Points of Interest raised by Professor Elaine Graham's Archbishop Blanch Lecture.

by Canon Dr Rod Garner

Chair of Trustees, Archbishop Blanch Lecture.

Professor Graham takes seriously the complexity of the prevailing culture in our post Christian west and the adequacy of Christian responses to it. She revisits the narrative of the re-emergence of 'furious' religion post 9/11 and its return to the public stage. The paper reviews the onward march of secularisation noting that it is not straightforwardly anti-religious. Professor Graham notes also the public perception that Christianity is a 'toxic brand' exemplified by its record on abuse, its hypocrisy and failure to match its aspirations, its dismal record on inclusivity and equality concerning race and gender, and the growing divide between its spiritual and ethical beliefs and the 'spirit of the age.'

In relation to the need for a contemporary apologetic Professor Graham notes the need for us to be 'bi-lingual', like St Paul aware of the cultural context into which the gospel speaks without being wholly assimilated by it. As a missional church, we have to give (offer?) culture more than the reflection of its own face. Necessarily this entails forms of practical engagement on our part that are open to other beliefs (or the lack of them) whilst retaining what we hold to be fundamental or distinctive in the Christian tradition.

The positive news is that we have a usable Christian past. It exists to inform, remind, guide and encourage us, but we should not be captive to it. In the same way, in relation to culture we need to be clear as to whether we are bridge builders or actually in revolt against modernity given the extent to which it has abandoned or forgotten what Christendom once represented.

Professor Graham maintains that there is a serious question to be addressed, concerning the adequacy of theological and scriptural literacy in our church congregations, and the ability of churchgoers to, ‘be ready to give an account of the faith that is in them’. (1 Peter. 3.15) to what extent do we in our congregations really know what we profess to know, or are supposed to know in relation to Christian faith and believing?

Apologetics has to be a matter of *deed* as well as *word.* Professor Graham argues a two-fold meaning: first the perennial task of asking, 'who is my neighbour'? and second, our readiness, in Jewish terminology, to persevere in the work of 'repairing the world'. Mission cannot therefore be just a matter of proclaiming personal salvation in the name of Jesus but a commitment to social justice. In this respect 'the common good' is less an abstract concept than a concrete practice that requires a public theology to underpin it.

If there is to be a new and more rigorous form of apologetics, Professor Graham argues, it will move beyond the promotion or defence of our Christian doctrines to forms of witness that are sacramental, costly, and incarnational – ‘acting and speaking, participation and witness'. In short, we must live our faith in the public spaces, in our communities, not just speak of what we believe.

In all of this there is the ongoing tension of whether it is the world or the Church that sets the agenda for mission and the apologetic that underpins and defines that mission. In listening and engaging sensitively does the Church allow the world to set its priorities or is this as one more instance of a Church that has lost its way and its teaching authority?

We face a paradox that the practical witness of believers may be their most eloquent statement of faith but of itself this carries no guarantee of reciprocity, no certainty that community partners will offer mutual support to the local church in terms of its own sustainability or numerical growth. In short, partnerships and social projects entered into may well assist social regeneration and wellbeing at the local level without contributing to the future viability or presence of a parish church.

Whatever form our apologetic takes it cannot 'be thrown at people like a stone' (Paul Tillich). It should be informed by and in ongoing conversation with its own Christian traditions. It must be sensitive to the real contemporary objections to Christian belief, objections that contribute to the Church’s continuing numerical decline.

Some questions to ponder:

1. To what extent does this lecture resonate with the issues and challenges confronting us in our parishes?
2. Does the lecture reflect our own reading of modern times and the extent to which they represent a threat or opportunity as we seek to speak of God in a world troubled by religion?
3. Would you welcome the opportunity of discussing the lecture in more depth via a zoom meeting in early 2022? If so, please indicate your interest in an email to Ann Goddard, Secretary to the ABB trustees: ann.goddard@liverpool.anglican.org

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