

Two cheers for the parish

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I've been asked to speak about the parish style of Christian community, and its future, because of course parishes face a lot of challenges today. Still, I believe in the parish way of being Church: two cheers for it, I say. I'll tell you why I think two cheers are appropriate, and what might turn my confidence into a full-throated three cheers. To set the scene for my reflections, let me tell you about a day out that my wife and I had in Houston, Texas, in July, when we visited two very different chapels. I'll call this first section

Houston, We Have a Problem.

The first was the Rothko Chapel, famous among modern art enthusiasts. Mark Rothko, the mid-20th century minimalist painter, was noted for his large canvasses containing no representation at all—just large dark surfaces, differently shaded borders, and varied textural finishes. In the silent, spare, empty square box of the chapel—non-denominational of course—big Rothko paintings occupy all four walls, catching the shifting sunlight from skylights above.



As you sit quietly, the mood changes with the paintings, which are sometimes flat and expressionless, and sometimes glowing. They're intended to evoke something sublime, but beyond any sort of representation at all. These are religious paintings for a

spirituality without content or doctrine—only mystery, and a sense of bare transcendence suggesting itself to the patient and attentive.

Mark Rothko speaks for a typical modern experience, albeit one with several manifestations. People today are not typically crass materialists or purely hedonistic pleasure seekers, as some churchmen suggest. Many ordinary people claim a sense of there being more to life than can be weighed or measured. They find it in the elegance and joy and sometimes the glory of music and dance, of exhilarating sport and risky outdoor adventure, of love and sex and friendship when these transport you, of being creative and celebrating the creativity of others. It's found, too, in the ethical demands that so many ordinary decent people stick fast to, and where would we be without them?

Some people try to access this sense of mystery and transcendence through the spiritual practices that are available to us nowadays from many religions, while most seem content to sense the mystery and to honour it by living as well as they can. The limiting case of this modern sensibility is on show at the Rothko Chapel in its leafy Houston suburb.

A short walk from the Rothko Chapel is St Thomas' University, a Catholic college run by a religious order called the Basilian Fathers. On their campus is an architectural masterpiece called the Chapel of St Basil.



It's like a big white concrete tent that you go into through an open flap, and inside it's all modern.



But there are still the familiar markers of the people of God gathering to share and continue a story and a journey together. There is the font, where human life stories become stories of God with us. There is the altar, where God with us takes shape in the midst of God's people. And there is the place of the Word, with the scriptures open to summon God's people in their journey of knowing, loving and being converted.



There are the pews where God's people take their place by right in a community at once divine and human, with statues to remind us of the saints who stand with God's people in the Eucharist: St Basil, and of course the Blessed Virgin Mary. On the wall are modern stations of the cross, to draw the imagination beyond the self and into the mystery of God as Christ has embodied that mystery plain to see. There is deep silence, and mystery, as in the Rothko Chapel, but in the Chapel of St Basil it's a storied silence, and an embodied mystery—the sublime is not without representation.

Also nearby is one of Americas great museums of modern art, the Menil Collection, and there in a gallery of surrealists I saw a painting that helped me appreciate the difference between those two chapels that had been playing on my mind. It was by Giorgio de Chirico, he of the mysterious statues with their wrong-way shadows, and a spooky sense of something hidden. The picture was called “Metaphysical Interior with Biscuits”, with all sorts of weird stuff in the background and a box of biscuits open in the foreground.



The artist was playing off the mysterious and the un-representable against the recognizable and the everyday, and I immediately thought of the Eucharist, where the depth of divine mystery is reliably pressed into our hands Sunday by Sunday. Here was the difference between those two chapels: in one the mystery is evoked, but in the other the mystery is present, and it is represented, though never of course exhausted. We Christians with our parishes, our churches, our worship gatherings and our sacraments are in touch with the mystery in a way that is accessible and transformative. We have the metaphysical interior but we also have the biscuits.

My point is that for all the sublimity, mystery and obligation that modern people feel and acknowledge, which the Church ought to respect, nevertheless in Jesus Christ, in his sacraments and in his Church, what is unnamed and unfocussed becomes communal and urgent. And it's this reality that issues in the stable, habitual dynamics of parish life.

Can we hold onto it, or are we in danger of losing it? And if so, what might help us get it back? I'm going to address these questions, but first, what are some of the things that make parish life and its sacramental, pastoral rhythm seem alien, inappropriate and unhelpful even to many Christians? So in the next section I'm going to ask the question,

Are We Capable of Parish Life any More?

I've mentioned the unfocussed sense of transcendence that many people have, though the Church claims more than this. But of course many Christians in our pews aren't so different from the wider public, though perhaps they value the nostalgic connection with the past that churchgoing provides, and of course like everyone today they value a chance to find some friendship and social support. The Church is something you attend in response to habit or maybe in search of something missing in life, but it's rarer for our people to say confidently that they are the Church, and that through the parish and its worship they find privileged access to the living God.

Long experience of a lukewarm Church in the era of Christendom, when the institutional Church was caught up in the state and its agenda, led some saints to distinguish an invisible Church from the visible Church. Hence, a private Christian life with God apart from the gathered sacramental fellowship of Christians became conceivable, and such an understanding of being Christian is now widespread.

Even churchgoers can separate the most important aspects of life with God from the regular habits of worship together, without taking the corporate reality of Christian life as seriously as God takes it. Which reminds me of St Paul's warning, in 1 Corinthians 11, about the dangers of eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ together without discerning the body, and how the health of the Church is badly affected by this oversight. The widespread malaise in our local fellowships is perhaps the result of this same failing in our own day: we have not taken the importance of belonging together in Christ seriously enough, and have been content to use the Church as a resource or a meeting place without sensing the central importance of actually being the Church together. The fundamentally isolated modern Christian for whom Church is essentially optional can't make much sense of what happens in ordinary parish Christianity—its habits, its obligations, its everydayness. And our parish life is often sick and unattractive as a result.

As with Goldilocks and her porridge there is a too-hot and a too-cold solution to all of this. The too-hot one is the fundamentalist escape from a common, shared world of meaning into a kind of ghetto of the mind—into a sectarian way of being Christian. Christ is against culture, according to this view, and calls Christians away from the world. There is no compatibility here with the ordinary mixed bag of Christians distributed right along the spectrum of conversion that we know to be typical of parish life. So the sectarian, too-hot alternative means disrupting and overturning the parish if not simply abandoning it for something more intense.

Then there's the too-cold option. It takes various forms, but all of them tend to identify Christ with culture. When I was young it was middle class suburban respectability—the sort of thing that Barry Humphries has spent a lifetime getting over. More recently, as a tightly wound and rule-governed model of society has given way since the 1960s, a culture of therapeutic individualism has taken over. Where once Church commended itself rather smugly as a marker of social respectability, now it has to sell itself in the marketplace of service provision. The American sociologist Robert Bellah, in his influential book *Habits of the Heart*, traces this transformation in his own country, with the Church catering to the fellowship needs and personal quest for meaning that middle class society wants.^[1]

Yet communities of personal support, if that's what parishes are becoming, are fragile, since people's expectations are so high. It's like marriage today, to which people bring higher-than-ever expectations. The amount of conflict and breakdown in our marriages is matched nowadays by the amount of conflict and breakdown in our parishes, because we need and expect so much for ourselves from institutions that were conceived in quite different terms.

So what we're often left with in parish life is something that the writer of 2 Timothy, in chapter 3, was also familiar with: holding onto an outward form of godliness, while denying its power. We see this problem play out in the lack of mature regard that Christians ought to have for one another, between clergy and laity, and between bishops and their clergy. Even if we try to avoid it, anyone who has been around parish life can't help witnessing a range of behaviours and attitudes that are incompatible with Christian maturity. The letters of Paul and others in the New Testament warn against just these problems, so they're not new.

We witness dysfunctional agendas flourishing, with some who are anxious and controlling who rule the roost while others lack the confidence or else a sense of mutual obligation sufficient to stand up to them. We see un-self-awareness, stiff and unvarying self-presentation, and symptoms of codependency, with some preferring self-advancing sycophancy matched by adolescent-style rebellion from others. We see the widespread abusiveness that forces lay people out of the Church, and clergy out of the ministry, involving a terrible wastage among the little ones that God cherishes. And we find institutional cover-ups. The agility and curiosity and confidence that Malcolm Turnbull wants for our nation is what many of us want for our parishes, but there is evidence that a fearful lassitude is more typical.

Those whose attitudes and imaginations are shaped by the me-first agenda of consumer capitalism are too unstable and unsure of themselves to comprehend let alone succeed at long-term commitments, as much in parish life as in marriage. Yet the sort of therapeutic personal agenda that shapes our times is not ultimately going to deliver, leaving many people today in a mood of apathy, relieved perhaps by irony. As American Catholic theologian Russell Reno points out, it's not conversion that a therapeutic, consumer-minded Church wants.^[2] Yet it's only conversion and forgiveness that will set our hearts free, making the disciplines and habits of parish life possible for us. We'll explore those disciplines and habits, in a section called

The Distinctive Christian Habitus of the Parish.

Amid the too-hot and too-cold solutions, what might Goldilocks find in the parish? I suggest that a “just-right” solution is there if we want it. It’s tied to the uniquely Christian environment represented by local communities of word and sacrament, of fellowship and pastoral relationships. Here we’re not talking about Christ condemning and avoiding culture, or about Christ dissolving into culture, as if he has nothing distinctive to offer.

Here we find Christian life together under the guiding star of Christ’s incarnation: God in Christ blesses our world by abiding in it, experiencing its joy and sadness from within, knowing habit and discipline, laughter and conflict, all revealing God’s patient investment. Here we have the earthly city opening its heart and mind to the heavenly city, and the heavenly city drawing near to the earthly city. Here, in a global world of fast-moving winners and slow-moving losers, we rediscover the local, with a range of people we wouldn’t normally encounter.

Such an approach to Christian life and fellowship once came far more naturally than it does for us in the third Christian millennium. In the first millennium, being Christian was a far more integral reality. Our faith, our life and our worship were woven together in ways that seem very foreign today. Christ’s body was not divided. Christ himself was present in his body the Church, and present in his body and blood on the church altar—one Christ, one integral body. And that integral abiding manifested itself in the parish system, as a Roman Empire of provinces and jurisdictions was matched by a Church of dioceses and parishes. If no place or person was meant to escape the Emperor’s power, so no place or person could escape God’s grace.

The Anglican version of traditional Catholic parish polity emphasized this local belonging of Christians even more. We were not a confessing Church as the protestants tended to be. We were the traditional Church of the English people that had undergone some key reforms, yielding a result that was quite distinctive.

The identity of the reformed Church of England was found in the way it lived and prayed together locally, with a common form of life shared by the laity and their newly-married clergy, and with a common form of prayer intended to keep a range of doctrinal perspectives together in the one tent. It was not an ideological version of Church. Central to the Elizabethan Settlement of 1559 was the Queen’s refusal to make a window into men’s souls. Instead, if we could pray and live together, that was sufficient mark of our Christian seriousness.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that “He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.”^[3] The Anglican parochial system at its best is faithful to this prophetic challenge, in which the actual Church is what matters and not anyone’s preferred ideological version of the Church—a warning that Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics at their best have always respected.

But that was then; what about now? The challenge comes when we find ourselves inhabiting a flawed and disappointing institutional Church, or a parish that exasperates us. Many lay people give up on the parish and many clergy never stay long enough to eventually belong, until they can finally make a lasting impact. As I said earlier, we’re all

easily disillusioned with our Church life as it is. But there's something about this situation that's good for us as Christians, so that it's worth opening our hearts and minds to others and to God even in the face of dissatisfaction and setbacks. In other words, there's something about the parish that presents us with just the challenges we need to grow in faith and maturity, if we let it.

Martyn Percy, now the Dean of Christ Church, Oxford, provocatively says that in our Anglican Church we learn to sacrifice our attachment to purity and to cultivate good manners.^[4] We're not always right, and everything doesn't have to go our way. It's more important to honour the deep bonds of oneness in Christ that are declared at the font and the altar than to be right at the expense of someone else having to be wrong. I'm not saying that there are no rights and wrongs. What I am saying is that there's a right and a wrong way to go about disagreeing, and having to work towards that right way is good for us and for the Church. So the parish is like a gym, for developing strong Christian muscles through having to work with opposing forces.

For anyone who might want to protest at this point, "what about the Gospel, what about the truth?" the answer is that there's plenty of Gospel truth in the attitude that I commend. The Gospel is centred on God's unbreakable faithfulness, made flesh and sealed with blood in Jesus Christ. When we stick together and honour one another's baptism, which the parish makes us do, then we are being witnesses to this Gospel.

Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, was always struggling to commend this vision of sanctified togetherness in the face of many who wanted a purer, less compromised Church—whether they were vehement Evangelicals, affronted Anglo-Catholic traditionalists, or equally vehement and affronted gay rights activists. Dr Williams' steady, dogged perspective was widely criticized, even mocked, but then that's what happens to prophets when they speak God's word out of season.

In his essay "Nobody Knows Who I am 'til the Judgment Morning," Rowan Williams pointed out that we only become ourselves through our struggle with the other, and with the unsympathetic grain of reality.^[5] Everyone who has ever honed a craft in the face of difficulty knows this as a general truth, but some of us can testify to it as a truth of parish life as well. My decade as Rector of two parishes has shaped my life, taught me whatever wisdom I've attained, and confirmed my theological vocation—not bad for ten years that, by and large, were the toughest and one or two of them the most unpleasant of my life. Many clergy and laity could tell a similar story.

In his book of meditations, *Silence and Honey Cakes*, Rowan Williams identifies the actual Church's spiritual credentials in

the daily prayer of believers, the constant celebration of the Eucharist, meeting the same potentially difficult or dull people time after time, because they are the soil of growth. It insists that we go on reading the same book and reciting the same creeds...an inexhaustible story, a pattern of words and images given by God that we shall never come to the end of. ... In very unmagical settings indeed, inner cities and prisons, and remote hamlets and struggling mission plants, the church remains pledged; its pastors and people and buildings speaking of God who is not bored or disillusioned by what he has made—and so they speak of the personal possibilities for everyone in such a situation.^[6]

Such a perspective is refreshingly free of frustrated idealism; it's not scandalized by Christian ordinariness, even by sin. God is not fazed by us, after all, and doesn't give up on us for all our falling short. Yet parishes can be frustrating, occasionally dispiriting and even embittering. So how might we keep up our courage and maintain our commitment? I call this last section,

Keeping our Nerve.

There are many in our Church who believe that the parish system is un-reformable and should be abandoned or at least bypassed in the multiplication of new and more intentional fellowships. The so-called Emerging Church Movement, with its "Fresh Expressions" of Church, can of course provide vision and resources for renewing parish life. In many places new Church plants, "Messy Church" and other family-friendly developments and outreach initiatives into the community are doing what energetic parishes, both Evangelical and Anglo-Catholic, have always done. But to give up on the parish altogether because it can be difficult, intractable and unrewarding, to my mind, means giving up on word, sacrament, and the people of God.

The good news is that a wave of spiritual energy is buoying up the Church in our generation. It began in the twentieth century with five key movements all driving the renewal of parish life. The Biblical Theology Movement and the Ecumenical Movement both helped us to recover a sense of being called as God's people—as the body of Christ. For Anglicans, this pointed us beyond the Erastian state Church model, with its culturally captive, socially conservative Anglicanism that many of us are old enough to remember. The Liturgical Movement, which in the Anglican Church was called the Parish and People Movement, helped us to recover the centrality of worship for Christian identity, returning the Eucharist to its ancient and proper place at the centre of Christian life after a long absence. Those of us who grew up with Prayer Book revision might remember how exciting and liberating all this was. The Charismatic Movement helped free us from what we might call the formalistic and structural captivity of God's presence to experience more freedom and personal connection in worship, even when we didn't become card-carrying Charismatics. And the Movement for the Ordination of Women called Anglican women to greater maturity in Christ, and to claim their proper place in his mission. The result of these movements has been to recover a sense of all Christians being gifted members of Christ, as St Paul taught, with a common inheritance together as saints through Baptism and Eucharist.

This is the enthusiastic conclusion of one of our Australian Anglican visionaries, Bruce Kaye, in his hopeful and encouraging book *Reinventing Anglicanism*.^[7] As the Apostolic gave way under Anglicanism to the Erastian, as Paul Avis explains, the Erastian has now given way to the baptismal.^[8] This language is everywhere now in our worship, teaching and parish planning together, even if it's the case that many still haven't caught the liberating vision. So beyond Church as a non-distinctive branch of culture, let alone a remote sect—my too-cold and too-hot solutions—a "just right" solution is emerging in our days as God's gift to us; a more intentional, even more mystical togetherness in Christ is reappearing in many parishes.

This development in the Church goes with comparable trends in wider society, too. What the sociologist Anthony Giddens called life politics^[9] is everywhere on the rise, as

people seek local opportunities to invest themselves in rebuilding social capital and renewing a sense of identity and solidarity. Indeed, in many places, parishes are a community focus for building wider social capital.

Rather than offer a technique let alone a manifesto for rebooting parish life, I conclude instead with a word about Dietrich Bonhoeffer and what he called religionless Christianity. This term is much misunderstood. It doesn't mean a secular beliefless Christianity, of the Bishop Spong or even the Don Cupitt sort. Rather, it means giving up on the idea that Christianity exists to provide us with religious services, to protect us from the uncomfortable facts of life, to preserve us from difficulty and challenge. This is how many people see Christian life, which they expect our parishes to deliver.

Wrong, says Dietrich Bonhoeffer the martyr, who believed that when God calls us, he calls us to die. Religionless Christianity means that God, worship, clergy, and parish life are not meant to serve and confirm our agenda, and our unreconstructed preferences in life. Rather, it's about the joyful liberation of our lives so that we come to serve God's needs, and others' needs, according to the big, liberating picture of the Gospel. I believe that the parish's promise of a unique Christian habitus can be fulfilled once again, even in times like these, as we discover God's agenda at the heart of our life in the Church, displacing our own agenda. And three cheers for that.

[1] Robert N. Bellah (et al), *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (1985), University of California Press, Berkeley & Los Angeles CA, 1996.

[2] Russell R. Reno, *Redemptive Change: Atonement and the Christian Cure of the Soul*, Trinity Press International, Harrisburg PA, 2002.

[3] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (5th edn 1949), SCM Press, London, 1954, p. 17.

[4] Martyn Percy, "Reluctant Communion: On Sacrificing Purity," in J'annine Jobling and Ian Markham (eds), *Theological Liberalism: Creative and Critical*, SPCK, London, 2000, pp. 114-25, on p. 123.

[5] Rowan Williams, "Nobody Knows Who I am 'Til the Judgement Morning," in *On Christian Theology*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2000, pp. 276-89.

[6] Rowan Williams, *Silence and Honey Cakes: The Wisdom of the Desert*, Lion Publishing, Oxford, 2003, pp. 92-3.

[7] Bruce Kaye, *Reinventing Anglicanism: A Vision of Confidence, Community and Engagement in Anglican Christianity*, Openbook Publishers, Adelaide, 2003. See my review of this book in *St Mark's Review*, vol.195, 2004, pp. 48-9.

[8] Paul Avis, *The Anglican Understanding of the Church: An Introduction*, SPCK, London, pp. 15-29.

[9] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, Stanford University Press, 1991, pp. 209-31.

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