

Listening & Discerning on the Way

A 'kairos' moment for the Church

The long decline of Christendom arguably began a century ago with the First World War and the last great pandemic in this country. The flu virus of 1918 – 19 led to 50 million deaths worldwide with 228,000 in the UK. A hundred years on we find ourselves at another moment of crisis, perhaps even more disorienting given the illusion of control we have built up since.

The Tragedies and Christian Congregations project group led by Professor Christopher Southgate has observed that an initial flurry of lockdown 'heroic action' by church leaders is inevitably being followed by a 'disillusionment' phase as the reality of the situation sets in. I have noticed that while some of my friends in ministry remain energised, others are owning a sense of being tired, stressed and feeling overwhelmed. So, 'earthing' the realities by naming what is happening, being present to the questions and pain ('living the questions,' in the researchers' words) are essential before we can start to make sense of it all.

I suggest that we are being given a kairos moment* in the middle of our more usual anxiety about the future of the Church, and our attempts to manage our decline. Kairos time contrasts with ordinary chronological time as a 'God moment' – an opportunity for God's extraordinary grace or work.

In John's Gospel kairos (time) and hora (hour) are used almost as synonyms. 'My time (kairos) is not yet here', says Jesus in John 7.6. Throughout the gospel, Jesus waits for his 'hour', the time when God's glory will be revealed. The kairos arrives in 13.1: 'Jesus knew that the hour (hora) had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father'. In the events that follow, God is at work to bring the creation back to life ('that you may have life', says John). The same pattern is seen in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark & Luke) where the intense activity of Jesus' ministry is followed by Jesus' passion, the time when he is 'done to', the kairos time where love's redeeming work is done.

We have not seen the kind of deep learning in the Church as a whole which can help us find God's 'preferred and promised future' in the deep waters of post-Christendom. For the end of Christendom requires change in the way we are, from a predominantly 'come to us' church culture to one in which God's people spot what God is up to in the world and form relationships around God's movement. We are not yet used to this. Try asking 'what God is doing' and we will usually come up with a list of things that we are doing – at national, diocesan and local levels.

*Kairos in the New Testament means 'the appointed time in the purpose of God' (New Dictionary of Christian Theology)

Such a profound shift is deeply adaptive: it will require extraordinary grace and learning. Have we been given such a kairos moment?

Such a process cannot be managed, directed or taught by those who already know the answers, as those people do not exist. We have never found our missional feet in post-Christendom before. This is about God's movement or flow, not our own best ideas, and therefore it must be discerned.

In normal life, with our busyness and our illusion of control, such discernment has so far been out of our collective reach. Indeed corporate discernment will not be easy now. Sense-making can only come from embracing the present reality, not short-circuiting it, and the temptation to live in denial, to get back to normal is always present.

The Partnership for Missional Church (PMC) process, overseen by Church Mission Society, now working in several English dioceses, and the parallel process in our own diocese (which we call Missional Learning Communities) suggest a way forward. PMC is all about corporate spiritual discernment so that the church can now find its way into God's preferred and promised future (a PMC phrase). We need to engage humbly in a process of spiritual discernment in order to learn together now.

What might such a process grounded in discernment look like in a local church, a deanery or a whole diocese?

In practice I am finding that two key questions which direct us to what God is doing, rather than what we are doing are "What are we noticing?" and "What are we learning?" Somehow, such an approach can engender a spirit of holy pondering (to use the word Luke attributes to Mary) rather than leading to a set of problems or solutions. In this way the conversation is framed around our corporate discernment of the movement of God.

Such discernment and reflection needs space. It might take an initial period of, say, four to six weeks to consider the two questions, whether at local or diocesan level, to gather responses and offer a further period of reflection. In a trusting environment a third question may be possible, "What are we noticing that we can let go or, or even allow to die, that we may enter God's future for us?"

This should be a genuinely 'whole system' approach, recognising that insights are at least as likely to come from surprising and unrecognised sources as any leaders. We are familiar with this as the Benedictine principle that 'it is often to a junior that the Lord reveals what is best'. In the NHS for example we can be confident that practical wisdom under pressure has been

gathered from all sources, including the cleaners and the porters. In our present context this means using all our means, from the telephone to our Zoom worship and virtual coffee meetings, to listen for the Spirit's movement among the whole people of God.

All the while the focus must be on corporate spiritual discernment. This is not a way of gathering information, or collecting good ideas, far less a communications exercise or a way of managing the Church. In principle, such discernment should be a continuous practice. It will never be concluded. At the very least, an initial listening period could be extended to include further prayer and reflection. A simple summary of 'what God might be saying' should be compiled (for such discernment is always tentative, at least at first, before it grows in its weight). Then, in the Anglican tradition, a particular role of the bishop is to articulate what is being heard, what Rowan Williams has described as the role of Interpreter, 'helping people make sense to and of each other'. In the case of a diocese, the process could therefore conclude, in this first instance, with the bishop offering their own sense and reflection.

One thing I am noticing is that this kind of godly listening and articulating leads to nothing short of delight among those engaged. It is not an easy process, but if we do believe the future belongs to God, such spiritual discernment is truly required.

Could it be that, in this sense, God is getting us where God needs us? This deeply disturbing, painful 'extended moment' may also be a great gift. If only we can let go of what we think we know, and listen deeply, we could be in for some surprises and no little change, but no less delight.

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