A new way of being Church for a new millennium

Will the next millennium prove to be an even greater test for the Church than the last? New fundamentalist imperialisms; the undermining of ideologies and institutions once counted as authoritative; the combining of new technologies with powerful economic forces to make the world a pluralist, commodified, global village; galloping urbanisation — these and so much more threaten the very platform upon which the Church has in the past taken up its rather privileged position in the world.

The institutional church is losing its status and power in this fast-changing environment and this I believe is the key to understanding the fear which is energising the forces of conservatism both in the institutional Churches themselves and in some of the new thrusting evangelical operations. This dynamic will, I suspect, continue well into the new millennium and many of us will therefore have to develop a very resilient faith to get through its early years.

Prayer and networking will be crucial for us through this period, until the old wine-skins burst and a new Church emerges. During this time we must play our part by setting up acted parables and sacramental signs against the dominant cultures, designed to point towards what the Church must become for the future. I want to suggest what I believe some of the marks might be of this emerging alternative for the Church in the new millennium.

1. The Church must be true to its Catholicity

The Church must acknowledge that the pursuit of truth is not an excuse for exclusivism.

Holding our beliefs humbly in dialogue gives us the possibility of learning further truth from other searchers after God rather than remaining the prisoners of our own dogmatic deafness. Diversity is not a design fault in creation but given by God so that in dialogue with difference we may learn that truth is not a statement but a relationship.

The Church must be a bridge-builder for community, to guard against the patronising exclusivity and parochialism which is so alien to the Jesus of the Gospels. Such community networking by Christians as they make new friends and alliances will nevertheless go alongside giving rapt attention to the treasures of our faith, its beliefs, traditions and practices – reinforcing the solidarity and community of belonging amongst Christian members, telling the story and living together as the Eucharistic community.

Whilst guarding and nurturing our Christian community's traditions, this networking will entail remaining open to engagement with different others and with the issues of society that might put these same faith traditions to the test to see whether they still carry God's truth adequately. At the same time, the societal assumptions and opinions of others must be critiqued from the perspective of the traditions which are part of our story as Church. This dialogue between our traditional treasures and the new world challenges can be Spirit-inspired if always the Christian community offers itself to continued encounter with God.

2. The Church must hold fast to its encounter with the Transcendent.

If the Church in the new millennium is not God-orientated it will have nothing of substance to offer in its dialogue with the world. If however our life together is nurtured by prayer, worship and loving action - through all of which the creator God continues to encounter us - our concern will then be for God's mission in the world and not our own. With our attention not on ourselves but upon the Holy One, we then begin to perceive how often God is making God-self present to so many of the 'unchurched' who, while not using churchy language, know themselves to be touched by God's presence.

The Church has become such an eccentric sub-culture that it is losing its ability to engage with the world where God is so evidently at work. If the Church turns faith and religious experience into 'religion' or sect, it will defend itself against being touched by God and will become yet more irrelevant to those who yearn to find ways of articulating what God is to them in their experience.

3. The Church must make its Option for the Poor

God has made us in God's own image with great potential. Where this potential is unnecessarily or unjustly restricted and our 'full humanity' is held captive, God's purposes are thwarted. It is the Divine Mission to redress this marring of God's image in us, and the constant focus of the Biblical narrative is the liberation and salvation of humanity so that this potential can be properly realised.

The Church must therefore be on its guard to analyse all that holds God's children back from realising their divinely-inspired potential. Jesus' strategy for redressing this balance is to be alongside the poor in order to liberate all creation.

The Church must in the next millennium therefore adopt this strategy of being alongside the poor, for from this perspective the world's issues become more stark and clear and we meet the Holy God amidst the sinfulness so that our way forward is illumined. Our operation will often most usefully be at local level in small, inclusive issue-focussed groupings, where more intimate worship is possible and where considerable networking with other women and men of good-will is more likely. They will gather together from time to time in the larger Eucharistic community of believers for larger worship services, but usually operating locally whilst thinking globally. They will need however to network effectively if issues are to be addressed at national and international levels through the skilful collaboration of these smaller groups.

The abiding concern of such groups when engaging in parabolic or sacramental action must be whether or not the group's life is conforming to that of the man who rode into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. First, does it ride into Jerusalem? – does our life together confront injustice? and second, do we ride humbly on a donkey, or do we concern ourselves too much with ourselves?

We will certainly need to be a self-sacrificial Church for the new millennium, for to make the Jesus challenge fresh for our time will lead to crucifixion, as ever it did.

4. The Interim Church

I have spoken of my pessimism for the shorter term, for I judge that the forces of conservatism are very strong, but I am always excited and overjoyed that even now there are many signs, in parishes and Christian groups, of this sacrificial way of being Church.

Issues are being addressed at many levels; the poor and excluded are the central concern of so many Christians; lay women and men are being helped to engage in a non-Churchy way as Christians in the work-place; and attentive worship is being offered in a whole range of ways. Christians are reaching out to others of good-will and creating networked communities of inclusive concern.

The institutional Church must learn to travel light for the new millennium. It is held back by its own historical accretions. Brave souls work within it at many levels, encouraged by the prayers of many, but always in the teeth of those who do not realise that if the Church seeks to save its life it must lose it. If it chooses to give itself away, God will richly bless it for the new millennium.

+ Laurie Bradwell