

EDITORIAL

CHURCH: THEOLOGY AND EXPECTATIONS

One of the singular blessings of theology is its ability to help one come to terms with reality. The fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War reminds us that the most unspeakable horrors of this century were perpetrated by the culturally most advanced nation of the day. Before the massive human carnage of both world wars, theologies wedded to the onward and upward progress of human civilization were exposed in all their nakedness. Nor have genocide and large scale liquidations of innocent men and women ceased in the post-1945 decades.

Yet this century has witnessed technical achievements of breathtaking sophistication, many of them in the service of healing the ills of human life. There seems no limit to the capabilities of *homo scientificus*, who at times appears truly godlike in the majesty of his dedication to improving our human lot. A theology which does not know both the divine and the demonic in history and present experience cannot cope with the way things are. A theological anthropology which does not recognize in humankind both a sovereignly competent creativity, spent so often in generous altruism, and the malicious ingenuity and heartlessness of depravity, two elements of which the twentieth century has been such a baffling compound, will not be equal to making sense of the world.

Nor is the need for a theology that can bear to contemplate the truth of existence any less urgent when ecclesiology is the issue. If one's beliefs about the church derive mostly from the era of Christendom, one can expect difficulties in living and working with a church stripped of serious public and national recognition. If one's dominant model of the church reflects the millennium and a half during which the civil and religious communities in Europe were roughly co-terminous with each other, one is likely to be ill-equipped to face the demands and pressures of being a minority church – increasingly disenfranchised or despised or – worst of all – simply ignored. And if one's training and expectation are predicated on the assumption that the local population, whether natural

community or official parish, wants the church and owes it a hearing and a living, one is theologically ripe for disillusionment. Except as an area of inescapable missionary responsibility, the parish has no theological status whatsoever.

It is more than a irony – a perceptive commentary on how church history has treated Scripture – that the Greek word from which ‘parish’ ultimately derives, *paroikia etc.*, in the New Testament denotes Christians specifically as temporary residents in an alien environment. This essentially pre-Constantinian perspective on the church’s relationship to the wider world cannot, of course, be transplanted to a post-Christendom context without anachronistic contortions. Yet it is salutary to remember with increasingly relevant attentiveness an era in which the church not only survived but grew and matured while utterly devoid of status, privilege and even legal protection. A theology that views the church as intrinsically distinct from the surrounding population, with possible consequences ranging from misunderstanding to persecution, promises to make much better sense of third-millennium realities.

The alternatives are worth recording. One is the hand-wringing dejection of the minister and members whose church is no longer appreciated as it should be by the people at large. A marginalized minority with no natural right to be loved and supported has no place in their ecclesiological self-consciousness, and hence their sense of hurt bewilderment. And such offended sensibilities will scarcely put them in the best mood to embark on evangelizing the parish.

The other response is the reverse of such resignation. It is in fact the perpetuation of an imperialistic Christendom mentality in maintaining the identification of the church with the broader community at the cost of the distinctiveness of Christian faith and life. Such a response to galloping church decline is a deeply insidious temptation for a national church that remains so only in name. It is no less than the aspiration to retain the church’s national character at the expense of its church character. If given its head, it will persuade the church to revise its ethical and disciplinary and even doctrinal standards in the interests of ‘keeping in touch with’ society.

Such a motive may rarely be spelt out in so many words. Most revisionists would vehemently disown any objective of

‘swimming with the tide’. But the experience, over hundreds of years of history, of being a church whose identity and fortunes have been inseparably tied up with the nation, is so deep-rooted in the ecclesiastical psyche that it instinctively reacts to preserve this bond whenever it is threatened. In both England and Scotland churches whose national appeal is but a shadow of its status on paper are struggling with issues of marriage and sexuality in arguments that often obscure the critical dimension of ecclesiology – often but not always, for the Archbishop of York openly asserted that unless the Church of England changed its attitudes towards divorce, it would lose touch with the people.

Within the context of similar debates in the Church of Scotland, similar inclusivists considerations lie just beneath the surface. The traditional Christian ethic that sets sexual intercourse solely within heterosexual monogamy is so widely ignored that (so the reasoning goes) unless the Church becomes more flexible, hardly anyone will be listening to it. It is the argument of this editorial that the factors undergirding such thinking include the ecclesiological assumption, perhaps in part unrecognized, that remaining the church of the Scottish people must take priority over fidelity to the church’s apostolic credentials. And so by hook or by crook the endeavour is on to baptize sub-Christian morality.

But the implications of freeing your doctrine of the church from the tenacious associations of Christendom or the Christian commonwealth are far-reaching in many directions. They impinge on the discipline of administering baptism, and on the determination of priorities in managing money, personnel and property. Activities and organizations and structures and expenditures that may have been highly appropriate in a church serving a Christian population may be no less incongruous in a minority church. The latter is likely to be a church stripped down for mission; the former, in a tireless quest to remain relevant and loved amid a largely non-Christian population, may find its energies and resources channelled increasingly into anything but local-church-based evangelism. It will mainly depend on our doctrine of the church.