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**Radical Uncertainty: Truth and Hope in the Church in Wales.**

In their book ‘Radical Uncertainty’, Professor John Kay and Sir Mervyn King address a profound and challenging question: **Why did no one foresee the economic crisis of 2008?**

Recalling an encounter with the late Queen (who asked them this very question), they wrestle with the most obvious of dilemmas: we know what we know; sometimes, we know what we don’t know but what about the things we don’t know we don’t know? In other words, when there are either pieces of information missing which, when discovered, prove to be vital or where the levels of contingency are significant, how do we plot a course of action when the landscape offers so little certainty?

The book has been widely read and is as persuasive in its analysis as it is in the prescriptions offered. Wrestling with complexity, where it isn’t easy to be absolutely certain, is difficult. Reading it, I found the parallels with our situation to be intriguing and want to use some of their thinking to aid our own reflections about what the future might look like. In particular, I want to focus on a few of the principles they articulate and how they affect our own context.

Surprisingly for a book which is mostly about economics (and not dissimilar to Mark Carney’s book: ‘Values: Building a better world for all’) they acknowledge the value of narratives. In other words, the stories we tell about ourselves, the world, who we are. These stories record history and they include values so they do offer a kind of record. Our own language is that of tradition, which is apostolic in character and origin. And this kind of articulation is biblical: ‘**For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.”** (1 Cor. 11:23-25). So our starting point is theological. And it is theology which shapes, develops and deepens our understanding of God and our call to follow Jesus Christ.

In Wales, we have developed our own narratives within this apostolic tradition telling a story about a church called to serve the whole nation. In a recent speech, former First Minister, Mark Drakeford, drew attention to the role played by the Church in Wales in 2021 as the terrible events of Aberfan were recalled.

Week by week, it will not be the seminal events which shape a nation’s identity. It will be the events of life and how others support and help us through them. All of us will suffer times of loss and heartache and we will remember those who showed kindness, love and compassion. In its ministry of accompanying, the Church in Wales shows that God loves the world and reaches through us with transforming grace in Jesus. I want again to pay tribute to the work of clergy, licensed lay ministers and countless others who serve others because of their faith in Jesus Christ. Thank you.

As we serve those around us, we do so as Christians. We are not an NGO nor an arm of government. We are compelled to speak out on issues where we believe something is out of place. So, we will speak out about xenophobia wherever we see it. We will speak out about refugees. We will always speak out in support of the poor, the dispossessed, the marginalised and the oppressed. Kingdom values compel us to speak.

Tomorrow we will welcome two speakers from the forthcoming ‘**Restoring Welsh Rivers’** summit hosted by the Church in Wales in November. Why should we be concerned about water? Because our rivers are dying. Water companies are illegally pumping raw sewage into them. And even as sections of our farming communities are underpaid and undervalued, intensive farming practices, promoted by unsustainable food production systems, are poisoning rivers with excess fertiliser and animal waste – witness the tragic situation in the Wye Valley. We recognise investment is being made to improve our drainage and improvements are being delivered. However all of us – including the industry, regulators, government and local authorities - must play a part in halting this indefensible abuse of the most essential element of life. Our summit will seek to create a consensus and momentum for change.

**Our primary task however is to be the eucharistic community**: worshipping God and bearing witness to the gospel. In this sense our task remains unchanging across the generations. **We are here for God’s sake and for the world.**

And what enables an organisation to flourish within its inherited tradition is when it is able to learn, develop and grow. The concept of discontinuous change is now widely understood, where change is unexpected. When change becomes normative and less predicated on what has happened previously, this makes for greater uncertainty. If the church is going to serve each part of Wales, it must learn it cannot be one thing only: a single model with little scope to adapt hoping that its reputation, presence and former practices will guarantee strong and ongoing interaction with others. Governing Body will know that we are trying to learn together differently and well so that we can be the church for this and future generations. The Learning Community scheduled for later this year will draw people together in conversation so that experience is articulated, practice is analysed, and a collective will is forged to minister well.

Our emphasis will be, as Governing Body knows, on the way our Ministry and Mission Areas work. However they are configured in each of the dioceses, they share several essential elements which we ought not to concede. **Firstly**, **we can do more, better, together.** There are things which former single parishes could never do that Ministry Areas can. In Bangor diocese a Ministry Area has recently worked with the diocese to employ a full time Youth Pioneer Worker to minister across the wider area co-operating with other Ministry Areas. This kind of partnership where finance, local leadership and the work of the diocese combines is transformative. Another Ministry Area has planned for an Anna Chaplain, having discerned the number of older and often isolated people locally. Again, the potential for a wider reach is made possible because the Ministry Area is a larger geographical unit.

**Secondly**, **we build a better collegiality.** The expectation that clergy are the Jack of All Trades who ‘do’ the ministry won’t work and, in truth, never did. The ministry of the many – ordained, licensed, commissioned and the gifted disciples of Christ – makes for a more complete, Biblical and rounded model of servant ministry. The dioceses of St Asaph and Monmouth have begun to develop this collegiality blending the strength of the local with a trans local emphasis on agendas which allow gifts in the body of Christ to be deployed beyond the single church or former single parish.

And **thirdly**, **in this journey, we are learning to be courageous and to take risks**. Not everything we try, is going to work but playing it completely safe certainly won’t work. **“Football is a mistakes game. Without mistakes, you can’t play it.”** said the Liverpool manager. And that’s true for churches too. The risk takers rather than the overly cautious were commended in the parable of the talents.

So, we have an opportunity to develop ministry from the base of lived experience. Early applications to the Church Growth Fund are showing dioceses are building on what is being learned through our Ministry and Mission Areas whether by developing hub churches, planting new congregations or appointing pioneers and chaplains.

And this kind of approach is present in the Kay and King thesis. We may not be familiar with the idea of stationarity. But as I understand it, this is a process in which we observe whether or not results change over time. In other words, it’s about collecting data and learning from what it tells us. How can we tell if something is working if we have no base data with which to compare what we are seeing?

We need to be able to monitor both qualitative and quantitative inputs if we are to have any hope of seeing the seeing good outputs. This approach to life in the Church in Wales may not be entirely new but it does not sit well with our inherited polity. But if we are going to track, with care, our CO2 footprint (and take remedial steps) we need a tool which aids us. If we are to understand where the numbers lie in our congregations and track changes and shifts, we need a membership app to aid us. And if we are to pour many millions of pounds into a fund, we call the Church Growth Fund, we really do need to track and test whether this level of investment is making any difference at all.

I appreciate this can sound overly business-like and devoid of the kind of human dynamics which have been the life blood of our churches. Kay and King have a surprising and pleasingly strong emphasis here which adds that human dimension. Organizations which flourish blend two further emphases: they practise the art of curiosity, and they are prepared to evolve.

This resolve to imagine a good future for the church is not about constructing impossible dreams. Anyone can cast visions which are wholly illusory, which sound impressive but are fantasies. The kind of life which brings hope is built one step at a time. Faithful reflection on our contexts, asking good questions and starting to plan and practise the things which allow us to be true to our calling. Mindfulness is not only a personal discipline. It is a shared enterprise. And when MACs are able to work towards that more purposeful ambition and by the wise, trained and careful exercise of leadership, mentored into a different way of working, there is hope.

The greatest example, perhaps, in the last 20 years of not cultivating an awareness of what is happening around us, is what happened in the mobile phone industry. Some of us remember the famous Nokia 7600 - the handset which would change the way we communicated. Launched in 2003, its strong sturdy box was matched by clear instrumentation and functionality. Then Steve Jobs turned up and by 2009 the iPhone had pretty much wiped Nokia off the shelf. The value of imagination cannot be minimized. Neither can clarity of purpose and determination.

I’ve spent much of this occasion speaking about the way we set ambitions for ourselves and strategy. **But I want to end with the most important part of our life which touches on our prayerfulness, our shared faith in Christ, how we learn to forgive and walk closely with God**. If we are to grow healing, healthy churches, we will need to become more resilient and robust in the ancient spiritual disciplines of the church. Justin Brierley (‘Spectator’ 30 March 2024) asks whether there is a kind of Christian revival taking place in Britain. Basing some of his analysis on the sterile and empty promises of the New Atheism of Hawkins, Harris and Hitchens his pitch is that Christian worship and spirituality remains attractive and that many long for something more than pure utility for a good life. The wonderful BBC series: ‘Pilgrimage’ recently screened showed the kind of questions, hopes, fears and longings which are common to us all. **We need to give ourselves constantly to the love and to the practice of Jesus Christ, becoming authentic, forgiving and hopeful people with something worth sharing.**

Kay and King came up with an intriguing title to their book: ‘Radical Uncertainty’. They analyse how to make sense of complexity and make wise decisions.

**Dearly beloved in Christ we have a God who knew the way out of the grave and as the disciples were to discover, He would not provide a blueprint for the future, but a promise He would be there and, more importantly, provide all we would need to navigate it well. This is our task once more: to trust and be courageous. And to venture well.**

**The Lord be with you.**

**Amen**



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