

Editorial

The ongoing saga of Lincoln Cathedral is a marvellous object lesson for anyone who wants to reform the Church of England's antiquated structures. Anyone familiar with the Barchester Chronicles can just imagine what the place must be like. In such a situation, all appears to be well until the moment that some dreadful thing happens which cannot be concealed. In Lincoln's case, it was a tour of Magna Carta to Australia – badly planned, badly marketed and all the rest of it – which finally made the wider world sit up and take notice. An outsider was appointed to clean up the mess but without adequate support from outside. The new broom quickly became a universal target. For, in the small world of the cathedral close, the one talent which the inhabitants have in abundance is the ability to survive.

The story of Lincoln can be repeated countless times throughout the Church of England. Cathedrals, parishes, theological colleges, societies of various kinds – they all have a little world of their own in which they exist and, more often than not, they can carry on regardless of what the outside world thinks. Only in a time of crisis – a parish re-organization scheme, a threat of closure or of bankruptcy, a series of unfortunate deaths – is the pattern ever disturbed and then, more often than not, it is the would-be reformers who suffer, for daring to suggest that anything might have been wrong with the way things were done before.

The present writer worked in at least two places where similar, or even worse, conditions than those at Lincoln have prevailed and has sat on any number of councils and committees where the survival of the least fit has been the main aim of the entire exercise. Anyone of drive and efficiency has been hounded out, usually by dubious means which are disguised by those responsible, who say things like 'so-and-so is difficult, not a team player, could never quite fit in' and so on. That 'so-and-so' has also been pointing out shortcomings which need to be remedied if complete disaster is not to overwhelm the place is tactfully omitted from the explanation of why he or she had to go, and life goes on pretty much as before. Bishops are often uncomfortably aware of all this but their hands are tied. They have no right to interfere – especially in cathedrals – and even if they could, it is unlikely that they would be able to solve the underlying problems. For a set-up which runs autonomously with only a handful of people is always going to be exposed to the dangers of in-breeding, petty quarrelling and so on. Not even the Archbishop of Canterbury can change human nature! But our bishops are hampered in another respect as well. Their own positions, after all, have been acquired in archaic circumstances, nor are they really accountable to anyone. Very occasionally there may be

rumblings in the ranks, as for instance when 13,000 people signed a petition against the consecration of the Bishop of Durham in 1984, but the whole matter was dismissed by the authorities as being no business of anybody but themselves. Recipients of the future ministry were expected to do just that – receive it, with no questions asked. The closed shop could hardly be more firmly fastened than that!

Evangelicals might like to think that they are above such things, but anyone who has been involved with an evangelical society for any length of time will soon learn that they are no different from the rest of the Church. Indeed, in one respect they may be even worse than others, since Evangelicals have a way of excusing their incompetence and bad behaviour by ‘prayer’ and other pseudo-spiritual devices. Some of them are so good at this that they probably do not even realise what they are doing! It is true that every once in a while a new broom will be appointed to sort things out but the results are seldom what was hoped for at the beginning. Those chosen for the task either ‘go native’ and become as bad as their predecessors, or they leave in frustration after just a year or two in the job, or (worst of all) they slog it out in a spirit of increasing bitterness. Too often the only result is another failed experiment – proof, if any were needed, that change of any kind is best avoided if at all possible. If anything is ever to be done about this sort of thing, it has to start with a change of heart on the part of those involved. I have to understand that if I am appointed to a post it is because those who have appointed me expect me to do a job and to do it to the best of my ability – not simply to relax and find the easiest option for long-term survival. I should be able to welcome challenges and to respond to them, not simply treat them as threats to be repelled at any cost. Above all, I should realise that I am only one part of a wider fellowship, which may not need me nearly as much as I like to think. Finally, I should be open to the reactions of those whom I am called to serve. This does not mean that I should simply lie down and let them walk all over me but that I should be sensitive to their needs and to their outlook as far as I can be and ready to give an account of myself to them. If, in the end, they do not want me I should be able and willing to go elsewhere, in the best interests of all concerned.

For this to work, the example has to be set from the top. It is a hard thing to say but our bishops should ask themselves why they have so little influence and why the Church is held in such contempt by outsiders who see little more than their words and deeds reported in the Press. What an impression it would make, if some of our leaders could admit that they have not been popular choices or great successes and voluntarily take early retirement! Deans, Sub-deans, Canons, Incumbents, Principals of theological colleges, Heads of societies and organizations, Churchwardens – indeed, everyone in positions of responsibility and authority – should

seriously try to examine themselves, submitting themselves to God and awaiting his disposition. Scripture tells us that those who are called to teach will be subjected to greater testing than others and we must accept that there is no such thing as a free ride in God's service. Only when we become convinced of this ourselves and start to do something about it in our own lives and by encouraging and admonishing one another in the interests of the common good, is any long-term change ever likely to take place.

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