

### Trendy Vicars – Trinity 10 2010

Genesis 15 vv 1-6 p15, Ps 33, Hebrews 11 vv 1-16 p1209, Luke 12 vv 32-40 p1045

A clergy friend asked me what I thought about the BBC2 series *Rev* and how I thought it compared with *The Vicar of Dibley*? Apparently *Rev* is a comedy about a young clergyman in London who can't quite work out what his rôle is and therefore suffers various crises of conscience. Being a rector or vicar is not simply a career. It is who you are. If, as a clergyman, you lose your sense of priestly vocation, you lose not only your job satisfaction, but also your whole reason for living.

*The Vicar of Dibley*, on the other hand, is, I believe, a fairly harmless comedy based on a mainly likeable cast of characters set in a small village. They may be caricatures, but they are not totally unlike us – silly at times, even occasionally badly behaved, but essentially their hearts are in the right place.

To be honest, I haven't seen either programme. I think *The Vicar of Dibley* would probably annoy me. I am very far from being convinced that women ought to be ordained and I do not like the Church to be portrayed as some sort of village society. The Church is the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit. She exists to glorify God, to build up her members into the likeness of Christ, to proclaim the Good News to the whole world, to care for people in every kind of need, and to work with God in the task of converting the kingdoms of this world into the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ. Maintaining mediaeval buildings, holding fund-raising events, PCC meetings, administration, keeping churchyards tidy, unblocking the gutters and all the paraphernalia of parish life are means to God's ends, not ends in themselves.

I might enjoy the black humour of *Rev*, but I shouldn't like the bad language, especially on the lips of a priest, and anyway it's not on till way past my bedtime and I'm not sure if it's worth recording.

[Policemen, I'm told, don't like *Dixon of Dock Green*; doctors object to *Peak Practice* and teachers have serious doubts about the authenticity of *Whacko!*]

What my friend was concerned about was that *Rev* portrays a clergyman who has lost his way and the implication somehow is that the whole of the priestly profession has lost its way. At least the Vicar of Dibley has a rôle which she discharges good-humouredly and with generally benign results. This then led us into a discussion about what is the rôle of the modern clergyman or, as some people would say, clergyperson?

Many people, I imagine, think that we clergy should still model ourselves on the traditional English rector or vicar. By *traditional* in this context people usually mean Victorian. It was the Victorians who gave us a professional clergy, highly trained, dedicated, authoritative and with a very high sense of vocation. It was the Victorians who reinvigorated and enforced the idea of a clergyman resident in every parish, an important and significant leader in the community.

Victorian parsons had a very definite position in the parish. The parson was the person. As well as leading worship, preaching and teaching the faith, the ideal Victorian vicar probably also had a big hand in the general education of his parishioners. He might hold classes himself in the Vicarage or help to found a village school. He would deal out alms to the poor and sick. He might establish savings clubs and found or reform local charities. He would often be responsible for building a new parish church or restoring and reordering the existing one. He would seek to influence powerful and wealthy people in the parish to look after the poor and to support the Church. He would contend for public decency and morality and the upholding of the Law. Many Victorian parsons were also JPs. A professional himself, the Victorian rector would demand high professional standards of churchwardens, church musicians and, where they existed, servers, acolytes and thurifers.

The vicar very often lived in the second or third largest house in the parish – sometimes a newly built parsonage – and, socially he was nearer to the squire and the gentry than he was to the labourers and servants. So far as finances permitted, he lived and dressed accordingly, regularly entertaining other professional people and maintaining a horse or carriage if at all possible.

The Victorian vicar had a sense of self-worth and confidence based on his spiritual authority. If he was influenced by the Evangelical Revival he would see himself as a minister of God's Word, preaching with something of the authority of the apostles and the biblical prophets, preaching the Word of God because he believed that God Himself had called him to this ministry. If he was influenced by the high Church Oxford Movement, he would still ground his authority in a sense of God's calling, but emphasise more the grace given at ordination and his rôle in administering the Sacraments. Either way, the Victorian priest or minister believed that he was commissioned by God for his ministry and many of his parishioners would have accepted this. It followed that the Victorian parson could feel justified in standing up to those who opposed him. Moreover, in a patriarchal society, it was assumed that the vicar's wife and the vicarage family would support and assist him in his work.

In an at least nominally Christian country, in which the Establish Church counted for something, the Rector had an important position in the community and could expect to be respected and, hopefully, loved. He could afford not to doubt himself. This was the Victorian professional model prescribed for the English clergy. It continued to set the standard for most of the twentieth century and probably still does for many of us today.

But even on its own terms this Victorian model is open to criticism. Jesus was brought up as a carpenter. Neither He nor the apostles were religious professionals. Jesus gave up His home and family. He does not seem to have had much money. He appears to have had no social position and the poor and the sinful were made much more comfortable in His presence than the pious, the rich and the powerful. Even in Victorian times, people questioned whether Christ's ministers should live in big houses, participate in a middle class life style, enjoy a high social status and socialise mostly with the gentry and their fellow professionals?

Sure, a vicar who has influence with the squire, authority over the peasantry and private sources of funds can do a lot of good in the community and many did, but is it the way Jesus would have operated? But are vicars supposed to be like Jesus anyway? [Recently I remarked at a meeting in Bromley that Jesus probably would not have been able to function as He did if He had been required to conform to the latest management theories which are now being applied to the English clergy. Someone present remarked that Jesus might not be the ideal Vicar of Bromley for the twenty first century. Think about that one!]

Supposing the Victorian model of ministry was right for Victorian times, it has become progressively less obviously so. Given their pastoral rôle, it is probably better if vicars keep out of the administration of justice. The state has largely taken over the provision of education, health care and welfare. This is a development encouraged and welcomed by the Church. The secularisation of English culture means that the Church's influence and secular importance are much diminished. The government treats the Church as just one of many faith communities – potentially useful in promoting social cohesion and charitable activities, but also potentially subversive in that religions preach an alternative morality to that advanced by the secular state and a higher loyalty than patriotism. Our numerical and financial weakness means that we can no longer afford to house and pay the clergy as minor gentry or even as comparable professionals like doctors and teachers. The grouping together of parishes and the breakdown of traditional geographical communities means that the parson is no longer the person in the parish, the priest in the Parsonage. Very often, he lives elsewhere and comes to the village only when he is required. In any case, people are much less deferential than they used to be and it is not obvious to many why they should defer to the official representatives of a declining religious institution. To be fair, a lot of us modern clergy would feel very uncomfortable if we were treated with deference.

My feeling is that the Church itself is becoming more secular. New terms of service for the clergy rely more on making us accountable to an ecclesiastical bureaucracy than on our personal sense of responsibility towards God and our parishioners. General Synod all too often egregiously refers to itself as the Church's parliament. Diocesan offices are becoming ever more like local councils.

And what can I say about PCCs? Although the theory is that PCCs were set up to cooperate with the Rector in carrying out the Church's mission, in practice I believe the rector or vicar on the one hand and the PCC on the other represent two different poles of authority in the parish – the one spiritual and theological, the other secular and democratic. It is not just that incumbents and PCCs often disagree; it is that they cannot agree because they do not even speak the same language. Rectors and PCC members are usually friends. PCC members may respect their Rector's integrity, honesty and ability. Rectors respect the commitment and hard work of PCC members. But the PCC really cannot see why the Rector thinks that the life of the church in the parish today should be guided by the Bible and Christian teaching, rather than by the need to keep happy the existing congregation, to halt the decline in numbers, keep the buildings in good repair and balance the books, whereas the Rector really cannot imagine why PCC members appear to think the way they do. The Rector is left feeling very lonely and the PCC is left feeling slightly hurt. As theologians, most clergy

recognise *every member ministry, the priesthood of all believers*. All baptised people are, we know, called to full time Christian service and every Church member has a crucial position in the Body of Christ. In practice, however, we clergy sometimes feel that the democratisation of the Church means that decisions with spiritual implications may often be taken by people with little spiritual maturity.

Lastly, with far fewer clergy around, it is much harder to provide all the services the Church prescribes. Moreover, in an increasingly secular world, congregations are much less likely to feel a sense of obligation to participate in public worship than they used to be. It is quite disheartening, therefore, sometimes to dash around between buildings in an effort to provide a full range of services, which only a few people regard as worth attending.

If, however, the traditional or Victorian model is no longer appropriate for the English clergy, what would be an appropriate rôle for ministers of religion in the twenty first century? It sometimes seems that the only person more subject to ridicule than the traditional parson is the trendy vicar. Quite frankly if the current trend is secular, multicultural, irreligious, a trendy man of God (or even person of God) is a contradiction in terms. There is no obvious rôle for a parson in a secular society. Let me ask you:

- Do you want a vicar who is just like one of us (and dresses, speaks and behaves) accordingly? Or do you want someone you can look up to (slightly more formal maybe than most people, better spoken, milder mannered?)
- Do you want a vicar who shares your doubts? Or do you want a vicar who holds fast to a traditional Christian faith, a lone voice in a world in which diversity is promoted, no one creed is to be regarded as any better than any other, and the only moral absolute is tolerance?
- Do you want a vicar who is tolerant when you divorce, supportive of your daughter when she has her abortion and willing to bless your son's civil partnership? Or do you want a vicar who always stands up for traditional Christian morality no matter what?
- Do you want a vicar who is open to theological developments like the ordination of women, new ideas about a less than omnipotent God and a less than perfect Christ? Or do you want a vicar who won't tolerate any deviation from what he perceives as the faith once delivered to the saints?
- And is the fact that I am even asking these questions a sign that I have sold out to the secular notion that the Church is here for the benefit of its members and potential members and that my task as a minister in the Church is to give people what they want? The spiritual view is that God's ministers exist to please God, which means giving people what is good for them whether or not it is what they want!

The times are uncertain. Uncertainty about the rôle of the parish priest reflects uncertainty about the Church itself and even uncertainty about God. I'd like to suggest, however, that the answer is in today's readings. Faith. Like Abraham in the Genesis reading, and all those people in the Hebrews, what is required of you and me is faith. We may be uncertain about what God wants of us or how we are supposed to achieve it. But we know that we can trust God. *Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.*