



Reclaiming the Church – A view from the edge

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Do we need a new Reformation? Reclaiming faith for the people

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Nick and Amy are staunch supporters of their village church. They are both on the PCC and they raise a sizeable proportion of the money needed to keep it going. They are both declared atheists. Their vicar is more than happy to have their support and they in turn laughingly reassure her that they will remain in post until a 'card carrying Christian' comes along. They themselves rarely attend services, Christmas, and possibly Easter, being the only exceptions, apart from the occasional wedding or funeral. It is not clear whether any of the few people who do turn up on Sunday mornings are themselves 'card carrying Christians'. The vicar does not like to press people on this point. She is just happy to have them there – for whatever reason.

Richard, Sue and their young family of three attend the evangelical church in the nearby town of Honerton. They are younger than Nick and Amy, but not a great deal younger. The church is good for their children and will go on being good for them, although it is not altogether clear what this means, until they reach their mid-teens when, if all goes according to custom and plan, they will graduate to the 'adult' church. If we wind the clock forward by ten or fifteen years, one of these children now goes to the village church, where she and her husband were eventually married, and another has joined the swelling ranks of the 'de-churched', those who have outgrown the church as they know it but who also feel disconnected from the local village church and, most significantly, the system which they perceive it as belonging to. These two have moved to the very edge of the Church's life, although they think of themselves as having left it altogether.

The incumbent of the village church is a woman in her mid fifties who was ordained ten years ago. She is much loved by the people she serves. She also holds a postgraduate theology degree from a good university. She too is on the edge of the Church's life. She feels marginalised and disconnected from those responsible for running it at diocesan level. She also senses professional jealousy coming from other clergy, both male and female. She has learned to be wary of the system.

All these people are experiencing a sense of disconnection from the dynamic force which ought to inform the life of the Church, and a corresponding disconnection from God. The two atheists feel this disconnection insofar as what is said about God in church does not seem to resonate with their particular circumstances – they are still grieving for their second child who died in infancy. They do not trust others with their emotions, and they feel betrayed by a God who allowed their child to die, so they do not acknowledge that God exists. Their vicar, nice as she is, has not yet managed to meet them in their pain perhaps because she has not deepened sufficiently in her own spiritual journey. **Questions pertaining to Mark 2.** *On the basis of individual Church background (the churches you perhaps grew up in), as well as your current church context, what do you think the Church needs to do to develop greater empathy with those who suffer (those 'on our own front doorstep' and those we hear about in the news?) Is there a common thread which ties their suffering to the life of the Church? How do we maintain a connection with them through this 'thread'?*

The young couple returning to their local church feel another kind of disconnect. What is said and done on Sundays is not something they can 'take home with them', metaphorically speaking. It simply affords space for a little 'mental darning', time to pick over the past few days and piece events together so that they can begin to reinsert them into the overall pattern of their lives. By the time the offertory hymn is announced, they may have managed to shed a few discomfiting memories, but while they may feel more 'sorted', they have not seen God. **For Mark 1.** *How can we as the body of Christ engage more deeply with people's spiritual hunger in our digitalised, fast moving, high achieving society?*

The flash of understanding which triggered the 16th century Reformation, and set Christianity on a new course, was Luther's realisation that the Church was making it impossible for people to see God. Its grip on the human soul allowed the Church's life to be increasingly driven by clerical lust for power and by managerial concerns. The latter amounted to raising money from the faithful through a form of extortion – the selling of indulgences – in which fear was deployed as part of a marketing exercise. Fear was reinforced by deeply entrenched guilt through the controlling mechanism of an institution outside whose boundaries, the faithful were told, lay darkness and damnation – *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. Material concerns – specifically funding the building of St. Peter's basilica in Rome, had simultaneously overwhelmed and then corrupted the Church's spiritual life.

Luther

As with many secular revolutions, the Church was badly in need of a reformation. But as is also the case with secular revolutions which explode into civil wars, it was a reformation which arguably went too far. A new iconoclastic tyranny would emerge under the name of *sola scriptura*. Winding the clock forward by four centuries, we see it further distorted by modern biblicism, various kinds of fundamentalisms and other idolatries, including that of management. A 'managerial/skills' orientated approach to the life of the Church stifles the kind of dynamic liberating spirit which informed Luther's original theological vision.

Luther was a contemplative. He was also subversive, a renegade monk living on the edge of the Church's life. His revolutionary ethic was shaped by a particular understanding of faith, as a response to God's invitation to the individual to be at one with him. Faith was the primary virtue. It would even, for a while, take precedence over love. Viewed in hindsight, this subjecting of love to faith would ultimately undermine Luther's earlier thinking, and compromise his theological legacy.¹

Perverting the course of faith

¹ He would be remembered as the great Reformer, but also as the one who allowed faith to serve a warped sense of duty, specifically the duty to support the monarch in suppressing the peasant uprising of 1525, in which 6,000 peasants were killed in a single day.

As a result of its being viewed in separation from the love of God, faith was subjected to a perverted form of legalism. While for Luther, this did not compromise God's mercy, the prioritizing of faith over love would ultimately become a tool for reinforcing clerical and secular power. Luther believed rulers to be infallible. Clerical power, with its implied infallibility, was exercised through preaching – and there were few constraints. 'Preachers are the greatest of slayers' Luther wrote 'For they urge the authorities to execute their office strictly and punish the wicked. In the revolt [of 1525] I slew all the peasants; all their blood is on my head. But I pass it on to our Lord, who commanded me to speak thus.'² **General and Mark 2.** *Is it possible to be part of the clerical institution, but not of it? What might that mean for the Church today?*

But despite this tragic distortion of the Gospel, Luther did, paradoxically, bequeath freedom to the Church. His famous 'stand' would from now on make it possible for people to question the psychological hold which the Church exercised on their lives and, more specifically, on how they related to God. His revolutionary thinking had begun as a spiritual protest in the face of a Church which was allowing material concerns, including, and perhaps especially, those pertaining to clerical power, to control the Church's life.

Luther's protest was primarily directed at clerical power exercised through the commercialising of grace, a process which would ultimately stifle its spiritual life. But it was also directed at the scholastics and the cold intellectualism which had come to dominate the life of the Church at the expense of the humility which is only to be found in an awareness of how a person stands in relation to the unfathomable holiness of God. The absence of the grace which is a sign of the active presence of the spirit of the living God, had atrophied the Church's inner, or true, life. As a result of this, the Church became so politicised as to render it almost indistinguishable from the secular machinery which surrounded it. **General and all five marks.** *Has the Church's spiritual life atrophied? If so, what are the signs of this? How might it change and what effect would a deepening of its spiritual life have on the work of mission?*

The Church as organisation

² Marty, *Luther*, 98 in Dominic Erdozain *The Soul of Doubt: The Religious Roots of Unbelief from Luther to Marx*, OUP (2016)

A comparable situation exists in the Church of today. It has become so politicised that it is at risk of spiritual atrophy. Another way of putting this is to say that it has become an organisation. But the Church is not an organisation. It is the body of Christ. What it offers is not simply a product among others. The secular organisation must justify itself on the high street and, in order to do this, it must be commercially viable. The Church, specifically the Church of England and, from my own experience, the Church in Wales, is increasingly anxious about remaining commercially viable, while at the same time maintaining a system of governance which would be untenable for any secular organisation, one which pertains to another age and has long outlived its usefulness.

So if the Church needs a new Reformation it will need to begin with a review of its concept of authority and resulting system of governance. At present the governed, especially those on the edge of the Church's life, as well as clergy and those who faithfully turn up Sunday by Sunday, feel either out of touch with their bishop and his or her representatives, who they rarely see, or undervalued. As a result of this disconnection many of them are also beginning to feel out of touch with God.

The 'unchurched' (people who 'get God' but don't 'do Church') are put off by the institution and by clericalism – the magical hold which clergy still exercise in the minds of many. The formerly 'de-churched', like the returning evangelicals I mentioned earlier, face a similar problem. They struggle with arcane gender specific language, and are puzzled or bored by what is all too often banal and inconclusive preaching. Furthermore, all these people feel marginalised by the institution's seemingly unquestioned adherence to a concept of authority and governance which feels remote and meaningless. Added to this, incumbents may themselves feel they have no choice but to speak and behave in ways that signal their support of the *status quo*, and this does not make them feel any more comfortable with it, especially as it can also alienate them from the people they serve. As a result, they too are finding themselves to be increasingly on the edge of the Church's 'organisational' life.

Return this scenario to Luther's own ecclesial context, in which the Church's political power was closely bound to that of the monarch, and we see a once iconic Church (the Church of England) now simultaneously controlling and out

of touch with its members – right across the Church spectrum, from laity to senior clergy. This has led to a climate of distrust and to inner fragmentation which feeds other divisions, specifically those relating to gender and sexual orientation. Taken together, these divisions, along with the distrust which feeds them, gives rise to damaging power games among clergy, irrespective of rank or position. All of this suggests that the Church is losing sight of what it is about – which is freeing people into God. **Questions pertaining to Mark 3 and 4** *Working on the basis that freeing people into God means taking away the things which bind them, what, in your experience, binds the people today? How does a 'freed' Church become better at missional serving? How might a sense of having been freed change the way church people relate to others?*

Paradoxically, the more the Church loses sight of what it is about, the more it senses a need to be both viable and relevant. The more it strives to be viable as an organisation, the more it diverts attention from the human need for freedom in God. Reclaiming that freedom and encountering the living God in the company of others ought to be the reason for coming to church on a Sunday morning. This would suggest that the Church needs to rediscover the vital component of trust which makes freedom and friendship with God possible.

Friendship with God – Transforming structures and authority

Trust is the basis of faith. It makes faith and love mutually sustainable. Together, they constitute the dynamic energy which resonates with the energy of the life of the Trinity, the energy of love between persons. This is the love which simultaneously generates and proceeds from faith. It is also the energy which ought to constantly regenerate the Church's relationships. At present, relationships in the Church are constrained by a management approach to how authority ought to work in its day to day life.

In the life of the Church, faith, proceeding from love for God, ought to neutralise the human desire for power and status, as it should also challenge a complacent and unquestioning obedience to bishops and senior clerics. In a management-driven Church, bishops are perceived as one or other of two personas; either the secular 'boss' figure (pertaining to the organisation) or the monastic abbot. These two authority models must be assumed by a single

individual almost simultaneously. This undermines their confidence and may even lead to some form of identity crisis. When should they be ‘boss’? In what situation, should they be abbot? When, if ever, can they be simply human? The status paraphernalia which surrounds the most senior clerical posts does not help them make these decisions. Neither does it help them retain their primary focus on Christ. **General** *In what sense might this loss of primary focus, and the preoccupation with status and relevance which leads to it, be considered ‘sin’? How do your conclusions apply to the life of the Church? How might a preoccupation with status affect the work of mission?*

All of this confusion contributes to an overall sense of uncertainty about what the Church is supposed to be for people in today’s world. This uncertainty will have spiritual, as well practical consequences for everyone and will be expressed through mounting cynicism and mutual ill will between bishops and their clergy, and between clergy and people, with the result that some people, both ordained and lay, are losing faith in the institutional Church altogether.

As I have already suggested, part of the problem lies in the fact that the Church is trying to hold the monastic model of authority and governance in tension with the commercial one, and thereby get the best of both worlds; unquestioning generosity and good will from those who serve it, cemented by unquestioning obedience to ‘boss bishops’ who they seldom see. Given that the two models are in direct contradiction to each other, the monastic theoretically pertaining to life in God and the ‘boss’ figure to life in the world, the Church is in danger of being perceived as ‘neutered’, an institutionalised organisation in which God and Mammon have cancelled each other out.

Questions pertaining to Mark 3 and 4 *What kind of authority structure is needed for the Church to enable transformation in the world it exists to serve?*

Reconciliation and bridge building

While the institution known as the Church of England is still iconic for many, this is less true of the disestablished Anglican provinces – or at least those in Wales, Scotland and Ireland. These have little iconic significance and, partly as a result of this, are winding down even faster than the Church of England. Seen from the vantage point of the Church in Wales, the spiritual vacuum in which the Church as a whole now exists (the result of internal division and

preoccupation with status and what might be called the ‘bling’ that goes with it), is undermining its confidence. As a result, it appears to those on the edges of its life to have lost sight of what it is really about – which is bringing the love of God and the presence of the risen Christ to the world of today.

This general sense of uncertainty about its meaning and purpose is both the cause and the effect of a non-dynamic, or static way of being Church. As a result of this uncertainty and spiritual inertia, the people who the Church is called to serve experience a ‘disconnect’ from the mystery of God, which they too are called to share in. This creates more spiritual inertia and is arguably the most significant cause of the Church’s decline. It has become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Nevertheless, people still wait for the Church to speak of God. The growth in non-churched movements and groupings, such as JAM (Jesus and me) suggests that many of them have given up waiting for what until recently has been known as the mainstream Church and now seek God independently.³ The Church finds it increasingly hard to speak of God in ways which will connect with people who have lost faith in, or are bored by, the institution because the spiritual vacuum which it now inhabits indicates that it has temporarily (one hopes only temporarily) lost sight of him. This creates a vicious circle. First, decline in numbers – because people who come to church do in fact want their faith challenged and kept alive – and then internal fragmentation. Internal fragmentation further undermines confidence and invites uninspiring leadership (opting for a safe pair of hands rather than imaginative, if risky, women and men in senior positions) and further decline. So we are left with the equivalent of corporate breakdown.

Corporate breakdown, as with any breakdown, comes with exhaustion and an ensuing loss of a sense of purpose, leading to breakdown in corporate relationships. In the context of the Church, I understand corporate as pertaining both to the body, as body of Christ, and to the sociality which is the basis of a properly functioning secular corporation. Again, both depend on trust.

³ Steve Aisthorpe *The Invisible Church* p.32 and ch.4. Edinburgh, St. Andrew’s Press (2016)

For the Church, this means trust in its primary sense of belonging to God and trust in the God-orientated integrity (and not only competence) of those responsible for the day to day running of the organisation. But while few would object to the prudent management of dwindling resources, many feel uneasy about the way secular management dominates its life at the expense of Christ-like gentleness, humility and imaginative, but theologically grounded teaching and pastoral leadership.

And there is other 'unfinished business' which further undermines trust and slows down the forward dynamic of its life. Misogyny in the Church in Wales is still rife. Homophobia and a general mistrust of LGBT people continues to prevail, if only beneath the surface. Furthermore, and sadly, we have yet to see open and public common cause being made between official LGBT groups and those who formerly represent women's ministry in the Province. There are, of course, numerous exceptions among private individuals.

Added to these areas of mistrust is the ongoing mutual suspicion which exists across churchmanships. Given all these divisions, and the spiritual vacuum to which they give rise, it is again unclear what the Church is supposed to be. What is its purpose? What truth does it witness to?

What is the Church for? Witnessing to the truth of the Gospel

The truth of the Gospel lies in something which is implicitly understood in the moment of forgiveness, and in reconciliation and healing. If the Church is to live, and thereby convey the truth of the Gospel, it first needs to do some bridge-building. Existing divisions, uncertainty about what we are called to be, along with preoccupations about the viability of the existing structure and the market value of material assets, make for a difficult context in which to communicate the truth of the Gospel which is the love of God for all people. Furthermore, the breakdown of communication in the Church's functional life begs some big questions in regard to faith, insofar as faith is energized and substantiated by love. Luther's understanding of the faith which justifies came as a realisation that we are all loved and held deeply in God.

The Christian idea of truth, if I can be forgiven for particularizing it for the purpose of this discussion, is the outworking of faith and love. Truth is bound up in love, in other words in the way we treat one another. Thus, reconciliation

is not just a matter of patching up differences and ‘moving on’ but of having the courage to ‘move more deeply into’ the full picture of any given issue in a desire to discern the face of Christ there – and in being prepared for surprises.

The deepening begins in a willingness to see people and the causes of conflict, poverty and mental illness (to name only a few of the ills that beset our world and society) as God sees them, through the eyes of Christ, to return his gaze and, as we do this, to ‘get into the other person’s field of vision’ so to speak. In other words, to experience (and not just deduce) how they see things and how they see us. In this way, we prepare the ground for new and sometimes surprising revelations of the truth of the Gospel. The Church needs to become a sign of that truth, in its work of reconciliation and bridge-building, a sign of life and hope, rather than a sign of failure, despondency and division, so that it can help others to hear and later embody new revelations of truth for our times. The reconciled Church is therefore a prophetic Church.

A hierarchical and status-ridden authority system does not help us to be prophetic. Furthermore, Anglican authority is traditionally modelled on principles of collegiality, and sharing the vision, as a result of a collective contemplation of God, is collegiality at its best. Where the Church’s life is either dominated by a small power elite, and then becomes committee-driven, it loses touch with the life of the Spirit and, consequently, with the very real spiritual needs of those it serves, including those of its own clergy.

Secular organisations have something to teach us in regard to both obedience and vision. Corporate visionary life calls for a transparent interface and mutual accountability between employer and employee, the idea being that all should share in, and benefit from, the corporate vision. Think only of the John Lewis partnership. In the history of the Church, monastic authority, properly exercised, relied on the Abbot or Prioress’s sense of accountability before God for those who had to obey them. This sense of accountability was, again, reciprocal. Each was accountable for the flourishing of the other.⁴ **Questions pertaining to Marks 3 and 5.** *In what ways do you think authority structures in the Church need to change to make loving service and mutual accountability something for which the Church is recognised?*

⁴ Benedictine Rule

Where we see the best in these two reciprocal authority models, we begin to see organisations flourish. Applied to the life of the Church, this mutuality will in turn inform the Church's theological and ethical vision, leading to holiness of life and purpose.⁵ But it is not a particularly *rational* process. Luther's moment of understanding was not the result of diligent reasoning which would shape future policy. It came about through an encounter with a God whose faithfulness proceeds from love. Love is spoken as the living Word which returns to God, not empty, but bearing within it the life of the Church. It follows that the Church, as opposed to the organisation, consists of those who resist all that systematises and crushes human creativity, all that blocks the living Word. These 'resisters' are often on the organisational Church's perimeters, either just inside its walls, or on the outside tentatively looking over them. They are looking for something to help them shape meaning from their lives and make sense of the violent anarchic forces at work in the world. They are looking for the prophetic understanding which comes with freedom in God, and freedom from fear. Fear is one of the greatest inhibitors of love, and hence of life, in the Church.

Confronting fear

The institutional Church is becoming increasingly introspective because it fears failure. So, for the Church, Luther's realisation of freedom from the fear of judgment translates as freedom from anxiety about failure. Paul's words about condemnation and judgment (Rom. 8:1) now translate as 'There is therefore now no *failure* for those who are in Christ Jesus'. This is not to endorse the Church's status quo as an 'organisation', or to promote a new form of Church triumphalism. Neither is it meant to justify clerical professionalism and the status-driven ambition that it frequently engenders. It is simply to say that the Church's loss of spiritual dynamic is in part due to its fear of failure. This suggests that it needs to recapture the kind of faith which Luther knew in his own moment of understanding; that he was unconditionally accepted by God.

⁵ L. William Countryman, *Living on the Border of the Holy: Renewing the Priesthood of All*, Harrisburg, Morehouse Publishing, 1999 p.81 and Daniel W. Hardy, *God's Ways with the world: Thinking and practising Christian Faith*, 'The Foundation of Cognition and Ethics in Worship' Edinburgh, T&T Clark (1996)

The Church, like the human person, is realigned with God in the moment that it trusts God enough to know that it is accepted by him, in all its imperfections, including, even, its sins. The nagging sense that it needs to justify its existence on the high street, to be 'relevant' ('irrelevance' having become synonymous with failure), bears no relation to God's specific purpose for its life. God's purpose for its life is not 'relevance'. It is forgiveness and healing. Forgiveness, and the healing which it brings, enables it to speak into people's need for the deeper truth of the Gospel. This is what people who come to church are looking for, even if they do not always acknowledge it.

Seeking God

They are looking for something which will resonate with their search for meaning. In other words, they are looking for the kind of genuine encounter with the living God, as God is manifested in the person of Jesus Christ, which enables human fulfilment. They may also be looking for it in other contexts, in those which connect people to one another, and hence to the love of God, in day to day life, in social networking, and in family relationships. In all of these they will be looking for a sense of God and for other ways of being church.⁶ Some, like the atheists I described earlier, may still go to their local church, perhaps because it answers their need for silence and space. For them, God will be in the fabric of the church building – in the beauty of its architecture and possibly of its location, and in its history. They sense, even if they do not acknowledge it to themselves, that the prayers of centuries are embedded in its walls. The church building is a place where people have 'waited for the God to speak' to quote the Welsh poet R.S. Thomas.

The couple who have left the evangelical church of their formative years are also 'waiting for the God to speak'. They are on a personal and largely private journey, working out their own salvation in ways which they were not able to do in the church of their early years. But they are also looking to the priest. They hope that she can trace a path for them with sermons and the kind of pastoral care which will help them work out their salvation on both a spiritual and intellectual level. The teaching ministry, viewed as a pastoral task, remains one of the most important gifts which the Church has to offer to the world. In

⁶ Steve Aisthorpe, *The Invisible Church* Ch.1

working with them, through her preaching and through being a person who spends time with God, the priest will be an example of the steadfastness of God's love, and of his faithfulness. They will recognise in her the Christ they have always known, but they will meet him through her teaching as if for the first time.

As we return our attention to these three loosely sketched categories of people, we begin to see a prophetic church emerging, one which speaks into the unspoken yearnings of the human heart for God and which also grows as it learns from those it serves. It is a Church which is being re-formed from its outer peripheries. Prophets tend to emerge from the outer peripheries, from wilderness places where they have 'waited for the God to speak'.

'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' asks Nathaniel when told that the Messiah is in the area. John the Baptist, and a number of Old Testament prophets, sprang from obscurity, and sometimes returned to it, as did Jeremiah who departed into exile with the 'remnant' of God's people. Today's remnant consists of those who do not fit easily within the organisational structure, who cannot be slotted in to an outworn hierarchical system which is increasingly out of touch with the people it is supposed to serve. Nor do they feel at home in so called 'non conformist' settings, many of which *do* in fact conform, albeit to a different set of theological and liturgical norms and practices.

It is the prophet Samuel who perhaps speaks most clearly into the spiritual vacuum which we try to fill with activism, and which the world fills so often with violence. He writes into a mute busyness which is not unlike our own. In Samuel's time, the worshipping community was preoccupied with its own short term and largely private concerns, so we are told that 'There were no frequent visions in those days'. It prompts some very pertinent questions: *What vision does the Church of today bring to a world full of uncertainty and increasing religious violence? What has it got to say to those on the peripheries of its own life, on the outside looking in, and to those on the outer peripheries of its hierarchical system? We are all waiting, on the one hand for coherence and meaning, for vision and direction inspired by tradition, and on the other for release from old habits of mind relating to how we are to be, as well as to how we are to believe. We are looking for the kind of leadership which will*

point the Church to new life in God, a leadership patterned on the dialogical relatedness of the Trinity from which the living Word proceeds and to which it does not return empty.

Life in God is about dialogical relatedness. It is a silent conversation. God waits to converse with his Church from within his own silence, but he also, paradoxically, waits in the noise and activism which claims our society and much of the Church's life. God waits in its anxiety and in its transience. In order to minister effectively to an anxious world, and to transient communities, the Church must meet people in the silent place where God waits, on the edge of the Church's life and sometimes on the edge of faith itself.

To be on the edge of faith is not simply to doubt certain tenets of the Creed. Rather the opposite, in fact. It is to be in a place of 'unknowing',⁷ a place where God is yearned for in ways which do not at first appear obvious or orthodox. Anxiety is itself a kind of yearning, whether it is anxiety concerning a specific person or situation, or a more general state of anxiety about the world. Both of these are expressed and salved in a deeper yearning for God – in yearning for God for his own sake. Something comparable may be going on in the consciousness of many who involve themselves with the church building. In this building some unspoken need is met. Those who serve the Church, whether lay or ordained, are called to minister into this need.

One of the effects of bad management is that it makes it difficult for people to sense their need for God, and difficult to minister to it. Management priorities get in the way of genuine encounter, both between people and between people and God. In being anxious and preoccupied with the practical needs of the moment, bad Church management does not listen to the deeper truth about the person. Good management requires that the Church relearns the art of listening – listening deeply to God and listening to people from *within* God. In order to do this, it will need to let go of its fear of failure, and of the preoccupation with numbers which goes with it, so that it can understand and

⁷ For those readers who may not be familiar with this term, this is a way of depicting knowledge of God. In the Christian tradition its most prominent advocates include Meister Eckhart's *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the poetry and writing of St John of the Cross, and the work of the contemporary writer, Maggie Ross. See especially her *Silence: A User's Guide*, London, DLT (2014)

grasp the more important things which are of God, beginning with the unique gift which each person has to bring to its service.

Good, imaginative managers are also visionary leaders. They know how best to deploy the gifts which others bring to the corporation. This is not the same thing as looking around for someone to fill a vacancy. So perhaps the first question to be asked when a position in the Church becomes available is 'does this vacancy really need to be filled?' While the opportunity to be rid of a position may be timely in terms of cost-cutting, the question needs to be asked with other ends in mind, because the person and their particular gift should always take precedence over the job or position. Is the position, as it stands, able to maximise the potential of a particular person? Rather than 'does the applicant tick all the boxes?' would be a more creative approach. This invites further questioning. Do the gifts which people bring imply that the organisation needs to adapt itself to those gifts, gifts which are literally God-given? To even ask these questions is to suggest that Church structures need to be far more porous and malleable than they are at present.

Since gift, in all its variety, is not restricted to those selected for ordination, it follows that the more the gift of discernment is deployed, the wider and more effective will be the variety of gifts brought by others – and the more difficult to manage and control. Furthermore, focusing on gift, rather than on status, creates its own dynamic and generates hope for the future life of the body. It releases gift in others, so generating confidence and a sense of belonging more fully to the wider worshipping community. Where people are made to feel valued, they give more. They may even reveal gifts they never knew they had, because these are the fruit of their life in God.

The Church's life is increasingly shaped by a skills orientated mind-set, (a left side of the brain approach to corporate life⁸) rather than by the kind of imaginative and creative thinking which comes with listening and working with people who live from within a deep and personal relationship with God. Such people offer a particular kind of wisdom. They have a sense of the holy. That is to say that they instinctively interrogate the God-ward direction of every aspect of the Church's life. Their priority is always to enable others to know

⁸ Ian McGilchrist *The Master and his Emissary – The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, London, Yale University Press (2009)

God, as God is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. They are vulnerable, as Christ was vulnerable – and the Church needs them to help it re-form its life. Only then will it be in a position to help people make sense of the times in which we live and to connect with those who don't 'do Church', but secretly very much 'do God'.