is not asked: it is simply assumed that producing and having more is best.

I mention this because I think that – without our necessarily realising it – we confuse 'growth' with statistics, with numbers, quantity, efficiency, scarcity, productivity, with a tragically constricted interpretation of the word 'economy'.² When we church people talk about 'growth' we also tend to unwittingly think statistically. Moreover, the church has been assailed during recent decades by an increasing dominance of the language of management speak – the abstract, depersonalised language of metrics, targets, goals, 'human resources'. This is hardly surprising, I suppose, as it simply reflects the dominant ideology of our time.

As a consequence, we are inclined to behave as though the church's mission is up to *us*, something *we* control and plan and manipulate. Capitulation to prevailing market ideology results in us packaging up the gospel as just another commodity to be sold in the consumer marketplace. In part it's just old fashioned works righteousness. In truth we want to be justified *not* by faith, but by our works: and we want to take the credit for what *we* have accomplished!

The real issue is identified at the top of the list on Moses' stone tablets: "I am the LORD your God... you shall have no other gods before me."³ For in fact we *do* want other gods, the gods of free market, supply and demand, positive thinking, heroic individualism, and so on, by which we imagine we will be in control of our lives. We do not really want the 'absolute dependence on God'⁴ which is the calling of our baptism. We may well read John's Easter gospel every Eastertime – hearing Jesus tell Peter that "when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go"⁵ - but we intend to remain very much in control, thank you very much!

¹ William Baumol, Alan S Blinder, **Economics: Principles and Policy**, 4th ed., San Diego: Garcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979, p42

² The English word 'economy' is derived from the Greek **οικονομοσ**, a composite of **οικος** + **νομοσ**, literally the rule (as in management) of the household. In Christian teaching it refers first of all to the Divine 'management' of creation – the principle economy is God's economy, the contours of which, and the measures of which, are grounded in the primacy of the Trinity, that is, in relatedness and union. In other words, for Christians 'economy' is above all a matter of relatedness, to each other, to God, to the whole creation.

³ Exodus 20:2-3

⁴ This is the famous expression of the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834).

⁵ John 21:18

And when it comes to the church, our baptismal vocation is so easily overwhelmed by institutional preoccupations. At the individual level, we can find ourselves not so much at prayer as serving the needs of a religious club. At the collective level, there is the long and shameful history of the church as power-broker:

The missionary proclamation of the gospel, that no corner of this world should remain without God's promise of new creation through the power of resurrection... has nothing whatever to do with an extension of the claim to sovereignty on the part of the Church and its officials, or with an attempt to regain the old privileges accruing from the cult of the Absolute.⁶

We Anglicans, especially, still hanker I think after our 'old privileges'. We forget that the institution's only legitimate purpose is to *serve the spiritual vitality of the soul*. Twentieth century theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminded us that "the church is not a religious association, rather: it is nothing less than the new humanity established by Jesus Christ the New Adam."⁷

Would someone paying a visit to our parish experience us as 'just another religious (or cultural or ethnic) association', or as the transformed new humanity?

GROWTH IN CHRIST

The challenge for the disciple of Christ is to remember that we are *baptised into his death and resurrection*. On this feast of the Reign of Christ the Gospel reminds us about the counter-cultural nature of the Kingdom.⁸ What kind of 'growth' does baptism into Christ's 'kingdom' envisage? The more fixated we are by the statistical situation – the greying of our hairs, the balance sheet – the more critical it becomes that you and I develop in our capacity to *think theologically*. For if we do not think about 'growth' theologically, we are almost certainly bound to remain enslaved to very neuroses from which the gospel intends to deliver us.

"Do not be afraid, *little flock*, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."⁹

This really is crucial – it makes all the difference. It is for this reason that I am inviting us to reflect on growth *as the gospel defines it* - lest we unwittingly become fixated by balance sheets and profit-and-loss statements, market share, and so on.

We have recently been reflecting on an article about spiritual growth by Fr Laurence Freeman. He very helpfully reminds us that:

The phenomenal expansion of Christianity... was seen as the work of the Spirit, not the result of a successful marketing campaign. Statistical growth is always reassuring, because it can be measured... Spiritual growth, however, is about developing the fruits of the Spirit, which faith and contemplation generate – including love, joy, peace, and patience. There is no law, no measurement-scale, dealing with such things as these... *The primary goal of the Christian life is the deepening of faith, and the marriage of contemplation and action.*¹⁰

⁶ Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, London: SCM Press, 1967, p328.

⁷ Cited in Keith Clements, "Life Together" in a Digital Age', address to St Mark's National Theological Centre, 26 February 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Zn6eW8iq3Q>

⁸ John 18:36

⁹ Luke 12:32

¹⁰ Laurence Freeman OSB, 'Dangers of the Shallow End', *Church Times*, 3 July 2015, p22. Emphasis added.

This time last year I spoke about our vocation as the baptised being grounded in and fuelled by the Eucharistic mystery. Recently many of us took advantage of the Spring Series opportunity to reflect more deeply on our calling as local Eucharistic community. From the point of view of the Eucharistic action, ‘growth’ is very the opposite of our culture’s statistical and acquisitive more-of-everything outlook. “Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?”¹¹ Jesus asks all of us. Growth as Eucharistic sacrifice – in the expression of our prayer book’s well-known sending prayer¹² – leads us into the kenotic¹³ landscape of being taken, blessed, broken open, and given!¹⁴

It’s also crucial to remember that ‘mission’ is not what *we* do, but an “overflow of *God’s* triune life.”¹⁵ At one of this year’s open forums I referred to the late Bishop John V Taylor’s marvellous book, ‘The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission’. He still has so much to teach the church about the Christian meaning of ‘growth’ I think. At one point he observes:

Mission is often described as if it were the planned extension of an old building. But in fact it has usually been more like an unexpected explosion. By recording growth of the church in mainly institutional terms we have suggested a slow, even expansion and maturing, whereas the great leap forward and the equally sudden collapse have been such common features of the story that we should have the modesty to recognise that the Breath of God has always played a more decisive part than our human strategy... One way or the other we should expect the church to burn. If it does not it is nonsense to talk about mission.¹⁶

Are we ‘burning’ with God’s triune life?

MEASUREMENT & GOSPEL

I have already noted that part of our difficulty is the business of measurement. By what ‘measure’ will we know that ‘growth’ has taken place? By the standards of marketing-consumer culture, or by what we find in the gospels? What ‘measure’ of ‘growth’ do we find in the gospels?

The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, “Look, here it is!” or “There it is!” For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.¹⁷

Strive first for the kingdom of God ... and all these things will be given to you.¹⁸

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.¹⁹

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed ... the smallest of all the seeds ... like yeast.²⁰

¹¹ Matthew 20:22

¹² The Anglican Church of Australia Trust Corporation, **A Prayer Book for Australia**, Sydney: Broughton Books, 1995, p144.

¹³ From the Greek κενωσις. See in particular the early Christian hymn in Philippians 2:5-11

¹⁴ ‘Thanksgiving 2’, **A Prayer Book for Australia**, p131.

¹⁵ “Mission... is not primarily an instrument of Church growth or a perception of paucity, or any other end apart from that generous outflowing of creative love that seeks to draw others into the divine liturgy.” Andrew Davison, Alison Milbank, **For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions**, London: SCM, 2010, pp119,120.

¹⁶ John V Taylor, **The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission**, London: SCM Press, 1978, pp53,54.

¹⁷ Luke 17:20-25

¹⁸ Matthew 6:33

¹⁹ Matthew 6:21

²⁰ Matthew 13:31,33

... like seed scattered on the ground ... [growing in secret, and we do not know how it grows].²¹

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field ...

like a single pearl [worth selling all for].²²

As Fr Laurence Freeman has already alerted us, Christian ‘growth is to be observed by what St Paul called the ‘fruits of the Spirit’.²³ In the letter to the church at Ephesus we find this beautiful expression, the hope that,

all (παντες) come to the unity (ενοτητα) of the faith and the fuller knowledge (επιγνωσεως) of the Son of God, to maturity (τελειον), to the measure (μετρον) of the stature (ηλικιασ) of the fullness (πληρωματος) of Christ.²⁴

The word translated as ‘maturity’ is the Greek word that always alerts us to the eschatological orientation of the Christian vision. I spoke about this word *eschaton* during the Spring Series. It can be accurately translated as ‘end’, or ‘goal’ - unhelpfully translated as ‘perfect’ – best rendered as ‘complete’, in the sense of a dynamic ongoing coming-to-completion. It reminds us that our vocation is not a preservation exercise, not a static state, not something *we* manipulate or control. By the Holy Spirit, the Divine completeness is always calling us out of our past, out of immaturity, out of in-completeness - and out of fear and anxiety. God calls to us from the future, urges us on, to completion. And the only ‘measure’ – literally, the *metron* – is nothing other than the ‘stature of the *fullness* of Christ’.

I wonder, in what ways are we growing in the stature of the fullness of Christ?

PRAYER & GROWTH

Well, all the great spiritual teachers of our tradition concur in placing *prayer* at the centre of this adventure in growth – as the ‘one thing necessary’²⁵ that alone liberates our spiritual growth as the baptised, the *only* basis for our ‘measuring up’ to the stature of the fullness of Christ.

Yet even our ideas about ‘prayer’ as the means to growth can be just as readily fouled up by our culture’s statistical-consumerist outlook:

When we say, then, that prayer is the very life-blood of mission, we are not talking about one of several kinds of resources, like money and man-power and influence, which *we* muster to aid our enterprise; we are saying that the essential missionary activity is to *live in prayer*.²⁶

Not ‘to pray’ – but to *live in prayer*. That great early church teacher Origen long ago spotted the danger, that we are inclined to envisage prayer much as any other self-centred lever in order to get our own way. No, says Origen, we “do not pray to get benefits from God but to become like God.”²⁷ This is very different indeed from the way in which we were possibly taught to pray as children. It’s a vocation in which our small and fearful egos can no longer be in the driving seat:

²¹ Mark 4:26-27

²² Matthew 13:44,45

²³ e.g. Galatians 5:22

²⁴ Ephesians 4:13

²⁵ Luke 10:42

²⁶ John V Taylor, *The Go-Between God*, p227. Emphasis added

²⁷ Laurence Freeman OSB, *ibid.*

No longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.²⁸

‘Growth’ when motivated by this kind of prayer is nothing less than growing into the image and likeness of the One who fashioned us. The true ‘measure’, to restate it, is the stature of the *fullness* of Christ.

To pray in this way – to pray such that the measure of ‘growth’ is the fullness of Christ – is the true calling of the baptised. It is to grow in such a manner that ‘life’ and ‘prayer’ are in fact one and the same thing. Not so much ‘to pray’ – as to *live in prayer*, to “pray without ceasing”.²⁹

CONTEMPLATION

The formal name for this kind of living in the Christian tradition is the word contemplation. That great twentieth century spiritual teacher Thomas Merton puts it this way:

The wisdom of the contemplative life is, then, not the wisdom of a man who needs to possess knowledge and learning... [or things, and so on!] It is the wisdom of a man who has forgotten himself and forgotten wisdom, and who *seeks to possess nothing because he needs nothing*. All that he needs comes to him from God, even before he begins to need it.³⁰

In the words of that marvellous address I have invited us to meditate upon, by former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams:

Contemplation is very far from being just one kind of thing that Christians do: it is the *key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics*, the *key to the essence of a renewed humanity* that is capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom – freedom from self-oriented, acquisitive habits and the distorted understanding that comes from them. To put it boldly, *contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world* that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit. To learn contemplative practice is to *learn what we need* so as to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly. It is a deeply revolutionary matter.³¹

This is spiritual vitality, the engine room of growth in Christ, the one thing that matters. In summing up the essence of ‘Benedictine spirituality’, Sister Joan Chittister in truth sums up the task of *all* spirituality:

The purpose of ... spirituality is to gather *equally committed adults for a journey* through earthen darkness to the dazzling light that *already flames up in each of us*, but in a hidden place *left to each of us to find*.³²

Commitment to that adult journey - to find that hidden dazzling light that already flames up in each of us - is the *measure* of the *stature* of the *fullness* of Christ. And this is our common vocation as the baptised: here at the junction, wherever God sends us, in the service of love.

²⁸ Galatians 2:20

²⁹ 1 Thessalonians 5:17

³⁰ Thomas Merton, (William H Shannon, ed.), **The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation**, New York: HarperOne, 2003, p152. emphasis added

³¹ The Archbishop of Canterbury's Address to the Thirteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith, 10 October 2012, para. 8, <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2645/archbishops-address-to-the-synod-of-bishops-in-rome#sthash.bg3qTym6.dpuf> emphasis added

³² Joan Chittister OSB, **The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century**, New York: Crossroad, 2010, p36.