

Success, Failure and Fruitfulness – a Reflection

In a few days' time I shall celebrate the 40th anniversary of my ordination as deacon. After I was ordained at the age of 24, I used to wander into clergy chapter meetings and think to myself just how old, weary and slightly stooped most of the clergy looked. I used to presume it was the dispiriting effect of working really hard and yet having seen thirty years of gentle but relentless decline in the measurables that people usually refer to, such as the ABC of attendance, buildings and cash.

When I was ordained I had great hopes of seeing spiritual renewal and growth in the Christian church in my generation. Forty years on, it hasn't quite happened. I have had the immense joy of seeing individual lives changed by the Gospel and some pockets of renewal and growth in churches I've helped lead, but it has been against a continuing national picture of steady decline in those same measurables. Over the last forty years there have been regular prophetic words about a new era of revival or spiritual outpouring just around the corner, and increasing priority and resourcing have been given by the national church to the elusive goal of growth.

However despite all the talk about renewal and growth, most clergy live with the reality of caring for shrinking and aging congregations and the gradual erosion of the space for faith in the public square. As clergy we can also face quite personal attacks; we live in a blame culture and disappointment about lack of growth can so easily turn into destructive criticism of those in leadership. Over the last 40 years I have seen several faithful and gifted friends leave ordained ministry altogether, which grieves my heart.

God is not impressed by the things this world sees as success. As I look back in church history, whenever the church has enjoyed the trappings of success, and has had great power, privilege and wealth, it has not used them well. It has too easily compromised with Caesar, and used its power to cover up its moral failures. By contrast, whenever the church has been pushed to the margins of society, there it has transformed the lives of those Jesus cares about most, the poor, the lost and the broken. It is where we see the church in all its fragility and frailty that we can see God at work most clearly. Indeed, 'We have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.' (2 Cor. 4.7)

I also think, with some self-awareness, that if I had led a high-profile career and had seen great success in spiritual or worldly terms I would not have handled that well. It would have brought out the worst sides of my character and I would have found it impossible not to make compromises along the way, to claim at least some of the credit for myself, and to cut some corners. That self-knowledge makes me pray with greater empathy for those who must bear the weight of leadership in church and state today.

As I look at the church, on some days I am discouraged, but on other days I am profoundly hopeful for the future. The Gospel is still true. Lesslie Newbigin, the great missionary theologian, was once asked, 'What gives you hope for the world?' He replied at once, 'that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead'. I am also heartened to see such a variety of new local congregations started by prayerful, enterprising, ordinary parishes.

Another thing that gives me hope is the injection of new life into our parishes through immigration. The conversion of England in the Dark Ages came about through the arrival of Christians from overseas on fire with the Gospel of Christ, such as Columba, Queen Bertha and Augustine. It seems God is blessing his church for its costly commitment to overseas mission in

previous generations by bringing to our shores today a wave of global majority heritage Christians whose infectious faith, often forged in suffering, will renew the church in England in the 21st century.

In a few days' time I shall be in the cathedral where I was ordained, presenting a new cohort of candidates for ordination. As I enjoy talking to these ordinands, I wonder wryly what they think when they meet clergy like me in our 60s today. I also wonder what kind of Church of England the younger candidates will hand on when they retire in forty years' time.

The answer to that question depends at least in part on how well those of us in our 60s hand on the baton - whether we keep sharp spiritually, sowing the seed of the Gospel prodigally and interceding fervently, or whether we allow ourselves to gently coast to retirement on a wave of apathy or disillusion.

Whether the church grows in **numbers** in the coming decades is up to God – we can and should sow plenty of seeds and water them, but it is God who makes them grow (1 Cor. 3.6). However whether the church grows in **faithfulness** to Christ and in Christ-like service to the world is very much up to us. My prayer for those being ordained this year is that they will be both faithful to Christ and faith-full in terms of believing in the power of God to transform both lives and communities.

And my prayer for those of us in leadership in the Church of England is that we will move away from our anxious preoccupation with the ABC of attendance, buildings and cash, and focus instead on what growth in faithfulness might look like for the church today. Graham Tomlin helpfully argues (in 'The Provocative Church') that a truly evangelistic church should be looking for a very different 'ABC' of growth, seeking growth in

- Adoration – worship that glorifies God and draws us to God
- Belonging – building one another up within the Body of Christ
- Compassion – for the poor and for creation
- Discipleship – disciplined lives shaped by the Scriptures
- Evangelism – putting the Gospel into words

To these five helpful signs of spiritual fruit I would add a sixth:

- Faith-filled expectancy – faith to ask big and expect big things from God.

Too often we are afraid to ask big in our prayers of intercession, for fear of disappointment. Yet consistently Jesus exhorts his hearers to greater faith and is hindered in performing miracles by the lack of faith he encounters. Too often we do not receive because we do not dare to ask. I remember John Wimber teaching years ago, 'Healing is God's work. By no means everyone I pray for gets healed. But I know that the more people I pray for, the more people will be healed.'

As I look forward to the next decades of my own ministry (up to and after 'retirement') I turn back again to the parable of the Sower, once described to me by a friend as 'the patron parable of the parish priest'. My prayer is that I continue to have the courage to sow the Gospel prodigally, not being discouraged by the reality that most seeds will be either trampled underfoot or choked by weeds or drought, but instead rejoicing that where it does bear fruit, the fruit will be out of all proportion to the particular seed we have sown. 'Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times.' (Mark 4.8)

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