

This is the full text of an address by the Rector of All Saints' Church, the Reverend Caroline Ralph. It was given at a public meeting held in the church and in the village hall on 23 July 2018.

I used to puzzle over the account in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles about the baptism of Guthrum the Viking and all his followers after he was defeated by Alfred the Great and signed the treaty of Wedmore, in the ninth century, not all that far from here. Surely his followers might not have felt the same about Christianity as Guthrum did? Suppose they objected? Later I came to understand that according to the rules of the time, what the leader believed, the followers also believed, so Guthrum and his army were baptised lock, stock and barrel. If only...

By then, this part of the world had already seen its saints – Dubricius, Decuman, Petrock and Carantoc – arrive from Wales and set up tiny churches. In Europe, the primary battles between the church and the state for power were won, generally by the church, and the first sign of this was the crowning of Charlemagne as Holy Roman Emperor, by Pope Leo III on Christmas Day 800 AD. When Henry VIII repudiated the authority of the Pope, the church in England became reformed and protestant, and by the Acts of Settlement in the reign of Elizabeth I, “established”. Part of the settlement was the adoption of the Book of Common Prayer and the monarch becoming supreme governor of the Church of England. I cannot overstate the importance of the Book of Common Prayer, in the main written by Thomas Cranmer who at a time when priests were still supposed to be celibate except in reformed Europe had smuggled his wife into the country hidden in a wardrobe. He ended burned at the stake for heresy in the reign of Mary.

Cleeve Abbey, in Washford two miles away, was the first to be reduced by Thomas Cromwell as a sort of try-out to see how his plan for the dissolution of the monasteries would be received. The effect of the establishment of the Church of England was to make the practice of religion in its correct form not only one from which deviation was heresy and likely to be punished by the church, but also of treason and thus liable for punishment by the state. The heretical beliefs of Roman Catholics and the derring-do of those thrilling priests the Jesuits did not matter because of what they believed about transubstantiation of the bread and wine at communion, but because they recognised the authority of the Pope who had excommunicated the monarch.

Elizabeth I may not have wanted a window into people's souls, but she burned a good many more than Mary, and ensured that brave Catholic

priests suffered terribly at Tyburn. It was always a slight embarrassment when students from my training seminary went to the English College in Rome, where Roman Catholic priests are still trained as they have been since the medieval period, and where there is an entire gallery devoted to pictures of the three hundred martyrs who died in England. Relations have improved. We work ecumenically with Father Michael in Minehead and I go on retreat to the Jesuit house where the poet Gerald Manley Hopkins trained.

Perhaps the greatest change in the history of the church in England is not so much the Reformation but the change in perspective to the concept of individual choice which was one of the products of the enlightenment. The social customs that formed medieval and early modern society were largely removed to be replaced with different values, the effects of which are still very apparent in life in general and church life in particular. The invention of the printing press produced ordinary people who could read the Bible in their own language and therefore come to their own views. The practice of religion began its slow decline from something that was done in a group together into a matter of individual choice.

Wootton, meaning a place by the wood, belonged to the hundred of Carhampton, a medieval division of land; and Courtney stems from Sir Thomas Courtney, the thirteenth century manor owner. So we have a village near a wood above a river valley with iron workings from an early period, and with a sacred site on a slight rise that later had All Saints' Church built on it in the thirteenth century. When there were pirates in the Bristol Channel, the protection of being a few miles inland must have been considerable. Dwellings appear to have been scattered in a linear development along the road leading to the centre of the village where the church and school are or were located; it seems unlikely that the village has shifted position very substantially. There is much here that the Victorians and indeed the Elizabethans would recognise.

Those of you who have been fortunate enough to visit a synagogue may have felt its internal arrangements were surprisingly familiar. In fundamental design churches derive from synagogues, befitting the beginnings of Christianity in Judaism; and in the holiest part of the building, instead of the scrolls of the Torah, we have the altar and the chancel, with the main body of people within the other, separated part of the building.

This is not to say that churches have always looked the same. The medieval inhabitants and Elizabethans would not recognise the interior of All Saints'. What we see around us here is what the Victorians imagined a

church should look like, and it has about as much relationship with the thirteenth century building as King Arthur does to English history. Let us begin with the rood screen which, in all places except St George's Dunster, is the most useless piece of church furniture ever devised. A minister standing behind it is half inaudible and appears to be standing behind bars. We all know that in Dunster, the townsfolk and the Priory were at odds to the extent that the bishop was called in and divided the church to keep them apart. What the rood screen tells us is not the beauty of fifteenth century carving but a reinforcement of division, a setting up of defined roles, a setting apart of the people from the clergy. To some extent that persists everywhere. People still mind their language when a vicar walks through the door, and very often the best teacups come out, as though the twenty-first century vicar does not swear or drink out of mugs. As in the army, the paying of compliments is to the position not the person, but in the twenty-first century world where the empowerment of the laity is in fashion, this in itself creates a muddle about the role of the clergy person and who people want them to be. I shall return to this shortly.

In the medieval period the walls of All Saints' bore the pictorial record of what the church thought the people should know. The joys of heaven and the fate of the damned were painted on the walls and pews were absent. People brought stools to sit on, or stood. This was a meeting place where it was not uncommon for justice to be administered in the porch, and where the offering of masses took place by the priest without any lay involvement whatsoever. Chantry chapels were set up so that masses might be offered for the souls of the dead, paid for by relatives anxious their loved ones would escape purgatory or hell. Statues were placed in niches, and offerings could be left as prayers to the saints. Priests received tithes and cultivated vegetables unless they had private means, and many were very poor indeed. They were also of course celibate and generally, although not always, ignorant. Sermons, if they happened at all, were by the preaching cross in the churchyard.

The wall paintings and statues disappeared with the iconoclasts in the sixteenth century and thereafter with the rise of the Puritans. We know from local accounts the anxious and narrow line walked by the clergy in the difficult years of the mid-sixteenth century when chalices, vestments and the Prayer Book were in one year and out as heretical the next. The book, *Voices from Morebath* by Eamon Duffy, is a close examination of the account of the vicar of Morebath, just a few miles down the road, of the trials and tribulations of this period. In Leighland manor house, a Roman Catholic priest was concealed for many years by a family that preferred to be fined for not attending church rather than compromise the true religion. The last

priest in that house, escaping to Wales in the seventeenth century, was captured on the Bristol Channel, taken to London and executed. Some of the Poyntz family who sheltered him are buried in St George's Church, Dunster. The church has long held a series of tensions and apparent contradictions in the worship of God.

The psalm singing of the medieval period came to be replaced by the west gallery choir, a gaggle of people sitting in the gallery and leading the singing. *Under the Greenwood Tree* by Thomas Hardy has a splendid account of one of these, but the west gallery choir and the galleries themselves have disappeared over time to be replaced by the modern creature, the organ. In the same way, the Victorians replaced the box pews that allowed parishioners to rent their space, with the more egalitarian if less comfortable pews that we see today, and ruthlessly re-decorated within and without. My particular horror is of Victorian stained glass, often (although I accept not always) of indifferent quality wherein a blond ringleted Jesus reinforces the Victorian ideal of children who were seen and not heard, and adoring, subservient women.

There was a time when all households needed only the Book of Common Prayer and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* to have access to all the religion they needed, with the Bible following close behind. And it is the 1662 Bible text that we still use today on two Sundays out of four. The preface refers to the "late unhappy confusions", a tactful way of referring to the English Civil War. It shows the preoccupations of the period: the repeated prayers for the sovereign the source of justice, the hope that we can spend our time in rest and quietness, the text that sets out clearly and when things are to be done, when the priest lays his or her hands on the bread and wine, and when the division or fraction of the bread takes place. A BCP service is a beautiful use of language, but it is the language of the sixteenth century, not ours. The print is small, the language is difficult. A newcomer is going to struggle, however welcome they feel otherwise.

Common Worship, the modern text, is not perfect and can be clunky but it offers a degree of flexibility and accessibility that is not present for those very many now who know no hymns, cannot say the Lord's Prayer off by heart and would no more dream of going to a Shakespeare play than they would recite the rosary. Only one of the many issues facing the clergy today is holding the line between those who cling dearly to what they know and love, and the missional imperative to go out into the world and find new disciples for whom the word of God has to be in their language, not someone else's.

I have taken the time to place All Saints' Church in context to show that I am not an iconoclast: I also love tradition and beautiful language and most (if not all) of the old hymns. A church represents security and continuity and this is important.

You can tell a lot about All Saints' or any church by the way it is ordered, or organized. It used to have a choir, now gone. Communion is important, the altar is in a special place and raised up. The position of the pulpit describes how important preaching is. In a Methodist church, the pulpit is central, and there is the font as the start of the Christian journey, the pascal candle, the lectern....

However, I do have to take issue in some respects. Many people say that "mankind" means everyone. Men in the bible means women, everyone knows that, why change it? Why make it "inclusive"? But man does not always mean woman. Why be exclusive? Women's place in society has always been of less value than men. Very early Christianity was scandalous because women were in the forefront, taking a full part. That was lost in the succeeding centuries as part of the price for Christianity becoming the state religion in a patriarchal Roman society. Women have been able to be priests since 1994 – in 2010, for the first time in the history of the Church of England, more women than men were ordained as priests, and numbers have roughly been in parity since, although this is not yet wholly reflected in positions of responsibility. It is a mere four years since women were able to become bishops and they are still not recognized by the two wings of the church. Indeed, conservative evangelicals, those modern puritans, will not agree that a woman should take any position of responsibility: not preach, be a priest, an incumbent, and certainly not a bishop.

We know Jesus was not blond and blue-eyed: he was a Jew. Why persist in something that actually reinforces a western stereotype? Context also means understanding that we are part of a continuing pattern, not the pattern itself, and the stubborn argument "but it's always been like this" alas is not true. The church is an ever-changing and vibrant collection of people, inventing and re-inventing through the ages. Churches are not, as RS Thomas once uncomfortably put it, "giant stone traps for the catching and imprisoning of priests like moths beating against the walls" – though there may be times when it feels like it. The priest in the twenty-first century is no longer the comfortable, father-knows-best of tradition. There is still no word equaling "father" for woman clergy, and frankly "mother" is not doing it for me. Modern clergy work together with their congregations, and the words are "collaborative" and "team" and "relational".

If All Saints', heaven forbid, burned down tonight, the church would be alive and well tomorrow. It is this living, breathing, life-giving entity that I wish to commend to you tonight, one hand on the rich tradition of the past, looking confidently into the future when the building itself is at the centre and heart of village life.

So we come to some facts and figures. The parish of All Saints is part of the Benefice of Dunster, a collection of six churches. It is in the Deanery of Exmoor and the Archdeaconry of Taunton in the Diocese of Bath & Wells which is in the southern province of Canterbury. All churches have a similar designation of deanery and so on. The parish system, originally one priest one parish, is at the heart of the Church of England and of great antiquity. The bishop has the spiritual care of everyone in his or her diocese and shares this cure of souls of everyone in this parish with me. Churches are cared for by the two churchwardens who are elected by the village at an open meeting: some of you were at the annual meeting earlier this year when we failed to find any churchwardens. They are appointed by the bishop, and I have no say in this. However, churchwardens are at the heart of the church and have a direct link to the bishop. I work with the churchwardens and the Parochial Church Council. The PCC with its secretary and treasurer undertakes the administration of the parish. Churchwardens can take services of the word; that is, services that are not communions. They can have many duties although these can be delegated. In the absence of churchwardens we have a great need of help.

All Saints' is a Grade I listed building. It is inspected every five years by our architect. If we wish to repair or alter it, we have to obtain a faculty, or a permission from the Chancellor of the Diocese through the Diocesan Advisory Council. This is not a straightforward business. We often need permission from English Heritage, the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings, the Exmoor National Park Authority – and so the list goes on. Church communities receive no finance whatsoever for the care of their buildings: it all has to be raised from parish funds or from grants. The money that goes into the collection or comes from gift aid is a major source of this. The collection at a service is not on top of other funds, it is how churches manage. Churches do not pay for their clergy, the individual is paid a stipend by the diocese. The diocese asks each parish to pay a contribution, known as the common fund. This is calculated by taking into account a number of different figures and values. All Saints', on top of heating, lighting, repairs and a contribution to clergy expenses, has to find £10,258 this year to pay the diocese.

Bath & Wells raised just over £9million last year through parish share, about a 99% collection rate: this is an extraordinary figure. Every single year, a smallish number of people raise £9million on top of a similar or greater sum to keep their churches going. £18million, every year, just from Somerset. This village is generous in giving financially and I assure you we are grateful. All this £9million goes straight out again in clergy stipends. Clergy pensions are paid by the Church Commissioners, a body that invests the Church of England's assets, and also makes grants to the dioceses to assist them. Bath & Wells uses about another million and a half from fees, investments and reserves, to maintain the administration of the diocese and to pay for outreach and mission in an annual budget of about £11million. In this deanery we raise a total of about £333,000. This pays for two less clergy than we actually have. We are therefore subsidized by other churches in the diocese, and this in time may mean less full-time and paid-for priests.

We are similarly grateful for all the people of this village and elsewhere who may not be in church on Sundays but who do the flowers, the cleaning, bake cakes and help at fundraising events. The clock is maintained, people express their creativity in the making of banners and making of church furniture. You already do a great deal. But church members are not outsiders or different, they are also people in this village and undertake a great deal to keep this building flourishing as well as visiting people who are unwell, joining in village events, playing in amateur dramatics and the like. Churchgoers think of and pray for the people in their village, week by week, month by month, year by year. This church is kept as a place of peace and quietness for visitors and all those who wish to come in, a perpetual place of welcome and encouragement whoever you are and whatever you bring. We feel this is worth keeping and we think this village thinks so too. It is a place where the rituals of birth, marriage and death are encountered, together with being thankful and experiencing joy. People are remembered and honoured, whether they come from the village or died in war. We give thanks for the harvest, collect for the food-bank for those less fortunate, and look for God in the commonplace and the special. We can do this with and for you, and we would like to keep on doing it.

I am in the business of being hopeful. I do not see the church closing. However, this is not up to me, it's up to you. It's your church, your building. This is a medieval building but it is sound physically, and services will continue to be held as long as there are people who ask for them.

But this building is a responsibility and not a right. God can be worshipped anywhere. We can, as church members, up sticks and go down

the road. We want to stay here but we need help. Could you act as secretary to the PCC when Patrick Hoyte retires next year? Could you work with PCC members to make sure the gravestones are not dangerous by going round and wobbling them every three months? Could you take on the checking of the gutters, the inspection of the plasterwork, the looking at the pointing, the state of the windows? Could you help with making the safeguarding of those using the church a priority? Or undertake to spend an hour or so doing the health and safety check of the electrics and the fire extinguishers? Could you steward at a fundraising event? Form a band of bell-ringers so we that we can hear the bells more often? Undertake the paperwork and responsibility for aspects of repair, and work with the church architect and builders?

If you can do any of these things, we will be asking for help. If you can't, we hope you will come to fundraising events, we hope to welcome you at harvest and Christmas, and perhaps at some other services. Later in the year we are trying a new informal service in the village hall with breakfast. Or come to a Songs of Praise service and help select the hymns, and maybe try a few new ones. You never know, you might like it.