John Hughes Memorial Lecture

Rev Dr Alison Milbank – Wednesday 24th October 2018

Has the Parish a future?

It is a great honour for me to give a lecture in memory of John Hughes, who apart from his undoubted academic brilliance, was a true parish priest, and one of the main reasons I hope for the future of the parish is the commitment to it of many of the brightest and most committed young people coming out of theological colleges today. And it is a delight to be giving this address at St Michael and All Angels, where he preached the sermon included in our sermon collection, *Preaching Radical and Orthodox*, in a church with such a heart for Christian education and formation.

In this talk I shall begin with some background about the history of the parish, and then turn to the challenges of our contemporary situation, before offering some ideas about what might give the parish a future in Britain. So first to its origins. The word means in Greek, 'beside the house', and referred originally to those beyond the centre of the city or town, from the time when the Christian community met centrally under the presidency of the bishop. As faith spread to the *paroikia* new assemblies were made within the diocese. The Celtic missionaries in Britain would set up a preaching cross or reuse a standing stone to gather people for teaching or worship, and as time went on, buildings replaced these stones, often also built on pagan sacred sites, following, as Bede tells us in his *Ecclesiastical History*, the advice of Pope Gregory to Augustine, when he came to evangelise southern England. There may have been churches much earlier, as St Martin's in Canterbury, Queen Bertha's own chapel, was built into the ruins of a much earlier church from Roman days.

Parishes grew up around these churches. There was the cathedral with its importance as the seat of the bishop, and in Anglo-Saxon times the collegiate church with a group of clergy who would go out to evangelise a wide area,

which is a model now again being promoted. And there began to grow up smaller, local churches built by those holding manors, which were the main units of population outside towns, and the first parishes.

By the twelfth century England was nearly completely organised under the Normans into parishes, with the task complete in the reign of Edward III, although the odd ‘peculiar’ survived much later and some to this day. The parish was the local and democratic unit with elected officials, and you can see from my slide what multiplicity of roles it performed: law and order, taxation, worship and offices, celebration and church ales, care of the poor, sick and infirm. There was no separation between sacred and secular, and you can see this ancient mode of parish life reflected in the television comedy, *The Vicar of Dibley*. All this survived the Reformation and elected churchwardens went on being central to their communities, and rogation days crucial for maintaining boundaries. In 1897 however, the church parish and secular parish were separated, so the parish council and parochial church council were created that exist to this day. In my own childhood in downtown Portsea the church was at the heart of community life with about eighty children in our mainly working-class Sunday School, and a raft of parochial activities. Secularism has taken its toll, however, and the turning of Sunday into an ordinary shopping day, so that, along with trade unions, political parties and other organisations, the Church of England has suffered a steep decline in worshippers and adherents. The figures on my slide speak for themselves.

This has caused something of a panic, and the parish system, with its universal coverage of every area and person, is straining under the pressure of the lack of people and money. My son-in-law is a vicar in rural Lincolnshire with twelve church buildings and nine operating regularly. The Bishop of Willesden, Pete Broadbent, one of the architects of Reform and Renewal, claims that ‘all the demographic evidence shows, we’re in the last chance saloon. Unless we do something in the next five or 10 years, we’re shot … we’re facing

a demographic time bomb', by which he means that the Church is failing to attract or keep younger people and if the rate of decline continues, the Church will die.[1] The Director of Theos, a religious thinktank believes that the parish especially holds the church back from mission, because it is so expensive to maintain and because of a parochial mindset.

Martyn Percy, by contrast, believes that the parish church is fully resilient, and is held back by the gathered nature of contemporary ecclesial practice and evangelical particularism. He really believes in the Broad Church tradition of an inclusive Church of England, and has confidence in its stability.[2] A cradle Anglican, I naturally come somewhere in the middle, in that I do think there is a decline and even something of a crisis, and I do not think a gathered ecclesiology is the primary cause for the drop in baptism figures. The swiftly insidious secularism of our society has to be acknowledged. On the other hand, like Percy I do believe in the resilience of the local church, precisely because it is local and has a commitment to place and context. I am not going to spend this talk analysing the relative severity of the situation we face, but to offer a vision of first why and secondly how I believe the vocation of the parish can be rethought, both to strengthen its resilience, and to counter and respond to our contemporary and future challenges. I do so, however, in a positive, hopeful mode. Instead of worrying about what we have lost, we should value and delight in the gifts of the people we have, and empower them to be good disciples and evangelists. For me, the best thing to come out of the Reform and Renewal agenda in the Church of England, is the report about the laity, *Setting God's People Free*, though even its title is negative, suggesting that the people of God are all being currently chained up.

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1 Quoted in a *Guardian* interview on 21st November, 2015 at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/21/justin-welby-church-england-new-synod , accessed 1st May, 2017.

2 See Martyn Percy, *The Future Shapes of Anglicanism: Currents, Contours, Charts* (London: Routledge, 2017), 157-8.

At the end of the TV drama, *Broadchurch,* the characters gather to hear a sermon by Coates the vicar, after which the curmudgeonly detective, Alec Hardy, greets Coates with the words, 'If I knew you peached like that, I'd have come more often'. For Coates's mistake as a parish priest was one that I have witnessed all too often. He was in many ways exemplary: kind, accommodating, really standing alongside the grieving parents of the dead boy, and even the murderer, Joe Miller, much against the local mood, but he failed to offer a confident, positive religious vision to the community. Only when he was going did we hear powerful words from Hebrews, garnering that response from Hardy, who desperately needs hope in his own life. Without a vision, the people perish. If the local church is to survive it must be confident about its gospel message and its own value.

But why should a commitment to place and parish be a feature of a contemporary evangelism? Have we not been told a thousand times, ever since the *Mission-shaped Church* report that we all live rootlessly, and associate in networks, and the territorial parish is a feature only of 'inherited church', and is no longer relevant. Andrew Davison and I argued in *For the Parish* that such a perspective first, could describe only a very middle-class life-style, with time and transport and money for such mobility, and secondly, ignored the way that such networks were themselves rooted in place – the local school being a key example.[3] Thirdly, in such a situation we envisioned the church as all the more important a place to honour but integrate our many fractured identities and commitments.

Since then the social and political world has moved on. Not only has locality as a mode of radical resistance to globalisation been acknowledged, but we have seen in Brexit, in the French Presidential election and in the election of Donald Trump in America a sometimes toxic but none-the-less potent popular

3 Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank, *For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions* (Norwich: SCM Press, 2010), 75-85.

localism. David Goodhart's recent book, *The Road to Somewhere* divided the population into two broad groups, 'anywheres' and 'somewheres'.[4] The former had usually moved away from home for higher education, gained success in their profession and economic autonomy, and held socially liberal views. They failed to understand the less affluent 'somewheres', who were much more dependent on community and local identity. Goodhart believes that 'without a more rooted, emotionally intelligent liberalism … the possibility of ever more unpleasant backlashes cannot be completely ruled out'.[5] Goodhart's reasons are not purely strategic: he believes we have truly lost our way when we float free of our social, geographic and bodily emplacement.

I would argue that the 'anywhere' view of reality still has a sense of place but it is more like a spatial grid. If all places are equally meaningful, it is as if one operates a private panopticon – the all-seeing view from the London skyscraper office – in which one has conquered space and knows it from a privileged vantage point. I would also argue that in the negative nationalism or localism that sometimes characterises the defensiveness of the 'somewheres' there is a similar tendency to wish to fix place into space: to police boundaries and operate an insider/outsider classification, which is equally gridlike. One of my students, who lives on a Derby estate, for example, can never wear anything purple in her own street, lest she seem to be supporting a rival gang to that dominant in her area. It is a danger for the parish too, to degenerate into a badge of insider status.

The parish will have a future if it becomes what the architect Richard Rogers calls 'open-minded space', which is potentially dynamic and relational, when we humanize it through our embodied, lived experience. As that

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4 David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (London: C. Hurst and Co, 2017), *passim*.

5 Goodhart, *Road to Somewhere*, 21.

perceptive cultural critic, Michel Foucault, writes in his essay, Different Spaces':

> We do not live in a kind of void inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be coloured with various shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable one on another.[6]

We all need a compass that can orient our encounter of space, a set of relations, and that is why the parish is a particularly humane mode of belonging. The Bible, Brueggemann writes, demonstrates that 'a *sense of place* is a human hunger that the urban promise [of freedom through self-actualization] has not met'.[7] In my view, part of the mission of the Church of England is to offer this gifted sense of place, by which we enable people to be fully present to their material circumstances in a relational way, which avoids the them and us mentality of the embattled somewhere, and the lonely individualism of the anywhere mentality.

Angela Tilby wrote recently in a *Church Times* column: 'the Church of England cannot be anything other than what it is: a Church with a mission and ministry to the particular places, communities and histories that constitute England'.[8] A recent YouGov poll among Church of England clergy found that 83% of them still valued the parish system, a presence in every community.[9]

6 Michel Foucault, 'Different Spaces', *Essential Works of Michel Foucault 2. Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, ed. James Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York: New Press, 1998), 175-85 (178).

7 Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge*, revised edn (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 4.

8 Angela Tilby, 'The Call to Minister to England', *Church Times*, 21st April, 2017, 13.

9 See http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus_uploads/document/5f5s31fk47/Results-for-Anglican-Clergy-Survey-08092014.pdf, accessed 15th May, 2017.

While there are also a number of mission initiatives under the Fresh Expressions banner, many of those are church plants, and thus equally a commitment to place, or Messy Church, which is usually run by a local parish.
Yet in these parishes we have to somehow mediate between the ‘anywhere’ alienation from place and body of so much modern life and the ‘somewhere’ inversion of it, which I have argued is also in some way in accord with it. This is the hunger for an unknown god of our own modern Athens: ‘to love, do good deeds, *meet together* and encourage one another’ as the vicar of fictional Broadchurch put it in his sermon. Where to begin? My vision of the parish for the coming century begins with something so foundational and blindingly obvious that you may think it not worth mentioning, and that is prayer. This is something positive and of infinite value that can be as well done by three old ladies as a packed congregation of hundreds. It can be done as well by one old person lying awake in pain at night. Our faithful of whatever age and mobility have this precious task to fulfil, to join with the prayer of our high priest, Jesus Christ, at the heavenly altar in reconciling the world to him. Much of the Church outside the evangelical movement and the religious orders has lost a belief in the power of prayer. It is not a slot-machine, but neither is it a series of pious hopes: it is a mystery, by which we align our wills with that of God, and in that synergy anything is possible. The parish is first and foremost a focus for prayer.

Parochial prayer is also intercession, by which local concerns are remembered, but moved beyond the parochial. Intercession is a mode of education by which we do the difficult work of learning how truthfully to connect local need and what is just and right. Listening to intercessions, I am aware of how faithfully local churches offer prayer for Syria, refugees and so on, but how rarely one hears prayer about the local shop closure, hospital dispute or PCC elections. To pray seriously about the roof repairs, or the city’s economic problems and cuts, is a way of helping people towards an

understanding of how to relate to their own context, and to inhabit it in a godly fashion. To pray about your town, your street, your church, makes you fully present to it, and prevents that sense of skyscraper mastery. And as well as interceding about need and difficulty, prayer of celebration and thanksgiving is equally valuable.

The parish of the twenty-first century should be a school of prayer, not only in the form of intercession, although all those that offer it should have regular training and support, but in private prayer. This suggestion came to me from a professional scientist, Rupert Sheldrake, who had himself been asked about prayer by other scientists. We may be an increasingly secular culture, but huge numbers of people with no religious affiliation pray, many more than say they believe in God!. I think of the young mother, Carla Andrew, who was interviewed on the BBC News last year after the return of her little daughter, who had been taken away from her on a mistaken accusation of physical abuse. Her face alight with joy and tears, she just kept repeating, ‘it’s a miracle’ ‘I’m not religious,’ she added, ‘but I prayed every night’. People like Carla light candles and leave prayers in churches and cathedrals in their thousands, when the chance is offered them. Rupert Sheldrake suggests that every parish, using a simple guide that could be provided as a blueprint, offer a regular ‘how to pray’ course, open to anyone. With a written guide, those who might have done the course with the priest to begin with, could lead it themselves. I really do believe that we have huge untapped resources in our prayer, not just in gaining results but in forming disciples, and in valuing our present congregations.

Secondly, and again linked to this aim of mediating between anywhere and somewhere, the parish can be a place that offers mediation and representation. This is really an outworking of the intercession and celebration I have already outlined. Here the building can be a resource of great value. Indeed, I sometimes wonder whether the criticism of the parish system as a barrier to mission is not actually a cover for the fact that they cost a great deal to

maintain, especially because we have a world-leading collection of ancient parish churches. This is a problem but a separate problem, and the two should not be confused. If we could only begin to see churches as a missional resource to be used as effectively as possible, we could be so much more creative and imaginative in their development. If we have learnt one thing in the first two decades of this new century it is that nothing is certain and the future is unpredictable. Assuming decline may be as mistaken as in the later eighteenth century, when many of these same churches were in a run-down and decrepit condition with hardly any congregation. From another perspective, fund-raising can itself be seen as a missional activity, in which a community reflects upon the value and function of the building which they are trying to repair or extend. It is quite astonishing how rural congregations keep the roofs on their ancient buildings, but this is partly due to the fact that they are so wholly local and resilient. Group them in benefices but do not disturb their structure, or you will really cut their life away.

Very many parish churches from villages to inner-cities actually already mediate and represent their area, because the kind of people who come to church tend to be active in the community in formal as well as informal ways, so that just looking round the congregation one sees representatives of the parish council, surgery focus group, CAB, hospice visitors. The think tank, ResPublica, did some research for the Church of England, which resulted in the report, *Holistic Mission: Social Action and the Church of England*, which discovered a huge proportion - 79% - of congregations were involved in running church social action projects, while 90% of their members were volunteering in other projects, which were very local, no more than two miles from home. And

despite the perception of people travelling to attend niche churches, 88% of those sampled similarly travelled under two miles to attend church.[10]
I would love to see the parish church in the future even more used by the community for lunch clubs for the elderly, libraries, post-offices, advice centres, co-operatives, art exhibitions, local history groups, baby clinics, plays and films. This is already happening as the provision of these services is dropped due to financial constraints. Public libraries began in parishes, however, so we are returning to earlier models. Indeed, in the Middle Ages, when respect for the sacred nature of the church building was so high, the nave would be used for making deals, signing witness statements, corralling dogs and all sorts of social activities. St Wulfram's in Grantham hosts a giant 'ice' skating rink inside the church during Advent but carries on with daily Eucharist around it – indeed, that is part of its missional purpose. And before it is taken down, a Eucharist and then an informal family service are actually held upon it. It is one way in which people can begin to half-belong, as in drama groups and other church activities, and we need to find ways to extend such involvement. Music is a key here. At Grantham the director of music takes a singing lesson in each local primary school, and out of this has amassed a choir of fifty children, boys as well as girls (30/20). In the report, *A Time to Sow* on Anglo-catholic church growth in London, choirs were central to this growth among children and young people. The parish that survives will be a centre of creativity as well as community.

The journalist and writer Simon Jenkins, who has promoted these outward-facing community usages of the church, goes so far as to want to take ancient churches away from the Church and devote them to secular use. I think many parishioners, including those who never actually attend, would be horrified. For the parish church can only represent the community if it points it

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10 *Holistic Mission: Social Action and the Church of England*, ResPublica Reprt at http://www.respublica.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/mfp_ResPublica-Holistic-Mission-FULL-REPORT-10July2013.pdf, accessed 2nd May, 2017.

away from itself towards God. It has to be a Jacob's ladder, with commerce up and down: in the words of the poet, Francis Thompson, 'pitched between heaven and Charing Cross'.

But place needs to be symbolically represented and acknowledged, and to be a source of meaning if we are to be truly present to it. One way in which to help people to inhabit place as a gift is to join in the charity Common Ground's Parish Maps scheme, which began in 1995, in which a community draws a 'counter-map', in which they mark the things they value in their local area: trees, funny graffiti, anything really. It could be a community project under the auspices of the church or the school and could involve any other local groups you can identify. Ask the shopkeepers to join in. Then display a giant laminated copy outside the church and hold a meeting to discuss your findings. In our book, Andrew and I commend Sam Wells', photography project, in which a single mothers' group was invited to photograph the area as they saw it and exhibit their work in the church.

What such projects reveal is that place is not a piece of static turf but a communal imaginary, a series of relational co-ordinates. Such counter-mappings as I have described can also can be used to explore questions of justice and the nature of power in an area. If there are areas frightening to older people, or nowhere for the young to meet, these can be exposed and communal decision-making begun.

An example of how to develop this sense of representation can be found in an area in east Nottingham called Colwick, which consists of some mainly twentieth-century housing, which was once next to an older settlement, now cut off from it by a giant bypass. A local parish priest worked really hard at the primary school, going in two or three times a week, starting an after-school club, which developed also a Bible study group for adults, several of whom are now confirmed and part of the congregation. The close ties between the only two real public institutions school and church - in the rather featureless area,

apart from a Lidl, has led to an increased self-confidence as an actual locality. A replacement priest for my clerical friend was an artist, and she was commissioned to work with children to design and make a light sculpture to represent the school and there is now an attractive sign, ‘welcome to Colwick Village’, at the speed limit off the bypass. For parishes are not just the beneficiaries of times of cultural stability: they engender it, especially when it is under threat, as Ben Quash has argued in his book of the value of abiding.[11]

Ben Quash notes also the importance of hospitality as an aspect of abiding, and hospitality would be my third hope for the future of the parish. For only with a stable, ongoing commitment to place is this generosity possible. Our openness to the ‘cure of souls’ – all souls – is what makes our heart, and is where our commitment to evangelism and the pastoral are one. Cathedrals are getting much better at being open to all comers, even during services, and seeing that as missional. Birmingham cathedral is a fine example of this hospitality in the way it went about its centenary celebrations with the Something Good projects. The fleet of thousands of golden soul boats suspended above the nave honoured the specificity and value of lives of people of all creeds and none, as did the amazing sound installation in which the voices of football supporters blended with choristers to sculpt a day’s experience in the heart of the city.

Local churches are not cathedrals, but being open at times of particular need is something smaller churches can offer too: I was astonished to discover that any time the quite rural church where I was a curate was open in the week, people would turn up, and often seeking help of a spiritual kind. The church was not geographically central; people locally knew it had to be kept mostly locked because of vandalism; yet they came. There is of course the spiritual openness of the parish system that will embrace all comers for baptism and so on but the physical openness is also a form of sacred hospitality. A friend with a series of

11 Ben Quash, *Abiding* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 28.

North Yorkshire parishes keeps a kettle and cake for walkers; other parishes in Manchester offer a simple tea and toast breakfast for passing workers in the week. City or town centre churches can offer sanctuary late on Friday or Saturday nights in association with street pastors. One benefit of a church used more frequently for community activities is that it can be kept open for longer periods, without the need for an army of volunteers.

Our hospitality however, is always more than physical sustenance. For you cannot have a sense of place as meaningful without a sense of the sacred, just as you cannot have a concept of a common good for society without something beyond material needs and desires. And although every part of the earth is sacred, we need holy places to mark that. Sarah Boss, a church historian and theologian greatly loved the Quaker tradition in which she was raised and for whom every place was holy and every day was Easter Day so there was no need for special days or places. But she came to see that she could not recognise Easter without celebrating Holy Week, or everywhere as holy without recognising an exemplar. Every church is a Jacob's ladder, 'twixt heaven and Charing Cross' and which renders Charing Cross a sacred or redeemable place – for we can blaspheme space by using it for evil or grasping it unjustly

. The image of Jacob's ladder is an appropriate one because the sacred place we offer in the physical building is actually itself a journey and a trafficking. A whole interlocking sequence of spaces articulate and move one through a world. Like the Jewish temple, the church is an image of the whole creation – here shown in the creatures carved everywhere, and its journey from Eden to the New Jerusalem. The sacred place reveals to us our exile as well as the way home. It is there to challenge and transform us. Somehow we need to balance intimacy and wonder, which we have too often lost in

what a character in a novel by Patrick Gale calls ‘cheerful community clutter’. Among the many reasons for the rise of secularism, Alan Gilbert suggests that it is the church herself who has embraced secularism. I was examining the website of a diocese I will not name – not this one – and under ‘church life’ was people meeting for clubs, social work and so on without any mention whatsoever of prayer or worship. The parish church of the future will, I hope, be even more clearly a site of other values, of palpable holiness, of stillness, of beauty, and you in the aptly-named St Michaels and All Angels, are already offering.

It is often worship that converts, as in the case of the journalist Peter Hitchens. I would argue that instead of endlessly seeking to become relevant by, as someone suggested to me last week, wearing jeans to ‘come alongside people’ when baptising their child, we should offer worship with seriousness, not laughing nervously at the thought of resisting evil, but taking each pastoral office deeper, making baptism a drama not just a celebration, and reorienting people to see the angels ascending and descending. Ironically, at a time when the church is hesitant about the supernatural, people beyond experience it in great numbers. 41% of women and 28% of men believe in angels, figures confirmed in two separate studies in 2004 and 2010, while 29% overall believe in the Judeo-Christian idea of the guardian angel. 7% have spoken with or seen angels, rising for some reason to 17% in Nottingham![12] It is perhaps we who fail to ‘turn but a stone and start a wing’. Our churches and scriptures are full of angels.

I have a theory about the increasing relevance of the holy angels in a secularised world, which is relevant to my theme of missional place. We live

12 The ICM and Bible Society polls were all discussed in *The Guardian* on 2nd December, 2012. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/dec/02/lorna-byrne-angels-interview-supernatural , accessed 15th May, 2017.

in a time of increasing economic, political and ecological crisis, yet there is little political debate or real choice. Consumerism is turning sour and globalisation recognised for the violent injustice it embodies. People feel helpless and unable to change anything. Civil society itself and all the mediating institutions that enabled political participation have atrophied: charities, trades unions, societies have all lost huge amounts of power and members. Identity politics, focused on individual rights and without a generous understanding of the common good is all that is left and is really thin. Angels represent the principle of mediation that has been lost: they are messengers of God, representing nations and people. It is angels that the unchurched often believe they become at death, as is witnessed on prayer cards left in our cathedral; it is angels the media call the Christian women who tended the dying Lee Rigby and sought to talk to his killers.

. The parish finds its true fulfilment when it fulfils this angelic role and mediates between our many identities and interests and 'gathers' the polity that is the modern self in worship where true wholeness is found in self-offering. It finds true fulfilment when it opens to local community and allows its different forms of life expression and debate. It finds fulfilment when it allows its co-ordinates to understand how centre and periphery relate. The gift of place allows one the confidence and embodiment to speak truth to power: to name the injustices. Simon Jenkins in the Guardian newspaper argued that in the end governments are not afraid of twitter or the internet: 'it is the street not the screen where the real politics lies'.[13] The power of the parish lies in the fact that it is about bodies encountering other bodies in a place, just as that of Taksim Square in Istanbul lay in the people who lay down in front of the bulldozers. Facebook may be an efficient tool for communication of times and meetings but as an expression of community

13 Simon Jenkins, *The Guardian*, Wednesday 12 June, 2013, 28.

it is more a display of narcissism and self-regard. Twitter may have brought out the occupiers but it was the taking of space as place that made them a challenge. For locality is the real challenge to globalisation, by people beginning to own place as a gift and to try to live sustainably, shop locally and eat seasonably.

We mediate and share the whole *habitus* of Christian community. We are ourselves the good news as those who have been forgiven and reconciled, who live in communion. For the offering of place in the parish includes history and tradition, which are mediated through liturgy. Only through the given-ness of liturgy, which we do not invent, are we able to be challenged and changed. To be a place of transformation, we need roots that nurture and liturgy that challenges us. This has to be taught: people have become tone deaf to worship as they have lost their sense of roots. And we have to find what Ann Morisy calls 'apt liturgy' to direct outpourings of loss and desire after a local catastrophe or important event.[14] But these actions should begin to nurture a hunger for the transcendent, for pattern and liturgical transformation. They should move people deeper.

I have already commended the report, *Setting God's People Free.* What I value most within it is the idea that we need a theology of the laity, in which their daily life and work is affirmed and seen as missional. To that end, my fourth hope for the parish is that it become a real site of Christian formation. When I lived in the United States it was normal to spend the whole of Sunday morning at church, with a bring-and-share lunch. We attended what had formerly been a black church in the days of segregation, in a poor area. And yet that church had every Sunday a Bible study group and a theology group, as well as a talk by

14 Ann Morisy, *Journeying Out: A New Approach to Christian Mission* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 156-61

someone of a more practical nature over lunch. St Margaret's Anglican Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in a mixed downtown district actually calls itself an ecclesial university. This Lent they offered wood-turning, philosophical theology, a film and justice course, quilting and prayer, as well as the usual Bible study, meditation and a reading group. Parishioners offer their own skills to offer regular courses, in which all types of learning are represented. Not all churches can be as creative as St Margaret's but the idea of formation being central to the parish's life can be embodied in different ways. I recently took part in a debate organised by SCM press about the value of theology, academic theology, to the Church, and it had an overwhelming response, especially afterwards from those who watched it on you tube. In all aspects of life, people are trained and prepared for their tasks, and yet we patronise lay people, and suggest that serious theology is an irrelevance for them. It only clings on at the hem of ministerial training. Recently, I was invited to give a talk at an inner city church, as part of a project for a book. I therefore prepared something quite heavy-weight intellectually, only to arrive to find a mainly working-class audience. I am ashamed to say I panicked for a moment, believing I had prepared totally the wrong material. How wrong I was! This was an audience hungry to talk about the depths of meaning in Christ's passion and not only did they respond positively to the talk but they asked a number of searching questions. They were lucky enough to have a priest who knew that he must, in the words of Colossians, 'present everyone fully mature in Christ' (Col. 1.28-9).

If we are to empower lay people to be disciples in their workplace, they need first to be resourced as Christians. This can be done in practical ways. Martyn Percy makes a good suggestion for the valuing of the laity as the church by proposing that parishes buy back outright or by mortgage, their vicarage.[15] It would be up to them how they use it, whether for a full-time priest, or let out to

15 Percy, *Future Shapes of Anglicanism*, 79-81.

rent. Managing the house would itself be a mode of education, not so much in the practicalities of maintenance but in strategy for their own mission as a parish. But being taught the riches of the Christian tradition of reflection upon the nature of God and reality is equally important. Yes, it is crucial to use the wisdom and insight of personal experience, and indeed, to reflect upon it. But you need something rich and strong in Christian thought and Christian Scripture to work with. Paradoxically, you will be able to challenge injustices in your own locality or work much more effectively if you understand the root of your critique. I recall the way a group of ordinary Christians, most of them without university education, enjoyed reading the early Christian text, the *Didache*, and how they applied it to their own church situation and need for reconciliation. It is my strong belief that if the Church is to survive, it must be through really valuing and honouring those people it has as a gift, as well as the work they do, and the potential within them. We have been given the Spirit, the Gift himself and Giver of Gifts so that we too may be gifts to others. In the case of the Holy Spirit the mediation and the gift are one and cannot be separated. As Christians called to evangelism, we too are mediators and gift in one, like the angels moving up and down Jacob's ladder.

We will only re-evangelise this country when we have the confidence in the Spirit as the giver of all the gifts we need, when we use our historic parish churches imaginatively, when we trust the faithful people in our pews as God's angelic gift to us, and embrace our calling to share the gospel with the whole people where we are, in the gift of place. As poet Francis Thompson wrote, as he lay, a homeless man, beneath a London Bridge:

The angels keep their ancient places;—
Turn but a stone, and start a wing!
'Tis ye, 'tis your estrangèd faces,
That miss the many-splendoured thing.

But (when so sad thou canst not sadder)
Cry;—and upon thy so sore loss
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder
Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross .[16]

Rev Dr Alison Milbank, Naomi Drake, Janet & Hywel Hughes.

Rev Dr John Hughes (1978-2014)

16 Francis Thompson, 'The Kingdom of God', *Works of Francis Thompson*, 3 vols (New York: Charles Scribner, 1913), 2, 226.