

Charles Hedley, St James's Piccadilly – 5 July 2007

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When it's time for the notices during the Sunday eucharist at St James's Church, Piccadilly, there's the usual list of parish happenings to report. Tickets for a forthcoming concert are now on sale, proceeds to be shared between Christian Aid and the church restoration fund; volunteers and contributions are needed for the summer bazaar; the patronal festival looms, at which there'll be a bring-and-share lunch in the garden "weather permitting."

So far, so very Church of England. This is the image of the church evoked by John Major in the early 90s in his famous "ladies cycling to communion in the morning mist" speech: a model of stability and rectitude in a troubled and uncertain world. Nothing changes: what a relief.

But, suddenly, it does. Pete, slightly diffident and clearly a bit nervous, takes the microphone. He has an announcement to make.

"Yesterday my partner and I received a blessing here following our civil partnership ceremony. We'd just like to say thank you to Charles [Hedley, the rector], and to everyone at St James's, for your love and support." He gives a little nod and returns to his pew as the congregation breaks into spontaneous and affectionate applause.

Strange as it must seem to most non-churchgoers, this simple statement will be seen by some Christians as a blasphemy, a sin against the Holy Ghost, a wilful and wicked denial of biblical teaching. (The previous week, one senior bishop in the north of England

had been quoted as blaming gay relationships for climate change. All right, it may have been slightly more nuanced, but that was the gist).

Charles Hedley will have none of this. St James's welcomed gays and lesbians, the transgendered and the bisexual, for a long time before his own incumbency began eight years ago (the radical/liberal Donald Reeves was his predecessor) and now an established LGBT group meets there monthly. The church mission statement puts gender and sexual orientation at the top of its three part list:

“ . . . We understand ourselves called to . . . gather as a body which welcomes and celebrates human diversity, including spirituality, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation.”

“Pete is a member of our church community and so it was entirely natural for us to offer him and his partner our prayers and a blessing. Here are a couple in a long-term, loving partnership. Why would the church not want to affirm that?” wonders Charles.

He doesn't exactly despair at the attitude of others of a more conservative disposition in the church worldwide, but he is clearly bewildered by it and comes across as gently, but definitely, exasperated.

“The Bible isn't like a motorcycle manual. It's not an instruction book. Its ideas, its poetry, its stories, they all flow, and inform and nurture us. It's such a rich source that to see it in this very narrow way is to do it a terrible disservice. I think the church as a whole is perceived as being not only very conservative biblically, but as 15 to 20 years behind the rest of society. People look at it, and wonder why on earth there's still an issue about gays and lesbians, or about women bishops for that matter. Society has moved on. Why would they want to go near a church like that?”

We talk in the building which houses the church offices, on the east side of the square courtyard. St James's is set in the elegant heart of London: a magnificent – if now a little fragile (a restoration fund was launched in the summer) – 17th Century gem of a building designed by Christopher Wren.

It's a striking building with a striking rector. Charles Hedley is a towering (over six feet, I would guess) figure, recently propelled to even greater heights of ecclesiastical distinction through a national campaign promoting solar energy: photographs in newspapers and magazines nationwide, show him standing alongside the solar panels on the church roof.

The campaign provides an interesting reflection on his theme of biblical interpretation. Even solar panels, it seems, have biblical roots.

“Being ‘green’ isn't a matter of fashion – it's as old as the Bible and deeply Christian. Throughout the Bible there is a sense of our connectedness with the earth: from the Genesis story of Adam and Eve placed in the garden, to the parables of Jesus, right to the close of the book of Revelation with ‘the leaves of the tree for the healing of the nations.’ The panels are a visible sign of a much wider understanding which we share with many other, more conservative, Christians.

“Living at the centre of London, it is important both spiritually and psychologically not to forget that as human beings we have our roots in the natural world and must care for it.”

The welcome page of St James's website echoes the theme: “*We are serious about striving to be a sympathetic community,*” it says, and you only have to step through the wrought-iron gates from the paved-with-gold streets of Piccadilly to know that these are not empty words.

This is no ordinary church; not just for its style and setting, but also the busy craft market that fills the courtyard, providing a valuable source of much-needed income; and for the small green caravan on the green at the west end, which the church has provided for the past 25 years. It's a drop-in service for anyone in need or distress, and is run by the Centre for Counselling and Psychotherapy.

Wren designed the church on what was regarded in the 17th Century, incredibly, as a relatively modest scale: he envisaged it would need to accommodate "not more than 2,000 people." An 18th Century Prayer Book records there were two sittings of morning prayer *daily*: the galleries and nave packed with the fashionable elite of London's West End

Now there's a community (they don't like the word 'congregation') of less than 10 per cent of that – around 130 on a good Sunday. Still, it's a big improvement on the dozen or so at the start of Donald Reeves' incumbency in 1980, but it hardly leaves room for complacency, either.

"One thing we do within our church community is to strengthen and enable people's ministry in their place of work, and in the world. It's not a question of going out and preaching the gospel, but of living that gospel, of doing it, being it, in those places.

"Of course, being here in Piccadilly is a great advantage: there's a big foot fall up and down so you can put on a workshop in biblical literacy, or spirituality, and people will come in. You can't do that in many ordinary parish churches in the suburbs."

He is not exercised about the evangelical versus liberal argument, and certainly he's not in the numbers game.

A visiting priest from the US, answering questions from an audience about patterns of church-going, faced a university chaplain asking why the evangelicals appeared to be so strong, and the liberals weren't. He said only about 70 students came to the chaplaincy services, compared with maybe 400 at the evangelical church up the road.

"And how many students were at the university? Fifty thousand! It's not that one is immensely successful and the other isn't, but that the church as a whole is not communicating to that generation," says Charles.

"The trouble with most models of churches is that they misunderstand something about human beings. They say 'we're like this or like that, we believe the other' whereas most of us are on a journey of understanding, and it's a much more dynamic way of thinking and being.

"I was talking to a young man who was very involved in an evangelical church and he had been out in the far east trying to convert Buddhists. Why for heaven's sake? When you look at the needs in this country – why go all the way out there to convert people who have their own faith?" Charles shakes his head in disbelief. But that's not really the point of the story. This is: "When we talked about same sex relationships and the issues around that, he had the understanding about it that his contemporaries would have, not the narrow conservative view. There can be a bit of schizophrenia in all of us, and even in the evangelical church it's not as if it's totally stuck and unchanging. Attitudes change and people change."

The liberal theology, expressed in the definitely Christian, but still open and welcoming, forms of worship, means St James's is not afraid to allow people of all faiths and none, seekers and explorers, or just the mildly curious, to experience what's on offer.

“We have a number of activities which are not narrowly Christian but that we want to share with people who are in other spiritual places. Because we have a liberal, progressive theology, it means we’re not afraid of doing these things, whereas other churches, perhaps of a more conservative or traditional disposition, may feel that because it’s not Christian they won’t do it. It’s odd, as if they think ‘this is the work of the devil: it’s going to corrupt our faith.’ But of course it doesn’t, we see it as one of the points of contact with the rest of society.”

Born in London, to a Church of England priest and a mother who had – unusually for her time – a degree from Oxford in chemistry, Charles himself did a doctorate in physics before seeking ordination. He never stopped going to church, but often felt he was “hanging on by the skin of my teeth. What clarified things was when I was at university and I had keen Christian Union friends.

“The more we talked the more I realised how much I didn’t agree with them and it helped me think through my own theology. I used to look at the church and think despairingly in the 60s. I suppose I looked at it with a young man’s eyes and felt there was complacency, comfort, conservatism, and all those things that were not very challenging or alive. But I also felt there was something in this Gospel that really mattered and that sniping from the outside was just a cop-out. That’s when I decided to put myself forward for ordination.”

He has been a university chaplain – at Cambridge – as well as working in a number of central London parishes. But he has also experienced life on a Sheffield housing estate, where material poverty was matched by a poverty of opportunity, expectation and education.

“There was a saying that Europe was the most secular continent, England the most secular country in that continent, and Sheffield and South Yorkshire the most secular part of Britain. The people were kind and warm, but in church-going terms it wasn’t exactly flourishing,” he reflects.

So after 30 years as a priest, seeing the increasingly deep secularisation of Britain, the rise of an aggressive biblical fundamentalism, the splits and threatened schisms in the Anglican Church, is he optimistic about the future of the church?

He chooses his word carefully: “I feel positive about Christianity I feel less certain about the church as we know it. Institutions change and grow and evolve and of course we’re much more aware now of other faiths, and of Christianity being one among many - certainly more so than we were 30 years ago. I think that changes the nature of what it is to be a Christian.

“I’m optimistic because the whole dynamic of what the Christian message is about is true, regardless: it tells the truth about what it is to be a human being, and how the world works, and the scriptures will continue to resonate as they have done. Whether the church will continue to be in all that – well, I’m not so sure.”

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