

TOWARDS A THEOLOGY
OF
THE PEOPLE OF GOD

OUR STORY

The Rt Revd Bill Ind

When the great Israel Baal Shem Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Maggid of Mezeritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: 'Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer.' And again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Moshe-Leib of Sassov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: 'I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient'. It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Israel of Rizhin to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: 'I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is tell the story, and this must be sufficient.' And it was sufficient.

Elie Wiesel, Souls on Fire (1972, Penguin 1984.)

It is easy to forget the significance of the fact that the Bible is full of stories, written down at different times, and told from particular points of view, but still stories. This tells us something about the character of the God with whom we have to do. The overarching theme of the Bible is how the life of God becomes involved with ours. It is the story of a relationship of many moods: anger, tenderness, love, and frustration, to name a few. But above all it is about God's faithfulness. He will not let us go.

The significance of naming

That, I am sure, is the significance of God telling Moses his name in Exodus Chapter 3. Once a person's name is known, the relationship with them changes. A relationship without a name inevitably means some sense of distance. Naming the name is necessary for closeness. It makes for a greater sense and intensity of presence. Naming makes true encounter and communication possible. God has a name so He is accessible and committed to the relationship, but more than that; naming involves historicity. Anyone whose name is known is part of that community which uses the name. God's own history is thus intimately integrated with the world of God's own people in particular, but never *just* with them. In addition, by this transcendent act of naming Himself, God becomes vulnerable. In giving His name, God becomes available to the world and is at the disposal of those who can name the name. It involves risk, because of course it means that, not only can the name be honoured and hallowed, but also that it can be misused and abused. So name-giving always carries with it the possibility of pain. The more intimate the

relationship, the greater the possibility of hurt. So for God to have a name entails the possibility of suffering. Indeed, what God already knew about people and the world and what has happened to the name, means God thereby chooses to assume suffering. In other words, within the Covenant relationship, which He makes with Israel on behalf of the whole human race, He expresses his utter involvement in the life of the world.

Our relationship to the story

Stories are told always from a particular point of view. We see things from a perspective, but stories always have the possibility to be seen or told in a different way. There is also another very important factor to be taken into account, and that is the kind of conversation which takes place between us and the story. The text of the story is set. It does not change, but experiences, thoughts, insights that we have, help us to see things in the story that were not there before. In other words, we bring our life to the story and that gives the story life for us. It is, I believe, by seeing that what we have in the Bible is the story of the People of God that we can effectively use it creatively, personally and corporately. It always helps me to have a genealogical view of Scripture, that this is the story of the People of God; and because we also are the People of God, these people are relatives, and we have connections with them, and gain insights from them. More than that, we ourselves have the same faults and the same achievements that they have. My aim in this paper is simply to use parts of Scripture in a way that they enable us to hold up a distant mirror to ourselves.

Taking the long view

Telling the story in this way immediately throws up a question for us: Why so much emphasis on the Old Testament? What about the New?

There are three separate but related answers to this question. The first is that the Old Testament tells the stories of the called People of God, and covers in all a period of at least fifteen hundred years. We see this People in good times and bad, in sickness and in health. We are given a long view and it is this long view which we need at the beginning of the Third Christian Millennium. The New Testament, on the other hand, was written over a relatively short period of time. Scholars believe that by the end of the First Century AD all the books were written, or were in the process of being written. In other words, the Church was something new, something that had not been there before; the problem we face now, is of an ageing institution, of an institution which has to look at its life and its long history. We are helped to do this by the Old Testament in a way that we simply cannot be helped by the New. The experience of the called first People of God is one of the real resources we have, which we need to take very seriously. The second reason is that when we look at the New Testament, we see how much it refers back to the Old. It is important always to remember that Jesus himself was a Jew. More than that, there is not a book in the New Testament which does not have direct echoes from the Old. For instance, the name of Abraham occurs more than seventy times in the New Testament; it is there in the Gospels and the Epistles. It is used as an example of faithfulness and as a person who is prepared to risk everything. In the Epistle to the Hebrews, Chapter 11, the writer gives a description of the heroes and heroines of faith, beginning with Abraham, and ends by saying, “These were all commended for their faith, yet none of

them receive what had been promised. God had found something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect”.

If we simply use the New Testament and ignore or forget the Old, we are in danger of only hearing or understanding part of the story of Scripture. All melody and no harmony! One of the weaknesses of the Parish Communion Movement is that, for many, the Old Testament is more or less completely unknown (except for sections which Handel set to music!)

Thirdly, it helps us to think about our relationship with the Jewish people, the first called People of God. One writer has talked of a fault line that runs right through European culture, and is centred on the uneasy relationship between Jewish faith and Christian faith. By paying attention to the Old Testament as well as the New, we are playing our part in healing centuries of division and misunderstanding

Culture of dependence?

Newcomers to the Diocese of Truro who have come from urban or suburban parishes and backgrounds often comment about the clerical dependency of the whole Diocese. It is there in every aspect of Diocesan life. It is, however, a mistake to see it simply as an issue to do with the Church. It is, I believe, one of the main elements of Cornish life and culture. In other words, it is a social issue as well as a theological one. If there is an issue of clericalism to tackle, we need to see it as an aspect of a much wider social issue of a kind of paternalism.

Many see there is a victim culture, which shows itself in a love-hate relationship with paternalism. People feel,

quite justly, that everything is taken out of the County: tin, fish, milk, and, above all, people. There is the boast that at the bottom of every big hole in the world you will find a Cornishman; but the reason for that is that many have to get out, partly because of education and employment, but also to escape.

Even most of the industry that does remain, china clay, for example, is now controlled from somewhere else outside Cornwall.

And yet, in spite of all this, Cornwall and the Cornish people who remain have an attractiveness that makes people want to return time and time again. It is significant, too, that most Cornish people who have had to leave to find work want to return home, even if it is not possible till they retire. It is its own place, a special place, but with its own identity and history; but there is within all of this an ambivalence.

With a poet's sensibility that's what U.A. Fanthorpe felt when she wrote *Lostwithiel in February*:

Lostwithiel in February

Civil, unfriendly, they answer
Our questions with a small pause first
As if to say *Is this an interrogation?*

We blunder aimlessly round their shops,
Exclaiming and moving on. Who wants
Walking sticks, ammonites, books about Daphne
du Maurier

This time of year? It takes the huge
Communal chumminess of August to generate
Such off-the-cuff traffic. Here, in a quiet season,

So why is there this particular feeling about Cornwall and its history? And, once again, one of the ways of understanding it is by thinking about stories.

We have our personal stories, our town or village stories, our national stories. They are one of the ways in which we describe and define who we are; they give us a place and a purpose. But, of course, stories are always told from a particular point of view. Different people will tell the story of a particular event, in which they share, from their perspective and it will always have a different feel and emphasis.

Very often, though, one particular version of a story becomes dominant and other voices find it difficult to be heard. Perhaps the best example of this is that many of us, when we were at school, took a subject called British History. It told a particular story but, all too often, it was not British history at all; it was history told from the English point of view. How much of the history of Wales and Scotland were we taught, except the times when they were fighting the English, who always seemed to win in the end anyway.

And, of course, understanding this helps us to see something important and distinctive about Cornwall. The names of the towns and villages and churches, the standing stones, the Celtic crosses and the engine houses make it very clear that Cornwall is a place with its own particular history and identity. And yet its distinctive story has simply become part of the English story, featuring only with the Prayer Book Rebellion of 1549, and with the wealth created in the first half of the Industrial Revolution in the Eighteenth Century. In other words, it has simply become part of the national story, featuring as a footnote.

The Celtic distinctiveness

There is also a religious version of the dominance of the English story. The common belief and understanding is that the whole process of the christianisation of England began with the arrival of St Augustine in 597. And yet we know that there were Christians in Cornwall at least a hundred years before that. Indeed, we know that there were three British bishops present at the Council of Arles in 314, though whereabouts they came from is unknown. They were, of course, Celtic Christians and, until recently, their story was known to comparatively few, and then mainly as full of quaint legends. What we are now discovering is how distinctive the Celtic influence was, and how much it has to contribute in trying to bring new life and vitality into our over-institutionalised Church.

Who tells the story?

The dominant story is always that of the victor, always told with a loud voice, so that the other version is not heard; and the result of that is a feeling of being colonised, of being taken over, of being an object in someone else's history.

For instance, as we hear the stories of countries which were once part of the British Empire, especially perhaps Ireland and India, and we hear their stories told from their points of view, it becomes clear that they have a different version of the tale to tell. Sometimes that tale is told with bitterness, anger, and regret, sometimes affection and even nostalgia; but, always, the tone of voice is different from that of the dominant story, and the feeling is there even when the story is unspoken.

A history of our own with God

I believe people need to be helped to see that they are subjects in their own story and not, as they all too often do, as passive objects in someone else's. To use a phrase of Moltmann, "Each of us has a history of our own with God". I believe that the goal of our ministry, individually and collectively, is to help people to know this and to explore it for themselves, to wonder at the great and mysterious opportunity of the life of each of us.

Inappropriate terms?

I believe in a fundamental way that we feed this clerical culture with the wrong kind of dependence by labelling people Laity or Clergy. It is inappropriate because lay in other contexts means a lack of expertise. It is contrasted with professional knowledge in the Law or Medicine, for example.

I believe that kind of language is fundamentally flawed, because the Priesthood is not that sort of job, even if in Victorian times it became one. Anthony Russell has written eloquently about the clerical profession and how this developed in the Nineteenth Century. It had to do with the kind of people who became clergy and their status in society, and not primarily with the sharing of the Gospel.

It is all too easy to minister as clergy into ways that feeds into people's felt needs for paternalism and clerical dependency.

Clergy have a particular responsibility and vocation and a particular knowledge and training, but all of us know people who are not ordained or trained whose knowledge of God is greater than ours, even though they may not couch it in theological terms. One ancient theologian was right when he said that anyone who struggles with prayer is a theologian. Knowledge of God and His purposes is a different kind of knowing from subjects like Medicine and the Law.

I am haunted by some words of John Taylor in one of his essays when he says that the Christian Faith is the most “clerically dominated of all the world Religions”. We need to remind ourselves, perhaps, that the word hierarchical is a word about priestly authority and power!

A new understanding of priesthood?

So how can we change this? I believe we need to have an understanding of priesthood, which comes from Scripture, which most of us have perhaps missed. I quote from John Taylor again; “ First, we can see the rest of Creation as a single whole, and be aware of it as an Other to ourselves. Here lies our likeness to God” and God saw it was good then God said, ‘Let us make man in Our own image and likeness.’ Humanity shares with God the capacity to know the wholeness and goodness of Creation. Humanity has a unitive vision of things. Human disobedience and alienation from God has put this vision of the whole desperately at risk. The Bible story shows how quickly things fell apart. Man became at odds with Nature; he was divided from his brother, nation set itself against nation, language cut people off from one another, and we suffer from four hundred years of analytical thought, until our knowledge has broken up

into so many specialisations that people have altogether lost the sense of any whole at all.

Secondly, we stand between God and that Other which we perceive as the Creation. We are but yet not contained within it: “Let us make Man in our image and likeness for all the fish of the sea, the birds in heaven, all wild animals on earth and all reptiles that crawl on the earth”. Human beings are creatures of the frontier, straddling the borders of flesh and spirit, time and eternity, in order to be the mediator, working with the Creator towards the completion of perfection of the Creation, standing within the Creation to offer it up in conscious gratitude and worship towards the Creator. “God blessed them and said to them, be fruitful and increase, fill the earth and subdue it, rule over every living thing.”

The unitive and the mediatorial tasks constitute the origin of all priesthood, seeing the Whole and serving its unity in order to lift it up to God and bring God close to it. That is the element of priesthood typified in the mysterious figure of Melchizedek who, according to later mythology, had no father, no mother, no ancestry, like Adam himself.

All who are in Christ, and in Him are made the new humanity, are called to exercise the ancient priesthood of serving the unity of all things and standing as mediators between that Wholeness, and its Creator.

Or, if you want it expressed in poetry, it is there in one of the great lines of George Herbert, about man who is the “secretary of God’s praise”.

The flawed nature of leaders

Perhaps an integral part of understanding something of the People of God is what Scripture and Tradition teaches about the nature of leadership. In the story of which we are part, God calls different sorts of people, but the extraordinary thing about Scripture is that it makes it clear always that the leaders are flawed, fallible people. The story does not conceal faults and failings but incorporates them into the narrative. Indeed what the story seems to suggest, in fact, is that God calls and chooses people for authority in the Church precisely because they are called to forgiveness in ways that do not protect them from further sin. So we should not expect perfect leaders in the Church, nor should we allow ourselves, or others, to project perfection onto them. The holiness of the Church is not the perfection of human nature; it is the forgiveness and sanctification of forgiven sinners. This should be clear and shown in the life and in the exercise of authority in the Church. It means that church people should expect more and less of their leaders. Less because we should expect them to fail in all sorts of ways. But more in the sense that we should expect them to be honest about their failings, and not attempt to conceal them. If this is to happen creatively it means that the People of God need to learn together and not see themselves as primarily clergy or primarily lay, but as people whom together, God has called.

All this is the significance of the first eleven chapters of Genesis. They set the context for the call of Abraham at the beginning of Chapter 12. In other words, the frame in which the whole of the story of the People of God is set, affirms that from the beginning God created and sustains the world out of love for the world, and not simply as the raw material from which to gather the Church. On the

contrary, the People of God in the Old Testament and the New were called into being that through it “all the nations of the earth shall be blessed”. Or, to put it in soundbite form, God called the People of God in order that *all* may know that they are God’s people.

If we have that view of priesthood as the basis of our thinking, we shall want to emphasise our oneness as the People of God, and not separate ourselves off into different classes and castes. We shall want to begin to wrestle with what the mysterious business of priesthood is for the whole People of God. In all of this, the Bible has a central place, but we need to be clear that a large section of the Old Testament has actually shaped our experience of Christian Faith as members of the Church of England in a way which most of us take for granted. It has shaped the expression of our faith and, above all, what it means to be an Established Church.

A model of church life from the Old Testament

Our model of church life, in fact, comes straight from the reign of King David, which occupies, quite literally, a central place in the Old Testament. Throughout Europe we can see that this Davidic Monarchy has been the model which has, in country after country, affected the shape and pattern of church life. In the Davidic Monarchy, there was at the heart of the nation a visible, acceptable, stable and well-defined religious structure with recognised, funded leadership. There were various shrines in different parts of the country but the heart of it all was the Temple and its priesthood in Jerusalem. There was a civic leadership in the role of the King who was at least publicly committed to the same theological position as that of the Temple and its Priests. Indeed, the

Temple functioned as a Royal Chapel, if you like, a sort of Westminster Abbey, or St George's, Windsor.

Now of course, with the exception of the Kings Hezekiah and Josiah, they did not behave in ways that suggest that faith was central to their lives! But they were at least publicly pledged to it so that a critical two-way conversation could take place and, of course, that has been so in our own nation over several centuries. So, in the period of the Davidic Monarchy, it did not seem odd that the priests were in the palace and it did not seem odd that the King should respond seriously to the finding of a Temple scroll. Some of them at least were interested in architecture and the built environment! In support of all this, there developed a group of people who were in part civic bureaucracy and in part a lobby for higher education. These people accepted the formal pre-suppositions of Temple religion, but at the same time they exercised considerable freedom and imagination, which drifted slowly towards autonomous reason and the support of the status quo. You will get the picture if you think of Sir Humphrey and 'Yes, Prime Minister'. He could almost have written part of Ecclesiastes and many parts of the Book of Proverbs. In other words, these ecclesiastical civil servants were in business to keep things stable and stop the boat being rocked. But at the same time as there was this religious government and religious establishment, there were also prophets with their uncompromising message, "Thus says the Lord". We need, I think, to take seriously the implications of the fact that the prophets were found in Israel at the same time as the Monarchy, and that the voice of passion is only viable in that kind of society, in social situations and circumstances which are in principle committed to the same conversation.

That stable, secure world, as we all know, came crashing down finally for Israel in 587BC and the results were profound: Where was God now? the Temple destroyed, people carted off to Babylon as slaves, all that people were used to, and had taken for granted, had been ruined. Even the places with which they had links in their past were far away from them. We can only imagine what it must have been like. Jerusalem was not just one more city. It was the Lord's own dwelling. But, of course, this period of the Davidic Monarchy was only part of the Old Testament story.

Before the Monarchy, there was the period of the Exodus and the journey in the wilderness, and the giving of the Law and above all, the figure of Moses. There is tension in the Books of Samuel about whether Israel should be a nation like other nations, whether there should be a king, whether a census should be allowed because only God should know the number of the Israelites, and also whether there should be a Temple; what the Israelites had done was carry God around in a tent.

The period following the Exile

There is much material for us to explore and think about, and relate to our own situation. But I believe more instructive still, as we think about the People of God, is what happened after 587 BC what is called by the scholars the 'Post-Exilic Period'. They had had their stability, their independence, their established religion, but now all that was taken away. Like us, they had had something and it was no longer there. So what can we learn from them? Most Old Testament scholars now believe that it was in this Post-Exilic Period that the Old Testament was formed and shaped in the way that we have it now.

There are things, perhaps, which we need to take seriously as we consider this Post-Exilic period. First of all the community of faith had to live in a context which had little influence over public policy. The community of faith had become politically innocuous and irrelevant. Also, after the collapse of the Temple and the traditions in life, which surrounded it, the disappearance of a distinct identity became acute. The social supports for religious practice were removed from all forms of religious observance. If a distinct identity was to be maintained, then it had to be guarded and supported in many new and different ways. First, the community had to work hard at preserving an infrastructure, which supported its distinctiveness. Israel was swallowed by a succession of cultures: Persian, Babylonian, Greek and Roman, all of which, in their own ways were universalising cultures, and were partly hostile to any difference or particularity. Judaism was allowed to continue but provided only that it did not over-stress its difference. Religion in other words was a private opinion and did not influence public policy. Finally, as I have already said, this period was when the story of the People God was written down. How were they to make sense of what had happened to them? This was a question which they all faced, and I believe it is in looking at that story that we shall get some clues for ourselves as we struggle with the idea of the People of God today.

The significance of the Book of Genesis

Very important in all of this is, of course, the book of Genesis. It is there at the beginning of the Old Testament, not because it was written first, but because it attempts to describe how and why the world was made

and how Israel came to be. In other words, it is about the founding of the People of God

We have got used to the fact that the book of Genesis is at the beginning, but we need to ask why this was, and what was the perspective that put it all together in the way that we now have it. One answer is that the People of God were still in a state of shock after the loss of their security and stability, the Temple and the land, which they believed that God had given them. They had lost their identity and the story in Genesis is told in such a way that Abraham, the Father of Faith, is shown as leaving behind all his security and setting out on a journey. He obeys a call without even knowing the name of God. He literally sets out on a journey of faith. So the People of God were constituted in insecurity and not in security.

A journeying people

As Walter Brueggeman says, “ The metaphor of a journey is a radical one. It is a challenge to the dominant ideologies of our time which yearn for settlement, security and placement”. This theme of journey is, of course, picked up in the New Testament, where the first disciples are literally followers of the Son of Man who does not have a place to lay His head. In addition, they are actually called in the ‘Acts of the Apostles’, the Followers of the Way. And perhaps most significantly of all, it is picked up in the Epistle to the Hebrews, Chapter 11, where Abraham and Sarah are presented as people who claim to no home. To quote Brueggemann once again, “The recital in Hebrews may be noted in relation to our passage for several reasons. First, such a pursuit of promise could never be one-generational. Each generation trusts that if the promises are not now

fulfilled, it will be given to the next generation. Thus the text stands in opposition to the one-generational ideology of our culture which demands everything now. Second, this Chapter is not simply a celebration of the great names of the past; it is an appeal for faithfulness in the face of present persecution. It affirms that the anti-promise mode of human community must be countered and resisted in a more powerful way of living.”

The ability to make the story our own

This version of the story was clearly addressed to Christians who were persecuted, but it is also addressed to us as we lose our own sense of security and wonder about our identity. In a way the story begins at Genesis 12:1 where Abraham is called by God to set out on a journey of faith. He is to set out not knowing where he is going or the name of the God who has in fact called him. He is called out from security to insecurity, from a settled to a nomadic life. Abraham is told that he will be blessed and that his name will be great. But also we are told that, in him, all the families of the earth will be blessed. In other words, the call was to him but for someone else and it is worth making the point that this is always the pattern of the call of God right through both the Old Testament and the New. It is interesting too, that this language about blessing can be translated in a different way: “through you all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves”. There is this ambiguity about the Hebrew text and it seems to me that both versions are worth considering, the latter because it picks up what Austin Farrer talked about, that is, the context of double agency. The way God makes things, and people, is to allow them also, then, to make themselves, and what this blessing gives us is the ability to make ourselves. It gives us our dignity; it makes us a subject in our own history.

This phrase, “Through you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed”, is a kind of theme tune of the People of God, which runs right through Scripture. It is repeated, for instance, four times in the book of Genesis, and then by Paul in the Epistle to the Galatians. It is, for him, the Gospel “beforehand”. This Good News is what God wills: life for all peoples, and it is a free gift for which none can “qualify”.

Sin and failure, personal and corporate

But later, in Genesis Chapter 12, verses 10 - 20, we get a quite different picture of Abraham; a man who is prepared to allow his wife to be taken off by Pharaoh to become one of his wives, and, in order to do that, Abraham tells Sarah to pretend that she is not his wife but his sister. In other words, a man who at the beginning of Chapter 12 was a hero, is now shown to have feet of clay. And then, in Chapter 13, we meet, for the first time, the People of God as a community, and the first thing that we learn about them is not that they are holy, not that they love each other, but that they cannot stand each other. That is the significance, I believe, of the row between the followers of Abraham and the followers of Lot. The default position for the People of God is that they row with each other. The history of the People of God is about division, and not unity. That is why so many of the letters of Paul are an appeal to unity, and for people to live in peace with each other. We need to take this very seriously, and to teach it as part of the Faith. We all need to understand that there has never been a golden age. In other words, from the beginning there was an ecumenical issue. How can we live with people who see things differently from ourselves, where they see themselves as part of the People of God. This, of course,

is directly relevant in our situation especially as new conversations between Anglicans and Methodists develop nationally. The face, and the whole shape and strategy of the People of God in Cornwall will be changed when our two Churches unite, and I say when and not if. It is not too early to be thinking about all of this at local level.

The People of God for the world

It is then followed by another event, which I think we actively need to teach about, and that is the extraordinary story of Abraham interceding for the citizens of the plain, which he does in Chapter 18. What we have here, I think once again very important for us, is the sense of Abraham interceding for God's beloved world, even the wicked parts of it. If we are to be the People of God, then we simply cannot opt out of the world and its problems. We cannot withdraw into ourselves, because it is for the sake of the world that we are called: "Pray with people sometimes, pray for them always."

The significance of sacrifice

And then, finally, in the cycle of Abraham stories, the mystery of being called to sacrifice Isaac, which remains one of the most haunting of all stories in the Old Testament. It reminds us all that from the beginning of the existence of the People of God, written in, as it were, to the very foundation charter, is somehow the idea of sacrifice, that is, of life laid down in order that more abundant life may come. It may be that if this is an integral part of our story, then we are called to think about being prepared to give up things which have been very important and significant for us. There is widespread agreement that there needs to be change, but

that will not happen without great cost. What is it that we are prepared to sacrifice in order that new life may come to us

Our spiritual DNA

I think we need to use these stories, and tell them to help Christian communities to see that these are stories about our family. Our spiritual DNA can be traced right back to them.

If these stories and their telling, and others like them, were shaped, as seems likely, by the experience of exile, they resonate with us in a very direct and particular way. In this country we have grown used to a civil society which is congruent with Christian life and faith. The Church has had a privileged, established place, but that is disappearing, and to be a Christian in a serious, committed way is now to be counter-cultural.

In the Exile, the Jews had to find a new way of being the People of God without any of the props and supports they had depended upon, and it was in this situation that they came to a deeper understanding of God's purposes for them.

The responsibility of the People of God

So there are many versions of the same story and, very often, when we hear, for the first time, a version different from the one we first heard, we see new depths and new meanings which were not there for us before. It is clear now, for instance, that Celtic Christianity has much to say both to a tired Church and to people who have never heard this particular story and way of believing in the Gospel. We need to explore our roots and be confident in

telling our version, the Cornish version, of the story. Cornish people and Cornish experience have their own tale to tell, and perhaps we can celebrate all of this next year, 2002, in ways that bring out the distinctive flavour and richness, and remind ourselves with pride that there were Christians here in Britain long before there was an Archbishop of Canterbury!

So we lay *our* version of the story alongside the others, knowing that it is not complete on its own but is part of the company of voices with which God is praised and glorified.

John Macquarrie says this: “Thus it was in the turbulence of the Post-Exilic time that the People of God came to have the noblest and profoundest understanding of its identity and destiny. It became clear, at last, that the special kind of peoplehood founded on faith was not bound to any natural community, to any nation, or to political institutions. It became utterly clear, also, that to be the People of God was not a privilege to be enjoyed, but a responsibility to be fulfilled”.

Distinction & distinctiveness within the People of God

Many priests today feel that their calling is not understood; it is taken for granted, even in the Church, and devalued. Many describe rushing around having to do a thousand things for which their training, and indeed their calling, have not equipped them. In the new situation in which we find ourselves, I believe that the feeding of the People of God, in Word and Sacrament becomes more important, rather than less. I wish to affirm clergy in their primary calling, which is to feed, to preach, to teach and to pray for their people, and to engage in the struggles and joys of their everyday lives.

This means that time for reading, reflection, prayer and growth in the spiritual life, for their own sake and that of their people, must lie at the heart of all they are to do and be. The trouble at the moment is that they feel they are distracted from this by the multiplicity of inappropriate demands which are all too often laid upon them.

It has been said that the role of the priest is to be Christ to the Church, and the role of lay people is to be Christ to the world. This is perhaps to overstate it, and to restrict the role of both, but the significant point is that the focus of those who are not ordained is *out* towards the world, not *in* towards the Church. The Church exists, not to be an escape from the world and its complexities, but to be the place where the world is offered back to God in all its joy and pain. Thus for the vast majority of church members vocation will be lived out at work, in school, at home in leisure. They will be nurtured and fed through word and sacrament and by their involvement in the mission of the church will help others come to faith. The role of those who are ordained, is to use the resources of the Christian faith in such a way that the Christian community is equipped to face with confidence, and begin to understand, where God is to be found, even in a world from which God appears to be totally absent, and therefore totally secular.

If we understand this, then collaborative ministry does not mean 'everybody can do everything now'. It does mean that all of us need to be aware, not just of our individual role, but our responsibility to the role of others. One of the great images of the New Testament is the Church as the Body of Christ; if we look at that analogy as St Paul does, and apply it, what we see is that all the parts of the Body have a different function, and the wellbeing of the whole depends on each part

exercising its distinctive role. Part of our problem in recent years is that we have used the language of collaboration loosely, so that essential distinctiveness has been obscured, if not lost. It is in this context that we each need to evaluate our role as part of the People of God.

Change or continuing dependency?

Bishop Roy has argued, in a paper approved by the Bishop's Council, that diocesan resources need to be developed from a concentration on providing training for ordained local ministry to providing training for ministry more generally in the diocese. This builds on our excellent and pioneering experience of Ordained Local Ministry. We all need training to see ourselves as the People of God, to know our story and see ourselves within it. I believe we have made an important start in our Diocesan Local Ministry Scheme, but as time has gone on I think it is now possible to see its shortcomings. There is no doubt at all that, as a result of the scheme, we have excellent local priests who have played an important and distinctive part in enriching the life of parishes. However, what they have not done is to change the pattern of clerical dependence. Indeed, through no fault of their own, in a way they have confirmed it. Once a parish has got its local priest, it has been able to carry on as before. It may well be the case that this was all that was possible in the early 1990's, but things have moved on since then, and they need to move on still further.

Before the ordination of many of the local priests I have spoken to them about the Local Ministry Scheme and when asked: "What has been the most valuable part of the course for you?" without exception they have replied: "The parish group." And yet, as soon as

ordination takes place, the group has ceased to meet, at least as an integral part of the Scheme. In other words, all the emphasis was on the training of the priest, and not of equipping the People of God in a particular place, to understand and to themselves be ministers.

Changing ministerial strategy

I believe in every benefice there are individuals, and indeed little groups, who, given the right framework, want to explore their own history with God. I believe this needs to be the central emphasis of our training and our ministerial strategy in the Diocese. We want to help people in parishes to know that they are the People of God, and that they are to be a channel of blessing to others.

I think if this is our emphasis, then out of this people will reflect on their life and its purpose, and some will perhaps offer for ordination. It is God who calls, and not us. Our responsibility is to provide a humus, a rich seedbed, out of which vocations may develop. And, once again, experience proves this in the majority of cases, men and women offer for ordination from parishes or communities where there is a rich, committed, Christian life

So, together, we work out what it means to be the People of God. That is our primary aim, believing at the same time that unexpected, uncovenanted things may happen. All that can be left to God. We can have as high a theology of the ordained ministry as we like, providing always that our theology of the People of God is higher and, more important still, we believe that God is greater than either, and is not limited by either, but works in His

own mysterious ways, and our vocation is to work with Him creatively.

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