

## Rickety Religion: Advent Calling

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The first in a short series of Advent reflections on mission, money, sex, power, integrity and identity within the Church of England.

***Rickety*** (adjective) = liable to collapse or come clattering down, first used in the 1680s, derived from rickets (noun) via the notion of weak, unhealthy, feeble in the joints, a disease caused by Vitamin D deficiency, but originally a local name (common in Dorset and Somerset) for the condition. The Latin name for the disease, *rachitis*, comes from Greek *rhakhis* (spine) was chosen by English physician Daniel Whistler (1619-1684).

Edward White Benson, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1882 to 1896, once preached that the Church of England and all true faith should, supremely, be an expression of what he termed “rickety religion”. Ideally, it should not be so self-sufficient and able enough to support itself, such that would not be dependent on the kindness and care of others. There was no other way to be, as our frailty, weakness and dependency would leave us open to the grace of God in a way that the safety of self-sufficiency will often deny. We need to live in a constant state of dependency before God, seeking nothing other than the presence of Christ, love, mercy and grace. Only when the light of God pours in through those cracks in the earthenware vessels that we are, and we begin to become the body of Christ as we come together, can the truth of Jesus (the verb of God made flesh) begin to trickle out from within.

Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack, a crack in everything  
That’s how the light gets in.

Leonard Cohen, ‘Anthem’ from the album *The Future*, 1992.

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So to our first question: what is the Church of England called to be? I have a hunch that Pope Francis gave us an important clue to one core proposition, when in an audience in late August 2019 he opined that the early Church was often depicted as “a field hospital that takes in the weakest people...it is for the infirm”.

“The sick holds a privileged role in the Church,” said Pope Francis. He added, “they are not to be cast aside...on the contrary, they are to be cared for, to be looked after [for] they are the focus of our Christian concern.” A humble national church will be a field hospital for everyone – a pop-up spiritual NHS service for all citizens. It will rickety in part, but resolute in others. It will not seek to dominate, for it is here to serve. Service – after the example of Jesus – is what it must do and be. It is local and lowly (NB: for further discussion, see Martyn Percy, *The Humble Church: Renewing the Body of Christ*, Canterbury Press, 2021).

The Anglican theologian Daniel Wayne Hardy used to speak of the responsibility of the church to be the “social skin” of the community or nation it served. In other words, to be an embodied and incarnational expression of Christ for the world in the context in which it was called to be. “Social skin” is a telling phrase, because it implies something vulnerable, undefended, and even exposed. This has little to do with the well-padded, armour-plated Teflon church-variety that is so well protected and insulated, and we have become rather accustomed to.

Skin, rather, implies reception and reaction. We feel the cold of the homeless on a winter night. We feel the pain of the victims of violence and abuse. We sense the soreness and scarring in our communities that may have come from wounds, accidents or blows struck long ago. We are conscious of our colour, and what that says about us. We bruise easily. We can be pierced. We bleed. But we can be warm, tender, affectionate, sensing, feeling and swaddling. We live in our skin.

There is a frequent Christian claim that says we don't choose to change (e.g., Cain in the Old Testament, and Paul in the New Testament come to mind), and sometimes it is only by being humbled – reputationally, morally, intellectually, spiritually, physically and psychologically – that we find God's surgery-of-the-soul within us can actually begin. But there is a close relationship between humbling ourselves, and our humiliation. Sometimes humiliation creates the ground for humility; it is the necessary preface.

The Apostle Paul who saw everything so clearly as a zealot (yet in black-and-white terms) had to be (literally) blinded by the light. It was only through the cracks in his zeal that the light and truth penetrated, and he began to see God's world in other colours. That the gospel is for gentiles, slaves and foreigners. That women can lead in churches and society and be equally valued and regarded – just as the male leaders always assume was their God-given birth-right. That refraining from certain foods,

circumcision and other customs could not make God love you more than others, or any less, because God has no grand-children. If we want to be the children of God, we can be adopted in Christ, and learn and wean from him. But we cannot pass this on through inheritance.

Deep down we know that to resist the work of God – the endless reconstruction of ourselves in the Imago Dei – is something we cannot contribute much towards, save our assent (“yes”) and suppleness (“let it be to me according to his word”). Without yielding to God, we will not experience true grace, illumination and transformation. We will, instead, invest our energies in being what God has *not* called us to be: self-sufficient, self-reliant and self-perpetuating.

Sometimes accepting God’s demolition of us, and the possibility of a complete reconstruction, is better than preservation, conservation, repair and resistance to God’s work. Our besetting sin in the church – with us for well over two centuries and more – is our buy-in to endless models, visions and programmes of self-help and self-improvement.

But first and foremost, God wants us with as little baggage as possible. The less there is, the more God can do with it. Loaves and fish are just one illustration. Likewise, the first disciples. Oh, and the early church. Advent is a season for casting aside, and beginning to follow the light to the distant glow of a stable in an otherwise forgettable rural village in some far-flung occupied territory. A completely pointless place of pilgrimage: a waste of time being there. Such is God; his work of renewal and redemption begins in the wasteland of a vast mighty empire.

Our besetting sins recall the first sin. And our attempts to cover it up should make us wince. Adam and Eve give us a familiar paradigm for individuals and institutions. Thinking they might know more than God, they succumb to temptation. Blame is passed around, and no-one takes responsibility. In a vain effort to cover their shame, they sew fig-leaves together to cover their sense of disgrace and nakedness.

If you ever want to run a bible study on the early chapters of Genesis, a compelling exercise for attendees is to give them a needle and thread, and some fig-leaves, and see what they come up with. It is futile and very funny. For this is midrash – a kind of espresso-shot of dark humour. Only when Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden do they get to wear proper clothes – and even these are made and tailored by God from animal skins. The fig-leaves are not mentioned again.

The first sin is contempt. That God need not be relied upon, or even trusted. That we could do better if we helped ourselves a bit more, and depended upon God a little less. That God might think our self-motivated attempts at self-improvement would not amount to a breach of covenant. That we could blame a third party (a serpent) for our hubris, or blame each other (s/he made me do it). The fear of the

Lord is the beginning of wisdom. When we lose that humility, foolishness finds a home. A ready one too, with vacant possession – for wisdom has been evicted.

In Malcolm Gladwell's compelling sociological monograph, *Tipping Point* (2000), he remarks that ultimately it is contempt that finally destroys an institution. When we cease to respect the leaders, symbols or very foundations of any institution – its purpose and values – the ensuing lack of trust is deeply corrosive for all future relationships. (This is what topples regimes, leads to revolutions and revolts, or simmering socio-political resentment and rebellion).

When the people sense their government or leaders are choosing to regard and treat their fellow citizens with contempt, the seeds of uprising are planted deep. When Bishops and church leaders treat the laity as mere pew-fodder, as mere numbers in pi and flow charts flush with potential, then perhaps as malleable consumers to merchandise and experiment on with new products and ideas, or just another round of disappointing statistics, you can begin to scent rebellion. When clergy are treated as though they don't matter, and as merely expendable employees who need to be kept in line, then the very womb of the church begins to groan with insurgency.

The institution – whether it be a government, parliament, the police, a university, school, health or social service, church, or indeed a marriage – can survive most crises. It can usually cope with competing convictions, and can even flourish with them if each party stays faithful and true to one another, their greater good, and the future and integrity of that institution. But it cannot survive contempt. That is, contempt for its public and the people it serves. It cannot survive if it shows contempt or duplicity towards its core values, or mainstay people, companions, colleagues or partners. It cannot explain away its hypocrisy, or blaming others for its own failures, as that only adds to the sense of an institution serving itself. Reputation-management is as futile as some clothes made out of fig-leaves.

Yes, contempt is a step towards self-destruction, and institutions that have the contagion are mostly destroyed from the inside-out. The tipping point will just be the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back; the one extra snowflake that made the roof cave in. So, if the first sin was contempt, what does this season of Advent press us to recall? Several things come to mind, but here are three brief propositions.

First, there is a very real difference between contempt and dissent. Indeed, loyal dissent is important for institutions, and is to be encouraged and valued. Institutions – whether it is a marriage, church, school, hospital or university – deal in established norms, patterns and paradigms for behavioural relations that express good values and practices. Dissent is how we learn from difference and diversity. Good and honest disagreement – *adiaphora* – has a role in preventing bad argument and fracture on non-essential issues. Unity does not mean uniformity. In being united, we can also confess our differences within a framework of mutuality and peace.

Second, institutions are, for the most part, free (or very heavily subsidised at their point of delivery (though some are paid-for and private). As services, they also rest on largely voluntary and free associations that bond us by shared values and commitments, and do not oblige us by contract. Institutions can rarely compel, and will be limited in what they can enforce. Yet they are essential in a civil society, and they primarily lead by example. As such, they cannot afford to be held in contempt by those they serve; nor do they treat those that they serve with contempt.

Third, and in that memorable sociological phrase, “structure is an expression of value” (see Stewart Clegg, *The Theory of Power and Organizations*, 1979; Luther Gerlach, *People, Power and Change: Moments of Social Transformation*, 1970; and Martyn Percy, *Words, Wonders and Powers*, 1996, pp. 116-119) our institutions sometimes need to look at themselves carefully in the mirror, and reflect on how their very structured-ness sends out signals and signposts as to what is valued and cherished. It is perhaps for this reason that the birth of Jesus is – according to tradition at least – in a rickety town, in a rickety stable and in a rickety crib. There is something here about permanence and stability, reliability and stability, that God seems to have by-passed. Quite deliberately.

We live in an age that has been weaned on stability, predictability and reliability. Covid-19 and its variants have knocked our self-assurance. Our self-directed teleology has been tampered with, and we no longer quite know how this will all end. Our confidence has been quietly shattered by the turmoil and lack of trust in politics and international relations; the trials and tribulations of our migrants and refugees; and the uncertainty of climate change and other ecological disasters. It is in such uncertain and unstable times that churches need to remember that they too are subject to such forces. Churches are not meant to exist in order to withstand such challenges, and remain aloof from them. Rather, we are to be the field hospitals of every age, pitching our tents where they are most needed for those with the most needs. Only to be great for those who are least.

Our calling is one of risk and responsibility for those who have nothing. The Kingdom of God was first practised and proclaimed by a bunch of ragamuffin disciples and their itinerant rabbi-leader. It was a precarious venture, that went where the needs of others took them. There was little sign of a plan, strategy or campaign. The task was to be the love of God wherever they found themselves.

Our calling begins with a rickety-roughshod prophet in the wilderness, proclaiming the coming of one who is greater than he. It continues with a young woman, chosen to bear a child, yet to be part of stable and committed relationship. All in a village, with few prospects, and little in the way of support on offer to an unmarried mother. These are the precarious, rickety beginnings for Jesus.

So, at Advent, let us cast aside all the works (of darkness?) within the church that prevent us from embracing that rickety religion we were called inhabit and embody. Sometimes, less is so much more. It is where Jesus begins his life and will later continue in his ministry. Advent says to each of us: remember the rickety places – the where, with whom and in what Jesus abides. Be there.