

Enriching our theology

Lincoln Diocesan Day 2005

Long before we knew that Bishop Alistair was bound for higher things, Bishop John had asked me to spend a little time with you all to look at the way in which we do our theology together – and to ask that question particularly with the New Era Vision document and process in mind.

I was delighted to say yes, although I am always overwhelmed with apprehension when asked to do such a thing in the presence of so many of you who are probably more qualified theologically than I am myself – therefore I see my task as seeking to prompt some questions rather than to provide answers: and perhaps that's what most significant theology tries to do – always acknowledge that now we see only through a glass darkly.

Even our best theology is only tinsel in comparison with the truth of God.

But I thought that we might begin by thinking about the nature of theology and then we can move on to thinking about the theology of the New Era Vision.

So, the nature of theology. Let's start with that old chestnut of a question: It's an old question but still a good one. 'do we Christians have the answers to take to a situation, or, does God best reveal Godself to us in and through situations?' That's the question, and most of us would probably answer: 'it's a bit of both.' We do indeed have the revealed truth of our faith to offer, but also we seek to listen to the Holy Spirit who, it is promised, will lead us into all truth – will reveal new things still.

Everybody here is a theologian. We may not be reading theology – but, we are all doing theology, insofar as we are seeking in our lives to be true to what is revealed, both in the sacred texts and in what God is doing all around us. Call it: 'Faith seeking understanding'. We're all at it – but with varying degrees of success. 'We're playing all the right notes', as Eric Morecombe said, 'but not necessarily in the right order.' To that extent, we are all theologians.

Anglican tradition says that the most formative theology was done by those we are still prone to call 'the Fathers' (although we note that one or two Mothers get in there now and again). And it was Evagrius of Pontus who offered the best definition of a theologian that I've yet found. He said a theologian is 'one whose prayers are true.' So to that extent, Every praying Christian who seeks to make honest sense of the world and seeks to honour God *at the same time* is a theologian.

So how do you do your theology? Suppose you have to visit a woman who has lost her child in a flu epidemic? How do you tackle it? After prayer, I'm sure, and in that you follow in the tradition of Evagrius.

But when you get to the doorstep do you reach back into your internalised note-pad of your theology lectures for some answers you prepared earlier?: 'despite your son's death, it's the best of all possible worlds; My dear, we live in a vale of tears; illness is God's punishment for sin; or the less precise, 'God loves you anyway'.

But when you get off the doorstep and venture inside, do you find yourself just sitting with the woman and seeing what emerges, hoping to make some theological connections. We can overdo the 'making connections' bit however. My own definition of a theologian is 'one who makes connections, even where there are no connections.' That's the trouble with 'on the hoof' theology.

Most parish priests will tell us however that what we learn from listening to the woman, knocks our prepared theological answers into a cocked hat. She has a burning anger, the child had Down's Syndrome which caused a family break-up. Since then she's blamed the child and now she feels remorse at the husband, herself and God, and is of course angry with you.

Parish priests will say that there is usually more to be learnt from such encounters than we take to them. Yes, we do learn a lot from being in these situations, but what is the nature of what we learn in a case like that? Is it really theological? Learning to be nice with people in distress, may not make us a theologian. But learning something about God from the encounter might be. And becoming something as a consequence might be – we might call that sort of doing theology, 'priestly formation'.

And is anything, any new truth about God, actually revealed in such an encounter or is revelation learnt elsewhere, from the tradition, before we 'take it into' the situation?

It's an old and simple question, but it's at the heart of the Windsor Report's discussion of the 'development' of the Church's understanding of God.

It may be a simple question, but our answers will determine how we live, move and have our being as theologians.

Of course, it's a power question too. Do I know the answers and my flock must listen to me expound them? Does the congregation know the answers and I haven't got a clue? And if God is speaking to us both, then how do we handle that when we arrive at different answers?

If we are firmly, or even marginally, in the 'the revelation has already happened' school, then is that which has been revealed now simply to be 'applied'? Is the task of mission to go and subdue creation so that it conforms to God's will? Is that the essence of mission?

And for those who prefer to answer that revelation still operates and we've still got lots to learn – then that is a risky option indeed. Jesus warns us that the Holy Spirit is very unconstitutional, blowing where it wills. It may blow all your notions out of the window – whether they be about traditional Church or new ways of being church. Be ready for the Holy Spirit to say: 'Goodbye to all that Church talk, and think again.'

This question of whether theology is designed to allow us to take the truth into our situations and apply it there, or whether theology helps us to see the truth revealed in our situation, persists in other ways too.

We've all seen the wayside pulpit type quote which states that 'Jesus is the answer' – but even if he is the answer, the Church all too often seems to have forgotten what the question was.

Many a course syllabus, which describes itself as 'Contextual Theology' on closer inspection turns out to be the old wolf in sheep's clothing. It does not purport to be 'abstract' theologising, but it is still nothing much more than 'applied' theologising. We've got the answer in the books – what we've got to do is find the appropriate page in the book which applies to this situation, and we'll be away.

It describes itself as Contextual theology but actually it turns the Scripture into something like a computer software manual. Like the computer, the world is broke, it needs a fix. Work out what particular type of software you're running (i.e. analyse the situation) and if we look in the manual it will tell us what to do.

But the reality is that the manual often seems to be a translation from the Japanese. And it's not until you work out what is wrong with the computer that suddenly the manual becomes understandable.

It's often not until you become fully aware of the intricacies of the situation that you begin to make sense of what the tradition was trying to get at. Or just maybe, the writer of the tradition had never come across this situation anyway.

So we need a way of doing theology which encompasses a number of things.

First, we need some thinking and action which is bang on with the situation we're in. God takes incarnation that seriously, then so must we. This is where pastoral experience (that woman mourning her child) and the reading of the signs of the times (as our Catholic sisters and brothers call it) come to the fore. To be theologians we must be fully incarnated Christians who own their own incarnation.

Second, our theologising must also be steeped in prayer – it must stand in awe of the God who is still active and still making all things new and still revealing Godself in our every breathing moment. It must be a Burning-Bush theology – on the look-out for the fiery God in every desert weed.

Third, our theologising must surely treasure the fact that God has been revealing Godself through the ages – that we stand in a line of inherited tradition with those who have gone before us. We have their witness all around us – we live and breathe it. In our scriptures, in our holy architecture, music, history, in our ecclesiology, structures of ministry, our worship forms and sacraments.

All these treasures are the tent pegs of the theological edifice in which God tabernacles with God's church. God in the midst.

Our theology will have to wrestle with the fact that we may no longer be in a situation from which we can understand what a particular tradition was on about – it originated in such a different incarnation – but know those traditions we must.

So how do we do justice to all this as we live our daily lives as theologians?

Let me offer a model of how we might go about it.

[SITUATION]

We never start doing our theology from a *tabula rasa* – a blank screen. We come at every situation with an already packed state of mind – steeped, if we are theologians, in the traditions of prayer, sacrament, reading of scripture and our ecclesiology.

But nevertheless our first theological step should be to steep ourselves incarnationally in the situation which faces us, without letting our traditions dominate our sensitivity. We want to be sensitive to all the vibes, and every good parish priest will know what that means. We listen to the stories being told, and recognise the passion of those caught up in the situation at hand.

[ANALYSIS]

Next, we try very carefully to analyse the situation. This is a process we so often miss. We are inclined to jump from the story – the felt experience – to the interpretation without first pausing to check everything out against all the disciplines God has given us. To go from the felt experience into interpretation is the sin that besets Northern Ireland where stories are pelted at the opposing side without a moment of care for the cold data to balance or even rectify the felt story.

It's a two way street of course. For during this theology of analysis we will also want the felt story to bring the cold data alive.

We often rush to theological reflection on the basis of story, the felt experience, not what is actually happening.

It is only when the felt story (the experience) is put together with the data (the analysis) that we should then dare to sink ourselves in the third theological step – theological reflection. Otherwise we're reflecting on our own figments rather than upon what God has sent.

But this 'theological reflection' element in the process is where all the traditions and disciplines of the academic theologian come into their own. We compare and contrast the present analysed situation with the Christian traditions in which we live and breathe.

We bring these two into such juxtaposition that they reflect both ways – the tradition throwing light upon the situation, but also allowing the situation to throw light on the tradition. And in the process, allowing the Holy Spirit to set fire to our imaginations – and see the vision.

This is the theological process of vision formation. Do it earlier and our vision will only be based on our own stories and our own analysis, not on the ongoing Story, the Faith Tradition, in which we stand. Only this way can we be sure that the story we are going to tell is compatible with **the** Story.

As you see this element of theological reflection is only one section of the theological endeavour, but miss it out of any decision-making and it could be the operation of any old bunch of people and not Christians at all. Miss this theological reflection out of the

decisions we make on the PCC and no wonder our PCCs looks like an evening with the Vicar of Dibley.

The final segment of the process of doing our theology is to act on the basis of the vision that has been formed by placing our analysed situation alongside the Traditions of the faith.

This is where we bring in all the tricks of good management – looking at resources, timing, legalities, ways and means. But we continue to appraise them in the light of the situation, the vision, and the faith which has spawned it. Our response will be carefully planned in accordance with all that we have learnt theologically thus far. So even the running of our projects must be a theological discipline, not just based on management tools off the shelf.

Some people say that before the theological cycle is complete, we must put in a fifth element – that of celebration after the response has been completed. But I really don't go along with that. And for two reasons.

First, celebration should happen at each phase. Celebrate the stories, celebrate the analysis and the reflection, the vision forming and the response. Worship and prayer and praise and parties are the name of the game all through the theological endeavour – 'a theologian is one whose prayers are true', and whose parties are raucous.

But second, to inject celebration at the end of the process does not leave room for failure – it assumes it's all going to work, that we will be a success. It leaves no room for the acknowledgement of the beauty of weakness.

Let me run an example by you.

[Parables in Action Story]

In a little backstreet church in Birmingham, we decided to do some bible study on the parables of Jesus. We were not a scholarly lot, but nevertheless, as we looked at each parable in turn we saw this same theological dynamic at work. Jesus had immersed himself in his culture and locality; had analysed it; and then reflected upon that in the light of his profound faith; and from that had devised a story which would speak into the situation and demand response.

Being a very practical working-class set of people, we decided to follow the same process – immerse ourselves in the locality of our parish, analyse out what the issues were, reflect theologically upon that and then tell a story which would impact our lives accordingly.

We began by telling our stories of our area. What it was like to live here – the danger on the streets, the poor housing conditions, the lack of adequate bus services and a lot more. We took photos, collected old Birmingham songs, pictures and anecdotes; and listened to some of our oldest inhabitants for their stories. Then we moved from this felt experience to the more clinical analysis. We went together to the reference library and drew maps of our area through the ages, working out just what the underlying causes of the present problems were. Masses of analysis, facts and figures, to set against our stories and pictures, brought us to the point of really being experts on what made our community tick – and what got in the way of it ticking properly.

We specified those issues and problems and wrote them up on wall charts so they were staring us in the face. We could have simply worked out what we were going to do about the issues and create a project – indeed that, it seems to me, is what most churches do.

But we were convinced that that would be wrong. We needed first to put those issues in the context of our Christian understandings. This was the essential moment of theological reflection. To do this we opened our bibles, remembered the words of hymns, the stories of the saints, our experience of worship and prayers: and looked to see where the issues we were now facing in our community connected with anything that had been faced before in the traditions of our faith.

We found so many connections that we recorded them all on tape and I wrote some of them up into a book. It was only at that point that a Christian-based Vision began to emerge for us. And that in turn issued in an active response, where we set up a locally run community advice centre – run by and for the people.

We were properly trained through a series of National Citizens Advice Bureaux programmes, and our management structures were all based upon what we believed our faith was telling us.

After about a year of fund-raising, training, advertising and so on, we opened the centre. The Action-reflection process of theology was complete – and we had a big service in church to inaugurate it, and had a great party with curried goat and rice to celebrate. Next day we opened the doors – and no one came. In fact for a whole week, no one came our way. It was then that we realised that this is not a circle that you go round just the once and then it's completed. This theologising is a way of life.

So our Parables in Action group began the circle again. The story we now told was of all our preparation and the feeling of despair and frustration at the seeming failure of our project. And it was at this point that the deeper theology and reflection began to happen. We carefully analysed the situation, as we knew we must, but then we turned to the traditions of our faith once again.

We read the Psalms of Waiting – of frustrated longing. And as we did so, so we began to recognise that our experience of helplessness and waiting was so very similar to that of the local people we were seeking to serve. Their lives were spent largely at the behest of others, with very little power to affect what happened to them. This awareness prompted our black members to share how it had felt on arrival in the UK to be set aside and deskilled.

Our older members told similar stories about the affects of aging and invented a word for that experience. They chuckled when they called it 'ageism', so I wrote it up in the book. (that was in 1987 and the word seems to have caught on).

Unemployment too resonated with this frustrated waiting experience.

But to crown it all, the bible was telling us about an altogether different type and quality of waiting. Waiting with a purpose. St Matthew's gospel offered the most startling example of it. Jesus immersed himself in the Galilee situation and reflected upon it. He determined upon his mission and went to John for Baptism. We likewise had had a memorable service

of commissioning and now we expected to move into our mission. Then we noticed that Jesus had not moved into mission but had been dragged into the desert for a time of reflective waiting – a proper evaluation of his vision.

Stones into bread? We had forgotten during our CAB training that our intention was to go deeper than symptoms.

Throwing himself from the parapet? We had become rather over-proud of ourselves and our glossy project. Doing the right deed for the wrong reason.

Power on the Devil's terms?

So easy to become as bureaucratic as the Social Services, not a project by the people and for the people any more.

This theological reflection led the group into a very moving discussion of Power and Powerlessness. And in the light of that, we reworked our management structures and policies of the project. In time it became quite a successful operation. But had we made decisions only on the basis of Common Sense, then our project would have reflected not the Traditions of the Christian Faith but the prejudices of the dominant culture of our age.

So the cycle of Doing Theology is an ongoing one, shot through with prayer and attention to the question of Power.

1. It begins with total immersion: experiencing the situation.
2. It continues with analysis: proper understanding of what's going on.
3. Then onto Theological reflection: holding the situation up to the light of the gospel and holding the traditions of our faith up to the light of what God is giving us to deal with in our situation.
4. Then working from the resultant vision into responsive action.

The whole idea is so that our faith may inform our planning, action and strategy.

Let's pause there for some discussion before we move on to address the Diocesan New Era documents and their process; to see how our theology can best inform that process and our Diocesan Planning.

Question for discussion:

An example of when theology has informed you ministry.

How did it do that?

How do you make sure theology informs your ministry?

What is the style of theology you'd like to be operating?

Is this how you do it?

How do your people do their theology?

Give examples of how you do your theology during your ministry.

Development plans:

I have read many Diocesan Development plans and the best I've come across is that of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brentwood.

It is a riveting analysis of our present situation in the South East of England.

The Diocese lives in the shadow of the powerful Global City of London, with post-modernism, the global domination of Market-place values, believing not belonging and all the usual analysis that we've become accustomed to - but done exceedingly well.

Then comes a theological input - based largely upon Trinitarian theology of course. It's the in thing. The interesting thing is that I find it quite difficult to see the document making clear connections between that theology and their analysis of the situation. There may be links but they are not explicit. The theology does not seem to be theology of their situation but just a chapter lifted from a text book on the Trinity - it's interesting but not clearly related.

But then comes the strange thing - and it's a thing which every Diocesan Plan I've yet read seems to do. It then totally ignores all the brilliant work it's done on the Situation Analysis AND it ignores the Trinitarian theological input as well; and out of the blue it starts in to going about how we are going to cut clergy numbers and still keep the Church show on the road.

I can't for the life of me see why they bothered with the analysis and the theology. It occurred to me that if the hidden but besetting problem was 'clergy numbers and resources' - why didn't they start by up-fronting that and doing their analysis and theological reflection right there? - an analysis and theological reflection upon that problem. There's plenty of theology to be done about 'feeling unresourced' about 'realism in ministry', 'money', and so on, as well as about the more churchy questions of 'clergy', 'priesthood', and 'church life and Kingdom of God' - but none of it's there in the document.

Decisions in that Brentwood Plan come at you out of the blue, based presumably on best guesses and what they think is best British business practice. And that may be all well and good - but it's not based on any stated theology. Nor, as a matter of fact, is it based on the sociological situation analysis either.

Well it's easy to criticise, - so let me criticise some more. It seems to me that the Diocese of Lincoln has done what the Diocese of Chelmsford (my own diocese) has done. The original New Era Vision paper began with some brilliant Theological Reflection. Whoever wrote it deserves an accolade. To quote just one phrase: "God loves us as we are, and loves us too much to leave us that way." Simple and strong theology.

Next in that original document are set out twelve Key Principles of the Vision. One of the difficulties for the reader is that the Principles are stated, but the work which spawned them is not in the document. So we don't know where they come from. They are not based on the section on theology – at least I don't think they are. So on what previous notions and values are these Principles based? It might be helpful to do some theology of those Principles.

Next in the original New Era document, the process of work is set out. The Mission Area or Deanery Planning Groups set to work with a Mentor to help it along. The first task is to do some mapping, or as I have called it, a 'situation analysis' of each of the parishes. And the document asks us to have a heavy emphasis here on analysing our church structures. Next, a lot of work was to go on looking at how the church is impacting the localities through its buildings, its people and its groups. Then the group had to decide on a resultant plan for deployment and where to bring in new resources. So the Mission Plan takes shape, with budgets, timetables and so on. The document finishes by stressing that the Groups will want to surround the discussions with prayer and worship – so there is the reminder that space should be allowed in discussion for the intervention of the Spirit-filled imagination.

However, during the process, there's no explicit way mentioned of making sure that faith and life are mutually informing – in other words, we're not told to do any 'theology' about our situation. However we feel about theology it needs to be structurally part of our decision making processes. If, like me, you believe that theology is the second step of decision making, then we need to do our analysis, reflect on that theologically and then move to making our plans. If you take a more traditionalist line, and believe theology to be the first step (the more a priori position) then you build it in before the analysis. In the New Era process there's no suggestion of where in the process we should include this important step. It is all left to the Mission Area Groups.

It's great therefore to read in the Enriching New Era document, which we all have, that in fact in the responses to the process some theology does indeed appear, because some of the Deaneries could see that this was necessary to inject it. This document was written as a result of receiving all the responses from the deaneries. The receiving group tell us that they did not however feel that the process had issued in radical enough responses.

It bemoans the fact that those responses were:

1. too clergy centred,
2. lacked a theology of risk
3. didn't work from a basis of mission
4. and didn't take the plunge.

But I think that the reason for all this is that the process from which the responses were to derive were not expected to be shot through with theological reflection – and I wonder what the difference might have been if they had been mandated to work theologically. So what might they begin to look like if they are revisited now with theology in mind?

Like the earlier document, the New Era document is similarly blessed with some very succinct theological input: 'the Church', it says, is "Herald and Servant, Sacrament and Sacred Society, Congregational and Communal, Local and Universal, teaching and learning, a part of and yet apart from the world around." I guess the problem is that the Church we all know just doesn't look as good as that. That sort of a priori or abstract theology paints a very idealised picture and if the exercise we have to engage in is working out how the Church can become that ideal, we may be setting ourselves up to fail. And that could be because this sort of pre-existent theology can be accused of being less than incarnational. In the 'real' incarnational world the Church always falls short of its ideal. If we're Platonists we will take that ideal as the reality – as that which is 'true'. But does it help us with our deanery plans?

At its worst theology of an a priori nature is a crossword puzzle in the sky. But theology based on what God has given to us to live with can be a great tool to help put faith and life together. All the Diocesan Plans I've seen have this same difficulty. It's therefore easy to criticise them, but it's more challenging to enter in, and work at creating a process which would give us the Spirit-filled vision for our planning.

But where your document scores points on most others I've seen is that yours is an invitation to everyone to become fully involved in the process and to engage in some very interactive decision-making. Your document makes the assumption that the Spirit of God is in the Churches of Lincolnshire and that asking the people of those churches is essential to good planning.

So from the basis of those very significant advantages that your document has, let me try to offer some ways in, by taking each of those reflections – those challenges – which are set out on page 3, and respond to each in turn.

The Enriching New Era challenges state that the

1. responses were too clergy centred:
2. the responses were too timid
3. the responses did not engage the question of mission sufficiently.
4. questions remain about adequate resourcing.
5. there's the 'house for duty' scenario
6. and finally, it says: "let's plunge in a bit more adventurously."

1. The responses were too clergy centred.

I think the responses were clergy centred because the questions most in everyone's mind – where the rubber is really hitting the road – is about the reducing number of clergy. So, if that's where the feelings are centred, why not do some real theology about that state of affairs? If the unspoken word seems to be 'cuts', let's do theology about reduction, fullness and emptiness and about money, market culture, resources.

If the real concern for people is 'clergy' let's start from there, and do some thinking about what is distinctive about different ministries, lay and ordained. How do they collaborate? And where therefore will we be needing those distinctive ministries?

If the real issue is about how to keep the present Church show on the road, then let's analyse the present Church show here in the Lincoln Diocese and do our theology on that basis. The resultant Vision and Witness from the traditions may mobilise us afresh.

2. The responses were too timid about what the church is.

Let's do then, some theological reflection about what the church is. Not just on what it should be in a perfect heaven (it's important to do that) but also on what the Church is in the here and now. By that I mean we need to face up to what sort of Church we've actually got, and what God is doing in it, for it, against it and despite it.

Why some old ways of being Church work so well or so badly and where some 'new ways of being church' succeed or fail.

Revisit what it really means to be a parish church.

What a parish Church needs to succeed.

Compare the ideal heavenly church with the earthly one,

And of course it will be essential to look to the Bible to see what the gospel says about success and failure, and how a Church should live with that.

3. The responses did not engage the question of mission sufficiently.

Well, to do that we'd have to ask some searching questions:

1. What is God's prime focus for Lincoln & Lincolnshire?
2. What is the C of E mission for Lincoln?
3. Are the two in any way similar?
4. In God's plan, what does God expect the C of E to do particularly?

If we could begin to answer those questions, that would prompt us to discern what changes we must make to the dear old C of E.

The Enriching New Era document continues with other challenges too

- 4. the question about adequate resourcing.** (incarnation)
- 5. the house for duty scenario** – (a good stop-gap measure but not one that will help the long-term problem)
- 6. let's take the plunge.**

Taking the plunge is only sensible if there is water in the pool.

And my feeling is that there is plenty of space in these documents and in your present process to pour the theological water into the pool. And now's the time to do it.

It may be timely too to check out what theology might be driving those Key Principles – which are set out again in the new document.

I'm going to stop there so we can have some reflection and debate on those observations.

Question:

Taking the Challenges in the Enriching New Era document:

How could you bring your best theological practice to bear upon the process now – in your deanery? in your parish?

Are there any changes you would make to the document before it takes on its final form?

Because the major problem throughout is that the Key Principles do not derive from or depend upon the Theological Vision of the document.

And we're not being asked to do our theology before we're being asked for Christian answers.