

On Loving the Church – The Sunday after Justin Welby’s resignation, 17th November 2024

It might be an odd week to say this in, and it might sound odd whatever the week, but I love the Church. The much derided church. With its liturgy, its sacraments, its tradition, its arguments. The way we all come together to hear the Bible and wrestle with it. Our great hymns, the beauty of this building, the simplicity of the Tin Church. All of our complex history. The great figures who inspire me; and even you here in the pews this morning. I love the Church. And not just love in some strained, theoretical sense – no: I actively like being here, enjoy it here, draw life and strength from being part of this church.

And that is not just some odd psychological twist of mine, that I’m the kind of person who likes rituals, likes belonging, likes tradition. I am indeed that kind of person. But there’s much, much more to it than that. Fundamentally, it’s a conviction about God. It’s the belief that He chooses to give Himself, first and foremost, through this bundle of things we call the church: through the sacraments, through his word preached, through his apostolic ministry, through each other as we get along and try to love each other, and let ourselves be loved. Put yourselves here, says God, be part of this, and then you’ll be caught up in my life. This is where you’ll find me – not sitting by yourself, alone, thinking great spiritual thoughts – no: here. With each other. And above all in this: hearing the scriptures together, taking communion together. This is where it all happens. This is where the life flows.

That is why, for mainstream Christianity, Church and sacraments have never been some kind of optional extra. The idea that one could be a Christian without being part of the Church, and without taking part in the Eucharist, would have been deeply strange to nearly all the early Christians. As one of their traditional sayings put it: if you don’t have the Church as your Mother, you won’t have God as your Father.

Now, there are lots of debates about what exactly that means, and in what sense it might be true. Those are for another morning. Today, I mention it because it drives home what a complete and utter catastrophe it is when the Church goes terribly wrong. When in the place you should find God, you find perversion, abuse, dishonesty, callousness, contempt, viciousness. When you come to the well, looking for living water, and you find it blocked up by a rotting carcass.

You will all have heard, I am sure, of Archbishop Justin's resignation last week. Behind that resignation there lies a catalogue of awfulness. It begins back in the Seventies and Eighties with savage beatings of boys by a sadistic pervert, John Smyth, who posed as a respected spiritual leader on youth camps. It was soon known about, and investigated, by a group of Church of England ministers, who then covered it up. Who thought, in the words of one, that 'it would do the work of God immense damage if this was made public.' None of these ministers, incidentally, was ever subject to any kind of discipline – despite their conspiracy, in some parts of the Church, being semi-public knowledge for years. They shipped Smyth off to Africa, without properly warning the Africans, and so he continued to beat and flog for decades. Black boys, perhaps, don't count quite so much. One died in circumstances that have never been properly investigated.

In 2013 Smyth came back on the Church of England radar again, when an English victim made a formal complaint. Not much happened. It was – sort of – passed to the police, and then, pretty much, dropped. There was no real interest in what the police were doing, no loud alarm bells rung in Africa, and no obvious care for the victims here. And now, in a pathetic final twist, it has even been suggested that the Church might not offer those victims compensation, because apparently he had nothing to do with us. Even if that were true, which it isn't, it completely ignores the cover-up, which allowed that abuse to go on, which told victims they did not count, and which was carried out by Church of England clergymen. There's no escape. This is a Church of England disaster. Our disaster.

And as such, of course, it comes on top of so many others. The list is depressingly long. It grows every year, and is from all wings of the Church. Even locally, of course, we have had Soul Survivor Watford; and we have had our own problems here, in this parish. These cases are very different, of course. *Very* different. But there is the common theme of the Church, and especially its clergy, damaging people. Of people who came to the well, looking for the living water, and who ended up being manipulated, hurt, wrecked. Of people who came for grace, and found a carcass. Who went away with their lives fouled.

So how can I, or any vicar, stand in church this morning and say, 'this is the well. The living water is here. Here you can drink God. Here He is, given for you?' Surely, sometime, we get to the point where that well has been so choked with human filth, that all we can do is walk away? How can any minister tell you to stay?

Well, not by telling you that things aren't as bad as they look. They are.

And not by telling you that times have changed, that safeguarding is done way better now, that lessons have been learned, and that a Smyth could never happen now. Things *have* got better, and I genuinely think abusers will find life in Church more difficult now than once they did; but only a fool could say there will be no more horrors, no more victims. The entire history of the Church tells you otherwise. As long as people are sinners – as long, that is, as the world endures – this kind of thing will happen.

The only good reason I can really give you to stay is the old reason, the original reason. We have done our best to poison the well, but the living water is still here. Jesus Christ is still here, sparkling and fresh. Jesus Christ still promises to reach out, through what we do here, through the Bible, through the sacraments, through each other, and yes, even through his compromised and sinful clergy – and He still promises to be real and to act. The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us, and He did not give up when flesh proved to be weak and corrupt and sinful. Jesus Christ plunged himself down into all the murk, all the sin, all the deadness. And He put Himself there precisely because He is the one, the only one, whose life is strong enough, pure enough, God-enough to burn through all of that, to be at work despite it, to rise through it, and not be choked.

So to that question, doesn't there come a time when the well is *so* poisoned that we need to walk away, the answer is actually: no, there doesn't. We're talking about God here. There is no pollution, no sin, no nothing, which is capable of cancelling his presence at the heart of the Church. There's nothing we can pour into his well, which He cannot take and work round, work through, work despite, nothing with which He cannot deal. There is nothing which can overcome Him. This is the only sense in which the Church is, indeed, infallible – God's promise to be here, and work here, will never, ever fail. We can break all our promises; He will never break His. Even the clergy are, quite simply, incapable of stopping up the well. The living water will rise.

That is not to say that clergy being bad, doesn't matter. It does, immensely. You, rightly, look to us to be examples, to – at the very least – be people of integrity, trying our best to live the Christian life. And our responsibility is not just to you, but to God: who wanted us to be part of the way He worked, who put so much trust in us. What we do, and how we fail, matters. Really matters. And that means that sometimes suspensions and resignations and prohibitions are what have to happen. That's why Justin was right to go this week – and why, surely, others are going to have to follow.

And yet, and for this truly thanks be to God, the quality of your clergy, the morals of your clergy, even the basic human decency of your clergy, is not the most important thing. The living water, doesn't depend on priests. Doesn't depend on me, doesn't depend on Justin Welby. God called us to help, and that is wonderful. But if we don't, He will work anyway. It's Him you come to receive from, not me. Not Justin. It is Him we all depend on. It is Him who has promised to be here, in his Church, giving Himself to us. And it's Him, despite all our failure, who will keep on doing so.

To Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.