

*The Twentieth*

**ERIC SYMES ABBOTT**

**Memorial Lecture**

delivered by

*The Reverend Nicholas Holtam*

Vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields

*at Westminster Abbey*

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and subsequently at Keble College, Oxford

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## A ROOM WITH A VIEW

### The Aspiration of a Parish Church

It is nearly twenty-five years since I was ordained a priest and I am grateful for the opportunity given by this lecture to reflect on parish life in the Church of England. I am especially grateful to do so in memory of Eric Abbott who was a spiritual director to me for five years as I prepared for ordination at King's College London and Westcott House Cambridge and began ordained ministry in Stepney. I remember him as an awesome though kindly Confessor rather than as a friend but I do so with affection. In response to my confession a week before I was made a deacon Eric said, "Remember, nothing is wasted. What at the moment you wish were not will one day be what God uses in your ministry to others". So this lecture is an occasion to try to use some of my experience, particularly at St Martin-in-the-Fields, and turn it in memory of a pastor who loved the Church of England.

#### **A Room with a View**

The metaphor of "A Room with a View" in relation to an English parish church is intended to suggest three things that I regard as historically and theologically important characteristics currently under threat.

First it suggests that parish churches should be open to the world. There is a sound instinct here about places of prayer. The Talmud advises we should, "Never pray in a room without windows"<sup>1</sup>. The question facing every church congregation is whether they save people from the world or in the world, whether they face inward or outward. My sense is that a great deal of what passes for 'mission' in the contemporary Church of England is peculiarly inward looking. For the last twenty years we have been presented with a false polarity that gives priority to 'mission' over that sort of pastoral care in which ministers and churches cared for the parish and not just for the congregation. It is difficult to know cause and effect but in our anxiety to survive we are creating inward-looking, self-referential, congregations.

This is particularly important when we have difficulty discerning good religion from bad and bad religion has assumed lethal potency. The experience of creating public liturgy in response to acts of terrorism has reinforced my belief that our religious life must be shaped and informed by God-given reason as well as the particularities of Scripture and Church tradition and teaching. We may well be frightened by some aspects of the world but it is made by God and fundamentally good. As Christians we are schooled in it and open to meeting God in it and to this the Church bears witness. So a parish church must be open to the world and not just set apart from it.

Second, a place of prayer should be open to the poorest. This matters, or ought to matter, to Christians because of Christ's teaching about God, and the things of God, being known in and among the poor. The Church of England gets muddled about whether we are *for* the poor, *with* the poor, or *of* the poor but one of the things that persistently undermines our pretention and opens us to God is the possibility that we will meet Christ in the poor.

The 'great soul' Gandhi taught that the place of prayer should be a spacious ground under the open sky available to the poorest of the poor. This is about being open to God's world *and* to the poor. It is not far from Dick Sheppard's romantic vision in 1914 that shaped St Martin-in-the-Fields throughout the Twentieth Century as the 'Church of the ever open door'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Joan Chittister *In the Heart of the Temple - My Spiritual Vision for Today's World*, London: SPCK, 2005, p43.

<sup>2</sup> "I saw a great church standing in the greatest Square in the greatest City in the world... There passed me into its warm inside hundreds and hundreds of all sorts of people, going up to the temple of their Lord, with all their difficulties, trials and sorrows... I saw it full of people, dropping in at all hours of the day and night. It was never dark, it was lighted all night and all day, and often

Third, a parish church is a room with a view committed to looking beyond itself to God, and to the Kingdom of God as seen in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. My use of the metaphor alludes to the image of God's home in John 14. Jesus said to the disciples, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places (or rooms). If it were not so would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?"

God's dwelling place is capacious. All sorts of people find their home there, people as diverse as Matthew the tax collector, doubting Thomas and impulsive and unreliable Peter. It would be a lot easier to create communities of the like-minded but if parish churches are going to point beyond themselves to the sort of community that God is collecting then we had better go to some trouble to ensure that parish churches are broad inclusive communities.

So "A Room with a View" is intended to suggest that the English parish church is, or should aspire to be, a broad Christian community, open particularly to the poor, and alive to the glory of God who was in Christ reconciling the world.

### **The present context**

It is now common place to admit that we in Britain have a problem that is both personal and institutional about the credibility of Christian belief. For longer than our lifetimes the British churches have suffered numeric decline and reducing influence. What was described as 'secularisation' now looks more complex. Religion is as much a part of human self-understanding and expression as ever. In the last British census 42 million identified themselves as 'Christian'. What this means is less than clear.

At a local, parochial, level in 1941 there were 1,568 on the Electoral Roll of St Martin's. In 2005 the number is 374. The pressure to survive can distort our purpose. In this context Jesus's saying about our being willing to lose our life for the sake of the kingdom of heaven is heard less as promise and more as judgement. I was struck to hear a Bishop say in a radio interview last Autumn that he was not prepared to be a Bishop of a dying church. Perhaps we can guess what he meant but in saying this the pressure to be successful had caused him to step away from the pattern of Jesus Christ and put too much store in a particular institutional form of Christianity.

The Church of England, relieved to find anything that helps staunch the decline in numbers, has got fixated on a narrow range of evangelistic basic Christian education programmes and on what are called 'fresh expressions of being church'. There is energy here, and for that we can be grateful, but this renewal movement tends to be self-consciously church centred, often in a non-traditional cultural form.<sup>3</sup>

Parochial clergy, particularly those with historic buildings, sometimes fulminate about their not being 'museum keepers'. My experience of living in Trafalgar Square has made me realise that London's museums and galleries have been enjoying an enviable renaissance. It is striking how they seek to engage people's interests in a variety of ways with a lively appeal to different personality types, and people with varied interests, abilities and time availability. This has set me thinking about the different ways in which people relate to a parish church, to St Martin-in-the-Fields.

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and often tired bits of humanity swept in. And I said to them as they passed: 'Where are you going?' And they said only one thing, 'This is our home. This is where we are going to learn of the love of Jesus Christ. This is the Altar of our Lord where all our peace lies. This is St Martin's' Dick Sheppard quoted in Malcolm Johnson *St Martin-in-the-Fields*, Chichester: Phillimore, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Bob Jackson *A Capital Idea* on the Diocese of London's web site: <http://www.london.anglican.org/CapitalIdea>. One of his findings is the London clergy take on average fewer occasional offices than clergy in any other Diocese. "Far from being a problem to them, the lack of occasional offices...has enabled them to focus on building the gathered community....It seems fairly well accepted in London Diocese that a pastoral ministry and way into the local community...is not the way forward. It is certainly true that London clergy are performing on average very few occasional offices. Yet church attendance is rising."

Of course what we are primarily is a 'eucharistic community' but there is more than one way of belonging to a church. It ought to be obvious that people at different stages of faith or commitment, of different personality types and interests, and at different stages of their life, will be drawn by and capable of different things in relation to church. This is certainly modelled in the Church of England's contemporary pluralism but every parish church has to recognise and provide for it.

In the rest of this lecture I want to sketch seven ways in which people legitimately relate to the sort of parish church that is, "A Room with a View". Inevitably I will draw heavily on my experience at St Martin-in-the-Fields, and of course I recognise the particularities of that church. However, the same points could be made from any of the parishes in which I have ministered. There are tensions and problems facing the Church of England at a local level. There always will be. My aim is to encourage and develop a sustainable model of ministry that is committed to the parish, that is the world, and not just the congregation.

### **The Eucharistic Community**

Being a baptised member of the eucharistic community is the most obvious way of being part of any parish church. It is the core group doing the core task without which nothing else has any place. The Eucharist has it all. Its different names emphasise different aspects of its work. Holy Communion, Eucharist, Mass, emphasise our community with each other growing out of our communion with God, that we gather primarily to give thanks and praise to God, and at the end we are sent out, dismissed, to the mission of God. Kenneth Kirk, one of the great Anglican moral theologians of the twentieth century, helpfully summarised:

"It is not that conduct is the end of life and worship helps it but that worship is the end of life and conduct tests it"<sup>4</sup>

Churches are primarily about worship.

We have also recognised that, like many London churches, we are in ourselves an international church. Like every church I have ever known, only more so, St Martin's has active international partnerships with Church and development agencies in Hong Kong and China, India, South Africa, Malawi, Kenya, Uganda, and the West Indies. Our visitors from around the world add greatly to this.

Jesus said, 'Where two or three are gathered together in my name I am there among them' (Mt 18.20). So the community is essential to Christianity that is not just about private, personal experience. The trouble is that, as a Rabbi once said, "Where there are three Jews you will have four opinions". That is true of any group and usually disagreements are resolved in favour of the most powerful, but it is part of the purpose of the eucharistic community to model diversity, confident in the unity of God and of the eucharistic action given us by Christ.

One of the most enjoyable liturgical developments over the last seven years at St Martin's has been our giving much greater emphasis to the celebration of Pentecost. Through it we have come to an enriched theology of the Holy Spirit, the breath or wind of God, the energising fire that burns with both zeal and judgement. The big gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is communication. People who did not speak the same language found that they understood each other. That is what happens when people meet in the spirit of love.

So at Pentecost we have a single Eucharist for the Chinese and English speaking congregations. The 'Chinese congregations' means two languages, Cantonese and Mandarin. In the 'English speaking congregations' a significant number of people have different first languages. This is relatively easy territory in a London church now. We enjoy the ethnic and cultural mix, people's ability to speak several languages, perform

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<sup>4</sup> K E Kirk The Vision of God, Cambridge: James Clarke, 1931

different sorts of music and provide wonderfully varied food for lunch. It is a terrific window into our being a world-wide Church.

The Eucharistic community is not static. It is a dynamic and changing group. Always there are issues that put our diversity to the test. Most mornings I pray in front of an icon of Li Tim Oi, the first Anglican woman priest. Recently this has been helpful because one of the least satisfactory parts of The Windsor Report of The Lambeth Commission on Communion<sup>5</sup> was its use of the ordination of women as a model of change within the Communion. They start with the ordination of Li Tim Oi as a pastoral emergency in Macau in 1944 but say nothing of what went before.

Change has a history. Dick Sheppard was campaigning for the ordination of women in the run up to the 1930 Lambeth Conference. The publication of his 'The Impatience of a Parson'<sup>6</sup> strained his friendship with Archbishop Laing and Sheppard was widely thought by the Church hierarchy to be irresponsible.

In 1942 Reinhold Niebuhr had said to Bishop R O Hall, the Bishop of Hong Kong, that it would make a tremendous difference if a woman were actually ordained. Before Li Tim Oi's ordination Hall consulted the Archbishop of Canterbury. Archbishop Temple's reply arrived after Li Tim Oi's ordination on 24<sup>th</sup> January 1944. Interestingly in the present context, he wrote that this seems to be primarily a matter for your own Province. However he went on to counsel for a revocable temporary expedient in the exceptional circumstances.<sup>7</sup>

The Windsor Report's main concern is with unity not with change. It jumps straight from 1944 to the Lambeth Conference of 1968 but this was not change led by the hierarchy and councils of the Church. The ordinations of Jane Hwang and Joyce Bennett in Hong Kong in 1971 and of the first women priests in other Provinces were actions in a turbulent process of 'reception' of the ordination of women priests by the Anglican Communion. Change is often disruptive. At the outset change is not always consensual. Nor is it necessarily led by the hierarchy.

In September 2003, after Jeffrey John did not become Bishop of Reading, the PCC of St Martin's voted unanimously to sign up to both InclusiveChurch.net, of which I have become a Trustee, and Changing Attitudes. It seemed a relatively easy decision and was communicated to the congregations. What little comment this received was positive. St Martin's is an open and tolerant community and has a fairly visible gay minority in the congregation.

Two months later some people were beginning to express their discomfort. A group of West Africans, one of whom said she had thought about leaving St Martin's, and some of the Chinese congregation raised their concerns. Interestingly a South Indian was more concerned about Gene Robinson's being divorced than his being gay. At the Annual Meeting the following April the matter came up again, as if for the first time, some people feeling that their views had been taken for granted.

As is often the case with moral issues, even when the Bible is clear, as with divorce and remarriage, pacifism, or the swearing of oaths, there are genuine differences between Christians. Whenever our members have raised the positive acceptance of homosexuals as a problem, there has been a conversation. A high point in this process was when a senior Nigerian layman, a member of his own Diocesan Synod, who had come to our daily services for about six months, asked to meet me. We discussed homosexuality because what we were saying was different to what the Church at home was teaching. At the end of our hour he still disagreed with

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<sup>5</sup> The Lambeth Commission on Communion The Windsor Report, London: SPCK, 2004

<sup>6</sup> H R L Sheppard The Impatience of a Parson, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1927

<sup>7</sup> David Paton R O – The Life and Times of Bishop Hall of Hong Kong, Hong Kong: Diocese of Hong Kong and Macau, 1985 pp.125ff.

me and concluded, “But this is not an issue to divide us”. Although I am aware of some of the gay members of the church drifting away over the last few years, I am not aware of anyone leaving St Martin’s over our having taken a positively inclusive stand.

In a lecture on ‘The Future of the Anglican Communion’ earlier this year, Bishop David Beetge, a member of the Lambeth Commission, said, “We are not in Communion because we agree or are likeminded but because Jesus said, ‘Do this in remembrance of me’.”<sup>8</sup>

Every parish church is an international, diverse eucharistic community open to change led by the Holy Spirit. Each eucharistic community makes a particular contribution to the Anglican Communion by being ‘the world’s local church’.

### **Other ways of belonging to Church**

Two years ago there was a very interesting congregational consultation at St Martin’s about the re-ordering of our buildings. We were considering creating a baptistry in the central porch, or placing the font on the central axis of the main entrance, to show it is the point of entry into the community of faith. Significant disquiet was expressed from the members of our eucharistic community because so many people did not arrive that way but came to St Martin’s not fitting the norms, unconventionally. Baptism might be what celebrates and seals people having made their way in by other means.

So the eucharistic community is the core but is only one way of describing a parish church which is much richer, more interesting and diverse than can be summarised by numbers on the Electoral Roll, or those baptised and receiving Communion.

### **A Community of Service**

In John’s account of the Last Supper we are given an action to demonstrate the new commandment to love one another as Christ has loved us. Washing feet is as distinctive an act for the Christian community as breaking bread. St Martin-in-the-Fields has an unusual reputation for Christian service and charity understood as ‘love in action’. It stems from the life of our patron saint, St Martin of Tours, who shared his cloak with a beggar who returned to him as Christ. “For as much as you did it to one of the least of these you did it to me.” (Mt 25.40).

Yet most parish churches have an extensive and honourable list of charitable groups meeting in and around the church. Served by committed people who are not necessarily part of the eucharistic community, they act in loving service. On the Isle of Dogs, for example, there were Alcoholics Anonymous, a Toy Library, an open youth club, the Docklands Drugs Initiative and local Relief in Need and Children’s charities. These sorts of groups are enabled by a hospitable eucharistic community and they also help to inform and educate the eucharistic community.

Charity is one aspect of foot washing, the search for justice another. In the 1980’s the Archbishop’s Commission on Urban Priority Areas recognised that it was not enough to state moral principles but to go on to identify the political implications of those principles. On the Isle of Dogs this approach was put to the test in 1993 when Britain’s first (openly racist) British National Party Councillor was elected in a by-election. In the absence of political leadership from the local Labour and Liberal Democrat parties, who imploded under accusations of racism, the local churches took a lead. For nine months we worked to create broad community alliances to address the underlying issues: housing, telling the truth about race and building bridges with the

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<sup>8</sup> David Beetge “The Future of the Anglican Communion”, a lecture given at St Martin-in-the-Fields on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2005. It has been printed in Christianity and Homosexuality – A Resource Booklet for Discussion. Copies available from The Parish Secretary, 6 St Martin’s Place, London WC2N 4JJ price £3 incl post and packing.

local Bengali community as well as strengthening the local democratic political parties and increasing the electoral turnout at the main election. The then Bishop of Stepney, Richard Chartres, commented, "It's difficult not to be political when Jesus said, 'Love your neighbour' and one political party is engaged in a sustained campaign of hatred against one particular group of neighbours."<sup>9</sup>

A vision of social justice brings with it a commitment to change the world. The recent all night event "Wake Up for Trade Justice" attracted 25,000 people to Whitehall. A lot were from churches but it seemed wider, inclusive of anyone who wanted to identify with this campaign. "Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God" (1 John 4.7), whether they know it or not. The commitment of these people to justice can challenge the eucharistic community.

It is easy to see why for St John an act of loving service is central to the remembrance of Christ. Church as a community of service is another way of people identifying with this Christian community.

### **A place of Prayer**

If there was one thing that caught me by surprise after my ordination as Deacon, it was the instant and immediate importance of intercessory prayer. At the early services in St Dunstan's Stepney in that first week of ordained ministry in October 1979, I was completely caught up in the praying for people and things, holding them and their life's events before God, not just the congregation but the parish. It is one of many things for which I am indebted to my training incumbent Fr Norry McCurry. Intercessory prayer has been an important part of my role as a priest ever since. It is, of course, what people expect. Nearly every Sunday one of the market traders outside St Martin's says, "Say one for me". It is what a priest is for.

When we open church each morning at about 7.45am, one of the first people through the door is a woman on her way to work. She kneels for about two minutes and leaves. It is what church is for, a place of prayer.

Just inside the door of St Martin's is a Prayer Board on which people pin their own prayers or requests for prayers. Serious business is done there:

In Memory of Mrs Woosnam – buried today

Please pray for my baby who was lost to me 1 month ago before it could be

Help me to get a job and a home

Peace

And the delightfully ambiguous,

Please pray for my beloved fiancée – may his eyes heal quickly

Some of them remind me of T S Eliot's lines in *Ash Wednesday*:

"Will the veiled sister pray

For the children at the gate

who will not go away and cannot pray."

It is the widely recognised calling and purpose of clergy and churches to pray for others, for people in need, for the world. It is also a core task to teach people to pray and to provide spaces in which it is easy to pray.

Back in my earliest days of ordained ministry I used to do an occasional half day chaplaincy in St Paul's Cathedral. On one of these occasions I was exhausted and chose for 15 minutes every hour to kneel down in the transept and pray. Each time I knelt down I was the only person doing so. Each time I got up there were 4, 10, and 7 other people kneeling near by. It was as if the purpose of the building needed to be demonstrated for others to join in.

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<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Holtam and Sue Mayo Learning from the Conflict, The Jubilee Group 1998



Christian formation involves active participation in a community of prayer: prayer groups, an occasional course to “Teach us to pray”, a weekend retreat. In Lincoln in the mid 80’s we organised an individually guided retreat through Lent for 57 people. It still impacts on some of our lives. At St Martin’s lay people lead the saying of weekday Evening Prayer and the intercessions at the Sunday 10am Eucharist. Douglas Board’s recent book *The Naked Year* has emerged partly from his leading of our Sunday intercessions. His prayers engage the realities of our world and our own lives before God.<sup>10</sup>

When people come into a church what matters most is that it is “a thin place” between heaven and earth, in another of Eliot’s phrases, “made valid by prayer”. Such churches are spacious, hospitable and inspiring. The late Peter Benenson told me that the idea of Amnesty International came to him in St Martin-in-the-Fields. “You would say it was prayer. All I can say is that the idea came from outside of me.” Thanks be to God.

### **Learning and the God of Truth**

Christians have always been concerned with education for its own sake because we believe that God is of truth. There is a practical depth to the Church’s involvement in education ranging from higher education to parish Sunday Schools. Eric Abbot’s own commitment to education reflected this broad concern.

There is a crossover from the Church’s public provision of education into Christian formation and faith education. Some churches and clergy may feel under pressure from those who come to church to qualify for Church school admissions but the Diocese of London is justly proud of its 150 schools. Clearly these are another way in which people belong to the local church.

Despite this, it is commonly agreed that large numbers of people now lack what the Bishop of London calls “a Christian grammar”. A recent description of the process of secularisation has emphasised our failure to transmit the Christ story down the generations.<sup>11</sup> Faith education is therefore of paramount importance to the Church. The Diocese of London has a policy that every parish should run a Christian basics course like Alpha or Emmaus. For many churches these have been points of numerical growth. They have also given lay people an increased confidence in what is partly a knowledge-based organisation. However such courses do not appeal to everyone and part of the price of such widespread commitment to ‘Christian basics’ is a perceived ‘dumbing down’ of the Church’s educational offer.

For some years we have been looking to develop a Christian basics course that might fit St Martin’s and have come to the conclusion that the people who come to us are not looking for a structured A-Z of Christian faith that systematically explores key themes of Christian theology. Instead, the St Martin’s community draws people because we begin our theological reflection in the context of global events, human relationships, social change, and a commitment to engage with the reality of life as lived by all of us. So we develop a theological conversation through liturgies, sermons, ‘thought pieces’ and educational events. Some of these are re-presented in small publications that have proved very popular with titles such as, ‘Life after Life: An exploration of living, dying and whatever comes next’, ‘Voices of Harvest’, ‘Christianity and Homosexuality’ and ‘In Search of Healing’. The contributors are clergy and laity, from within the St Martin’s community and beyond, something that resonates with our intention to produce a resource in conversation with each other.

Education courses are also part of the public offer that draws in people who are not otherwise members but who are interested in the subject. For example, two years ago a Lent series of talks called “Beyond Church” attracted attendance of between 60 – 100 people many of whom had no evident link with St Martin’s but who were interested in a well informed discussion of difficult moral issues. A public meeting in advance of the

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<sup>10</sup> Douglas Board *The Naked Year*, St Martin-in-the-Fields, 2004

<sup>11</sup> Danielle Hervieu-Leger’s *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, Cambridge: Polity, 2000

war in Iraq drew 160 people. When we have worked with the National Gallery's education programme we have drawn similarly large numbers, only some of whom are from our own congregations.

An education programme is one more way in which people who are not necessarily part of the eucharistic community might feel they belong to their church in what is a serious search for the God of truth.

### **Creativity and the Arts**

On Good Friday St Martin's has a well attended Three Hours from 12-3. Something like 450 people come to all or part of it. It is preceded by a short 'all age' service at 10am attended by 70 or 80. In the evening there is a concert. Whether it's one of the Bach Passions or the Mozart Requiem, all 825 seats are sold out. Concerts attract a different audience from services. This is part of the change that has happened to institutional Christianity in this country. It is bad for church attendance figures but it is not all loss. There are deep Christian cultural roots in our society.

There is an astonishingly accomplished musical life to St Martin's but it is only different in scale to what happens in many parish churches. I grew up singing in a parish church choir where the organist and choir master also ran the local choral society. On the Isle of Dogs we had occasional concerts and in 1992 The London Docklands singers were formed by one of the congregation attracting singers from the local community. Last month they sang in a performance of The Dream of Gerontius in St Paul's Cathedral.

With six concerts each week St Martin's is one of London's major concert venues. I don't know that there is any strong association with the worshipping life of the church but I do know that to sit in church listening to wonderful music is one way of being recreated in the heart of the city. It can be healing and Godly.

Some of our best work with homeless people and young people at risk has been in this area of creative arts. Exhibiting paintings, or playing music, and receiving applause, is terrific for self-esteem quite apart from the fun of making something beautiful. When this has been taken into an act of worship in church the contributions have been made with striking reverence by people who are not habitually at public worship.

In the twentieth century St Martin's was best known for its ethics but there is an earlier tradition of aesthetics, offering to God the best of art and beauty. It is in the architecture. St Martin's is one of London's most beautiful eighteenth century churches, the work of James Gibbs and some of the most accomplished craftsmen of the 1720's. The planned renewal of the buildings is an opportunity to commission new works of art of similar quality. The new crib by Tomoaki Suzuki proposed for Trafalgar Square is the first of what we hope will be a small number of high quality and important commissions. The willingness of the artistic community to be involved has been humbling. The creativity of God means that parish churches can be marvellous centres of artistic creativity and this, too, provides a way for many people to make an offering to God.

### **Honest Commercial Exchange**

St Martin's is known throughout the world for music and feeding people. Given our location it is not so surprising that we have also been able to sell these goods to people who can afford to pay for them, extending our ministry commercially. Our concerts make a profit and receive no funding from the Arts Council. The Café in the Crypt has been London's Les Routiers Café of the Year. St Martin's is London's 20<sup>th</sup> most visited tourist attraction.

This experiment in business was set up in the 1980's by my predecessor, Canon Geoffrey Brown. In some ways it offered a commercial alternative to the sorts of urban and social regeneration proposed by the

Archbishop's Commission on Urban Priority Areas who produced the report 'Faith in the City'.<sup>12</sup> At that time providing employment was a key aim for St Martin's but so was providing an income to stabilise ailing church finances.

Making an honest profit was seen to be good and number of senior business people have given their time to oversee this project at Board level. One said how refreshing it was to be part of a Christian church that appreciated his working life and skills as a blessing. Given the amount of time we all spend at work that still seems to me a serious indictment of what most parish churches pray for and get concerned about.

Having a business at St Martin's has created employment and has indeed been good for the church's finances. As with our social work at The Connection at St Martin's we do not require staff to be communicant Christians but ask that they share and put into practice our common values.

The business has also provided different ways for visitors to engage with the church. It used to be said that the task of the most visited churches was to turn tourists into pilgrims. Customers keep more control than that. A customer pays for something he or she wants – food, music, a brass rubbing or whatever. This is not about customers becoming part of the eucharistic community, though sometimes they do. It is about customers being satisfied by a good and honest commercial encounter with a Christian church that establishes an honest and trustworthy relationship. This is important because a recent survey found that only 43% said they trust the Church. This is less than trust the educational service and about half the rating for the armed forces.<sup>13</sup> Trust and credibility have to be earned.

The increased number of visitors has also added energy to the place. It is a pleasure to come into such a thriving and vibrant church. The professionalism of the business means we look after our buildings better than we did and provide better for the casual visitor. The Parochial Church Council is also more business-like and has a 3 – 5 year Mission Action Plan. Having a Chief Executive running St Martin-in-the-Fields Ltd alongside me as Vicar is not without its tensions but has proved to be a very creative dynamic. It is interesting to see the commercial model of church being imitated.

### **A place for the whole community**

Parish churches are important focal points in local communities. They are one of the few public places where people gather. As places of memory they also collect a community's history. This is an incredibly important function and a strong reason for all the members of local community to support their parish church.

The significance of this is well made by Simon Jenkins. His Introduction to 'England's Thousand Best Churches' refers to our parish churches as 'The Museums of England'. He respects the church as, "a shrine of impenetrable mystery". Into these churches people have poured their faith, joy, sorrow, labour, love. Jenkins says, "The local parish church is like Thomas Gray's tombstone. It tells of 'homely joys and destiny obscure... the short and simple annals of the poor'".<sup>14</sup>

Simon Jenkins dwells on the physical fabric of the church that embodies this historic role but it is a continuing contemporary experience through the Church's occasional offices for parishioners who have not necessarily been part of the congregation – weddings, funerals and, at St Martins, memorial services. To work well these have to be honest and 'real'. That often means they have to be 'personalised'. I am struck that I have rarely felt compromised by this. Nearly always people are respectful of Church even if they are not themselves active members. What the minister often meets in these settings is people who know about

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<sup>12</sup> Archbishop's Commission on Urban Priority Areas Faith in the City: A Call for Action by Church and Nation, London: Church House Publishing, 1985

<sup>13</sup> Paul Avis A Church Drawing Near: Spirituality and Mission in a Post-Christian Culture, T & T Clark, 2003 p ix.

<sup>14</sup> Simon Jenkins England's Thousand Best Churches, Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1999, pvii

love, justice, mercy, joy, celebration, loss and grief in ways that suggest they are not far from the kingdom of heaven even though they themselves would mostly not name it as such.

Again it is the fact of a eucharistic community that makes this possible by fulfilling the core commitments of a church in ways that make the place accessible to others. It opens the church as a place of honest encounter for the world before God.

### **Conclusion**

Today's Church of England lives with the pressures of institutional survival. It cannot be guaranteed. Under this pressure we also live in a time of great energy and creativity. What I have described is, at its best, not just adaptability but a faithfulness to God. It is not a faith in the immortality of our own institutions. The heart of the Gospel is in the paradox of our being willing to lose our lives to find them.

People complain that the Church of England washes its dirty linen in public but, Eliot again, at least we are washing it. Beyond the local parish we are not sure how we belong together. To belong everywhere you have to belong somewhere. I am convinced that the problems of the Anglican Communion will be answered best in the local parish church.

I have tried to describe the experience of a parish church that is open to the world, to the poor and to the vision of God's many-roomed generosity. In its local form, it is a world-wide diverse church. Led by the Spirit of God, it is open to change in every generation. Of course there is a gap between aspiration and reality, but because we have been given a vision of God's kingdom that gap is something Christians have always had to handle.

Perhaps the key to the churches in which I have been privileged to minister is the way in which they welcome people. Of course every church says it is welcoming but the test is whether the visitors bring anything that is valued, wanted, and will change the life of the parish church and not just be assimilated into it so that the only people who belong are the people who fit the existing community. The test is whether we really do expect to meet Christ in the stranger.

'A room with a view' is a way of being an open church that requires a generosity of spirit and trust in God. In the crucial dynamic between kingdom, Church and world, it assumes that God is at work in the world, where the kingdom of God will come as it is in heaven, and that the parish church's task is to witness to this in many and various ways.