Ecclesiastical Law Society

Cumberland Lodge, Windsor

5th – 7th April 2019

Church and State in the 21st Century – the challenges of establishment for parochial clergy: a reflection by the Rt Revd Graham James

Some years ago I was asked what was the greatest challenge faced by the Diocese of Norwich. Only half jesting I replied 'the Diocese of London'. I'd just lost several of the brightest and best of our clergy to the lush pastures of the metropolis and the seductive charms of Richard Chartres. I never seemed to lose any clergy to Hull or Hartlepool: the Holy Spirit is very selective. One priest went to a London parish with a highly particular churchmanship. Another was single and felt the culture of the capital city would be more congenial. Another said he thought he could be more the sort of priest he felt called to be in London. He commented he would not have to deal with all the 'extra stuff' that came your way in a diocese like Norwich. By that he meant the big demands of occasional offices, the expectations to be a trustee of local charities, and also meeting the deep-rooted but often unspoken desires of the wider community for the vicar to belong to them, without them feeling much responsibility to belong to the vicar.

More recently Norwich has recruited one or two clergy who have worked in large urban and metropolitan parishes. They've discovered themselves busier in rural multi-parish benefices of 3000 people than they were presiding over more than 20,000 people in urban England. They've loved the 'extra stuff'. They've got smaller congregations but are subject to bigger expectations.

It's this paradox I want to explore in this talk. The diverse, often inarticulately expressed, expectations to be found of the parish clergy of the Church of England (and of its bishops too) are part of what may be best described as 'low establishment'. They derive from the Church of England's particular history. They are the consequence of historic rights of parishioners, for example in relation to marriage. Indeed, they are the result of having "parishioners" at all, rather than members. This "low establishment" is related to a church deeply embedded in the educational system and whose schools, outside metropolitan and heavily urban areas, are schools for everyone. They are part of the outworking of a Church with which the monarch is closely identified and glad to

be so. Around 3000 people turned up to watch the Queen go to church on the Sunday after Christmas at Sandringham at the end of last year. It never occurred to any of them that she might turn over in bed and have a lie in, as even some faithful Anglicans do on the Sunday after Christmas. I've wondered sometimes whether the Queen does a lot of vicarious churchgoing for the nation. While a good deal of this 'low establishment' may be regarded as a historic legacy which will not survive another generation, I believe some connections between the Church of England and the communities it serves are stronger now than existed when I was ordained in 1975. I will take three examples.

The very first deanery chapter of clergy I attended in Peterborough shortly after my ordination at Michaelmas 1975 included a discussion about what should be done about Remembrance Sunday. All the clergy agreed that Remembrance Sunday was on its last legs and once the last veterans of the First World War had died it would be time to bring it to a dignified conclusion. Second World War veterans, they said, had much less investment in it and the young could not see the point of this glorification of past conflicts. I've never forgotten that discussion since it taught me a great deal about the inability of the clergy to predict future patterns of religious observance, let alone church attendance. As we know, Remembrance Sunday now draws some of the biggest congregations of the year, bigger than Christmas in a good many parishes. It is, of course, an Anglican phenomenon in England.   From what other church leaders tell me the renewal of Remembrance Sunday has had relatively little impact on Roman Catholic and non-conformist attendances in England that day.

Secondly, there has been an unexpected renewal of the Church of England's role in education during the 44 years since my ordination. Church schools were thought to be a thing of the past by many clergy in the 1970s with less and less to distinguish them from the usual run of local authority schools. The renewal of the role of the Church of England in education has been mostly a determination on the part of the Church herself, with the publication of the Dearing report in 2001. But the advent of academies gave new opportunities which dioceses have been mostly quick to take up.   Contacts between churches and local authority schools in many places have strengthened too. In the council estate parish in Peterborough where I served my curacy there were no church schools. Despite our best efforts the local primary and secondary schools resisted any church connection or involvement. Today in that parish, things are entirely different. A nursery school exists on church premises, and a youth worker has been shared between one of the local secondary schools and the church. No one imagines this to be anything other than the way things should be. Three years ago, a survey of the parishes in the Diocese of Norwich revealed that two thirds of them valued their connection with their local schools, whether church schools or not. As well as being part of the

routine ministry of the clergy, many lay people are involved, leading Open the Book, for example. Routine school services in parish churches have increased significantly in the past decade, reflected in the annual statistics now gathered. Again, this seems a rather traditional dimension of 'low establishment' which has been given new energy. There are many examples of non-Anglican churches engaging with their local schools, of course, and in the Roman Catholic tradition schools have been highly significant but with a very definite focus on Catholic families first. The culture of the Church of England and its sense of responsibility for everyone in the community – over-weening though it could be in the past – has found a new vigour in our changed times. And it creates just the sort of assumptive connection that lingers if encountered early in life.

Thirdly, there's the wider sense of service which the Church of England shares with other churches and which isn't distinctive to it alone but gives added strength to Anglican engagement in all this 'extra stuff'. By this I mean the major impact of Faith in the City and the Church Urban Fund renewing the social engagement of the Church in the cities which has flowed into more rural areas too. Food banks were once an urban phenomenon but are now found in the countryside. The engagement of some small rural churches with Christian social action agencies has focussed on drug culture in sparsely populated areas. The way in which 'county lines' have affected young people in places like Norfolk and Suffolk has been significant. The Christian social action agencies established in the last 30 years in Norwich alone and which deal with homelessness, drug abuse, sex work, unemployment and other social issues have been numerous. The social fabric would collapse without them. Much of this has been done at an ecumenical level. This is one of those areas where other Christian traditions, especially the new Pentecostal churches, have taken on and inhabited dimensions of Anglican 'low establishment', and helped to rid it of a paternalistic culture. Their energy and vision have sometimes made parish churches which thought the problems were too great for them to address become braver in inhabiting their own tradition.

The establishment of the Church in England is frequently through to subsist in the presence of bishops in the House of Lords, the monarch as the Supreme Governor of the Church of England and the way in which Parliament has to pass all Church of England legislation. Abolish such things and I expect the Church of England's understanding of herself would change. But the 'low establishment' I've described would not disappear quickly. What makes it challenging for parochial clergy is that this 'extra stuff', once the very meat and drink of Anglican parochial ministry, and which still makes such demands, now seems less cherished by the Church of England herself as an institution. The focus on new congregations, Strategic Development Planning and the worry about the Church of England's own numerical growth, may suggest that responding to the expectation of others, i.e.

one's parishioners who do not come to church, and which may not lead to rapid congregational growth, is not valued by an institution desiring to build congregations rather than communities. Equally, asking the parochial clergy to set their own goals in their Ministerial Development Reviews suggests that they should impose upon their parishes and congregations their own aims rather than simply discovering what the expectations are and seeking to meet them with the resources of the Gospel. I think this is what causes a lot of clergy stress, perhaps especially among those clergy who want to respond in both directions and find themselves pulled apart. It may apply to bishops too, especially in those parts of England where the bishop isn't simply seen as an ecclesiastical cultic figure but genuinely expected to have a role in the wider community.

At my last Diocesan Synod in October – the last Diocesan Synod of my whole life – I explored some of these tensions in parochial ministry and the life of the Church of England more generally. The continuing expectations of 'low establishment' exist alongside the explicit call to 'intentional mission'. We cannot ignore the fact that, as the Archbishop of Canterbury comments frequently, you are 8 times more likely to go to church if you are over 70 than if you are under 30. The demographic challenge is visible in many congregations.

Hence, I would not want you to think that I believe all the developments around 'intentional mission' are mistaken. In 2007 a programme called *Committed to Growth* was introduced in the Diocese of Norwich. Every benefice was urged to develop a growth plan and given a basic framework for it. They were to seek growth in discipleship, in service to the community around, and in numbers. A great deal was left to local initiative. At the heart of this was the recognition that Christians need first to deepen their discipleship in Christ, and then serve their communities before any hope of growing numerically might emerge. Discipleship, service, growth: that seems to be the pattern of growth in the primitive church and it does seem to have had a positive effect upon the statistics in the diocese of Norwich. *Committed to Growth* also allowed the parishes to celebrate what they were already doing. It wasn't always about doing something extra. But it did help people to see the connections between house groups and bible studies with support for the food bank or the local homeless charity. Norwich has seen the creation of resource churches, Church Army mission centres, Church Urban Fund community workers, pioneer ministers and mission enablers. There has been no shortage of 'intentional mission'. But I believe the terminology is misleading. For whose intention is revealed in mission? It's the mission of God in which we participate. God certainly sends us into the world in mission but it's his intention in Jesus Christ that's central to it, not ours. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son…' (John 3.16). It is intriguing that it's the cosmos that's named there. God did not so love those who believe in his name or the Church or all

humanity but the world, the whole created order, everything that God himself had brought into being. Seen in those terms God's mission is much greater than the building of congregations, essential though they are as places of explicit response to the saving work of Christ.

The phrase 'intentional mission' is sometimes contrasted with another, 'inherited church'. This frequently seems to possess a rather derisory connotation as if the inherited church is some sort of burden from the past, a left over from the days of Christendom, an empty shell of establishment assumptions. Yet the expectations of the Church of England and especially of the vicar or rector can be considerable over whole swathes of England. Perhaps I'm particularly sensitive to 'low establishment' since I was born in a Congregationalist manse. In my early life I observed my father serving the needs of his congregation and building it successfully. While he did engage with the wider town as a Rotarian and in similar ways, his relationship to the community was one in which there were scarcely any expectations of him as a result of his role and office alone. Expectations grew as people got to know him and put their trust in him. They were expectations which came from making connections, the very things which pioneer ministers and mission enablers nowadays regard as rather novel.

When I reached secondary school age my father was ordained in the Church of England. I could immediately see he was doing a related but very different job. Through the occasional offices he spent most of his time ministering to people who didn't come to church. In those days as a curate he went to the hospital every week and visited everyone who had registered as C of E, whether they wanted a visit or not. Data protection was unheard of. I did much the same as a curate when I was ordained in 1975.

Living in a vicarage rather than a manse was different too. A village fete in the garden came as a surprise. When the roof of the parish church needed to be restored a letter was sent to every person in the village asking them to contribute on a weekly basis. Over half of the regular contributors never came to church.

I lived through this without much reflection at the time but I did realize the Church of England was there for everyone, and not just for the congregation. It was an explicit place of response to the gospel – that was what worship, corporate prayer and fellowship were all about – but it was very clearly a Church which served the world that God so loved.

Someone else who grew up in a non-conformist environment and yet became a priest of the Church of England was the late Wesley Carr. Not many people observed his origins in the Salvation Army by the time he was Dean of Westminster. His published works such as *Brief Encounters* on the occasional offices or *The Pastor as Theologian* or *The Priestlike Task* explored the nature of Christian ministry from an explicitly Church of England perspective. The responsibilities of the parish priest reflected those of a National Church with responsibility to minister to a whole population. Wesley Carr contended that the primary task of religious institutions was to help contain and then explore irrationality and dependency. Those very words – 'irrationality' and 'dependency' are controversial since they can be characterised in contemporary society as pathological or immature. In Wesley Carr's understanding irrationality related to ideas which transcended human knowledge. Dependency was his shorthand for the way we deal with emotions such as fear, love, grief, guilt and anxiety. He believed our churches were places to explore ideas about the divine which transcend human knowledge while providing a healthy context in which to understand and interpret the experience of being dependent on each other and on God.

Put another way, Wesley Carr believed a major function of the Church of England was to bring people together, nurturing their inter-dependency in the Body of Christ and organising them around their response to the transcendent. He argued that the leaders in these institutions, primarily the ordained minsters, operate on the boundary between the Church and the wider world. Thus they need to develop an interpretative framework, what Wesley Carr would call a 'stance'. The ritual and symbols of Christian faith, as employed in the Church of England, facilitate both the public and private means by which some of the most demanding feelings and experiences around dependency and our search for meaning can be dealt with in a constructive way rather than simply become chaotic. This illustrates why Remembrance Sunday has become so significant. It provides the ritual and symbols which enables a public and personal means of responding to the confusion and helplessness of a world in which war and the death of the young in conflict creates bewilderment. It provides a positive vehicle for the quest for meaning. Remembrance Sunday doesn't answer every question about war, grief and commemoration. But it does provide something to be done and a means of apprehending a larger narrative which may contain and illuminate our own life story. Remembrance Sunday also acknowledges complexity. There's a public refusal to allow easy answers. That's why we use the rituals and symbols of religion in the context of the National Church. The service in St Paul's Cathedral after the Falklands War in 1982 was controversial because simplistic expressions about victory were moderated within a public ritual. The service allowed a more complex expression of the conflicting feelings of grief and anger which existed alongside

recognition of the achievement of the Task Force and military victory. Wesley Carr was himself at the centre of one of the most watched funerals of all time – that of Diana, Princess of Wales, at Westminster Abbey. That service sought to hold both irrationality and dependency, as defined earlier, at a time of intense national grief and bewilderment. These are occasions when the value of the Church of England in its national and established role seems taken for granted by the whole nation. It's intriguing, for example, that in the United States it is the small Episcopal Church which has created the National Cathedral in Washington and which seeks to do some of these things for America as a whole.

An intriguing development in the media in the past couple of decades is worth brief reflection. Whenever there is a local tragedy which gains wider attention, the local vicar or rector seems to be sought out for comment about whatever dreadful thing has happened. Then it's usually said that special prayers are being offered in the parish church. Elected political leaders are rarely turned to at times like this. Mayors and local councillors are not usually seen as spokespeople for their communities. 'Low establishment' is vividly displayed here. And it's one area where there is now less turning to the hierarchy. In the days when I was Chaplain to the Archbishop of Canterbury there were large services at which the Archbishop preached following the Zeebrugge disaster, the Hungerford massacre and the Marchioness tragedy on the Thames. They quickly followed one after the other. In 2001 it was the parish church in Soham and the ministry of Tim Alban-Jones, the vicar, which gained the attention of the world's media after the murder of the two young children in that Fenland village. Much earlier, in the North Sea flood of 1953 307 people were killed in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex. On the 50th anniversary in preparation for a special service I was intrigued to discover from researches in the Eastern Daily Press that no comment seems to have been made at the time by the bishop or local clergy nor, as far as I can tell, did any commemorative act of worship take place. This was confirmed by some of the elderly people I met who were bereaved as children in 1953. 'We were just expected to get on with life.' They were hardly likely to put their experience into Wesley Carr's terminology but the Church at the time did not offer them a means of exploring dependency and irrationality. That made the experience more chaotic than it needed to have been. It felt as if what we were doing was 50 years too late.

Wesley Carr collaborated frequently with Ed Shapiro, a psycho-analyst and Professor of Psychiatry in the United States. Their common interest was Group Relations Theory. In an essay honouring Wesley Carr Ed Shapiro noted that when speaking to congregations Wesley frequently used stories to communicate the ideas he wanted to present. Ed Shapiro himself offered a story about Tom, a black social worker and lay minister in his local church. He was on a bus and a group of black

teenagers were harassing the white bus driver. None of the white passengers moved or intervened at all. As things got worse Tom felt he had to get up and speak to the teenagers about the dangers of their behaviour, given the current tensions in society. He asked them if they could contain themselves. This they did. But Tom thought to himself 'why do I have to do this?' and then he commented 'I did not like the role I was in.'

I think that's how parochial clergy sometimes feel. Ed Shapiro characterizes it as being 'lost in familiar places'. Public ministry is not always comfortable but there is sometimes no one else given the interpretative task or who possesses even a vestige of the authority of the vicar at both a private and public level. This is not all the result of being the established Church, of course, but the territory of the Church of England is one in which expectations from the wider community are still considerable. Without an interpretative framework the stress and demands of this 'extra stuff' are likely to be felt even more keenly. At the moment I don't think the Church of England as an institution provides such a framework and sometimes adds to the tension by scarcely acknowledging its necessity. The 'low establishment' experienced in parochial ministry has not disappeared because the human needs it seeks to address will not vanish. And that is especially the case in the age of Brexit in which irrationality and dependency have been so vividly on display.