

REDISCOVERING THE MINISTRY

By Tim Marks

Getting here

My family and I moved to Cambridgeshire in 1991 after seven years teaching theology and pastoral skills at Moorlands Bible College. During this period, after worshipping in an Anglican church, for some years and becoming acclimatised to a mixture of informality, liturgy, different architecture, we became Anglicans. I want to emphasise that we did not at this time or since stop being Baptists. This was not in the contract. Four years later we felt a call to these flatlands, where the Midlands Plain meets the Fens, and to five tiny congregations worshipping in medieval buildings.

The land around us is without feature. To walk out of the village in which we live on the farmlands is to encounter an alarming sense of exposure to sky and landscape. It is remorseless - endless prairie fields without hill or fold, few trees, heavy clay soil and the ever-present wind which finds little in its way from the North Sea. The skies are often leaden for days and the landscape darkened - but when the sun sets, it does so with overwhelming splendour. I mention this because it has seemed to me that in the same way in which the church building shapes the worship of the congregation, so the landscape shapes and influences the landscape of our minds and thus our perceptions of God. I have come to grapple with monotony occasionally transfigured with glory. I have been exposed to withering winds and a desert place which has begun to grow an unexpected crop.

The churches have been declining badly for at least five years - though in some villages it has been hard to detect any gospel ministry in the recent past, still less any response to what gospel ministry there has been. All my congregations are under 10 and some under 6 in number. In the beginning it was three services on a Sunday morning and one on a Sunday evening. Sometimes there would be an organist. As none of the churches has toilets there are certain logistical problems to be overcome in winter which require inventiveness and a strong nerve! Happily there are few people around on Sunday mornings. The buildings are in bad shape in

some cases -none of them warm or inviting enough to stay longer than 45 minutes. The bill for repairs that needed to be addressed amounted to a ball park figure of £120,000. The diocese found itself moving towards bankruptcy and the payments to the diocese for ministry rose by 62% over two years. In the village in which I live (370) which has a congregation of 5 regulars, the quota has risen to £3,800. And the people were depressed and angry. They were like a patient in hospital who is told by the new doctor that the prognosis is not good, indeed life expectancy may be quite short. The reaction? Denial, blame, rage, ludicrous optimism. Get me another doctor. This isn't happening to me.

If that were not all, there was a sense of spiritual oppression that neither my wife nor I had felt before, and opposition that was horrible and implacable. We wondered whether it had all been a ghastly mistake. Why did the forces of darkness want to hold on to these villages when there was no spiritual work happening? Or were we mistaking ordinary depression and unhappiness for a glamorised and melodramatic sense of spiritual warfare?

This was the situation into which we came two and a half years ago and in which we still labour, though as you will see things are changing. I must stress that although people advised us to move on quickly, to go on our way rejoicing, the fact that we have not does not denote any heroism on our part. Not a quarter of a year goes by without us crying to God, 'Beam me up Lord! Enough!' And the answer is always quietly, 'NO. Complete the work that has been given to you'. So servanthood it is and not always with good grace.

The Discoveries

Perhaps none of these will seem to you exceptional discoveries, indeed many of you who have been labouring in the field of pastoral leadership for longer than I may find what I am to say commonplace. But I came to this task from seven years of great happiness teaching theology and pastoral skills, spirituality and personal formation at Moorlands College and. I left, restless and a bit tired perhaps of 'keen' Christians, wanting to get my hands dirty again in the humus of the church, the soil of unbelief and confusion and yearning. In those months of praying about leaving, two people came my way from outside of the college and I was able to help them to become Christians. It whetted my appetite to take the gospel out of the classroom into the market place again. To

experience again the magic of seeing God at work rescuing and healing and saving. To be part of a fellowship on the move, feeling the wind of the Spirit at my back. And yes, I had forgotten some of the tedium and the heartbreak and the stony-hearted opposition that is so grieving and yet is so much a part of real gospel preaching.

'Even after Jesus had done these miraculous signs they still would not believe in him ... at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But..' (John 12.37). The little words 'still' and 'but' indicate the stony core of the rejection of Christ that preaching the gospel exposes, especially among Christian religious people. Despite every evidence I 'still' refuse to surrender to joy and peace. 'But'... despite all that has been given my faith will remain private not public. And yet the harvest is worth all the toil! The faces that shine with love and grace. The lives that can be examined and are worth living. The often unspoken 'but now' of the gospel sometimes dramatically, sometimes gently breaking through. Glaciers melting, seas warming, the ice breaking up, spring on the way.

The Power of the Word

This discovery has been twofold - it has been personal and corporate. I confess that theology and textbooks have occupied a larger place in my life over the last few years than the study of the Word. Perhaps that is inevitable in theological teaching - but there is a loss. The duties and privileges of preaching bring us back to the rock face of weekly exegesis. And I have found myself sustained by and relishing the ministry of the Word, teaching it, sharing it, preaching it. A little old lady came to me after one (12minute) sermon in the early days (more, often 20 now!) and said with wonderment, 'I never, understood the Bible meant something! I really understood that!'. And so she went away empowered to read for herself, hear for herself, respond for herself. I have spent time letting the Bible clarify and deepen people's desire for God in the Song of Songs, sharpen their understanding of the modern world from Hosea and give them a world view of coherence and meaning. And the changes have been remarkable. From the plain stuff of putting the best of books in the hands of the people.

The Worth of Prayer

If there has been one verse from the Bible imprinted on my heart these last years it would be 2 Tim 1:7: 'For God has not given us a spirit of timidity but of love and power and a sound mind'.

We encountered a spirit in these parts which lay beyond the outward manifestations of people in the churches who were apathetic or the affluent pagan people who wanted to see 'their vicar' in the pub swapping stories with the blokes and were upset when it didn't happen. A spirit that felt like ice on the one hand and torpor on the other. There is no doubt in my mind that St Neots is a wicked town and yet, theologically I am not sure what I mean when I say that. I look at the faces, I think, rather than discern the spirits., But when I see faces bitter and lined, pale faces, undernourished and irritable and when a small town generates excessive violence I think I may be encountering powers and dominions. I am left gently sceptical about much 'kingdom ministry' amongst my charismatic friends - it may be my infirmity but I do not see it in my Bible. And 20 years' experience of ministry has left me with a deep aversion to the melodramatic. But for a year I was quite unable to pray or intercede with any power or sense of God.

I walked around the village dumb and numb. Walking blind in a fog. Hoping that he would see even the willingness and desire to pray, and would answer all that even my mind was too fagged to articulate. And after about 18 months it passed, as did the occasional fear of the dark. It was quite distinct. After a year of barrenness 15 people have found faith or their faith has sprung into life and fellowship has been sought.

The Transformation of the Gospel

Sometimes people have looked at my over-large personal library and spoken of me as 'an academic'. This is not true. My calling has been to the terrain rather than the maps, if I can put it that way. When I was a child I was fascinated by maps. They adorned my bedroom. I remember one in particular of the Canadian wilderness. James Bay. Moose Jaw. Anchorage. Wonderful names! But what was it really like when you got there? I imagined winter in James Bay, the polar bears prowling, the sense of the North, the high Arctic. I imagined getting off the train at Moose Jaw and seeing the wall of Rockies ahead over the prairie. Maps. Theological and philosophical maps later on in ministerial training. What of the terrain, though, the actualities of which the

maps spoke? The journey to God. The way from sin and brokenness. The Pilgrim's Progress. This was where my interests lay - more in relationships than in counselling skills, more in witnessing than in doctrine.

Rediscovering the Ministry

R.T. Kendall rightly said that the only real test of life in a congregation was conversions. No church can get fired up about evangelism unless the pastoral leader is excited about his or her personal witness, gets in the thick of it with confused and uncertain people, places a priority on evangelism for him- or herself. I have been re-excited about the gospel. I have seen grace setting people free. Sometimes long-established churchgoers, more at home with a roughly sketched map than the real spiritual terrain, are getting into pilgrimage, starting their journeys with intent, buying a new Bible, starting to pray, beginning to share what is happening. People with little contact with the church speaking of being haunted by God, having a sense of divine presence around them, unsettling. Feeling love around, in the air, arousing, beckoning. I have felt the yearning of Jesus to bring home the broken and refugee and disabled and lonely and abused people around us and inside us, been gripped by his relentless, restless searching for the hurting and despairing. He wants to say YES. Is anything better than someone saying, 'I will be receiving his love, and I will be loving him back and I will be proud of it. I'm coming out of the closet'? Is anything better than to see quiet tears and someone whispering, 'I feel I have been saved from something'?

So I came back to the roots. Peter Lewis sent me an original Puritan volume to buy. It was a series of sermons by a little-known Puritan pastor called Thomas Dyer. He described himself simply as 'a preacher of the gospel'. Here are the roots for me. Here is the great inspiration. To be a preacher of the gospel of Christ - 'To spend and to be spent for them Who have not yet my Saviour known'.

The Gathering of the Congregation

During the last 12 months it has become clear that God has been not only gathering in his flock but also been building his church - that is to say, the end result of effective witness to Jesus Christ in a community is the gathering of a local congregation of believers. A

group of 20 or so people have met with me each week to study the scriptures, and the number grows. Are they simply an eclectic group drawn from 5 parishes or is something else happening? People began to say, 'This is my church' or 'This is where church really happens for me rather than Sundays'. The result was that we began to realise that a congregation was growing quite distinct from the parish churches.

The next step was to plan a Sunday meeting for them in a worship style culturally suited to them, accentuating fellowship and focusing on the exposition of the Word of God. This does not easily fit with Anglican ecclesiology - though in these days of revolution in the Anglican church it is hard to know whether there is such a thing. Would 'Seven on Sunday (the name of the new service) be simply another service, majoring on the Anglican capacity for diversity of worship? Was it, as some of its detractors suggested, an embryo 'Baptist' Church? I believe it is neither. If God is calling together a local congregation out of shattered Anglican and Methodist and Baptist Congregations then we must not miscall it in the interests of pacifying the theologically timid or the politically correct. There is a corporate discipleship demanded of a congregation and without that willed discipleship it cannot grow into the form of Christian community that God chooses and wills for it. Ecclesiology much catch up with life. In a time of huge change, God, when the Word is taught and the gospel preached, will build by his Spirit Christian community. If he is Lord then its shape must be how HE wills in the local situation and its associations or how it fits with the wider 'catholic' Christian community.

So 'Seven on Sunday' will start in February and it waits to be seen what God will do with it but we know that if we are blown along by his Spirit then it will shape up into recognisable fellowship in Word and Sacrament, and will, I hope, be a sort of adopted child of the Anglican church, nurtured by its rich traditions of worship and devotion.

Rev Tim Marks has been a Baptist minister and also an Anglican priest. He taught theology and pastoral studies at Moorlands College. After working as the Director of a counselling and training agency in Bristol, he became national advisor to the YMCA on personal and spiritual development. He has been

involved as a trainer in the Leadership Institute, and has a private counselling practice in Malvern. He was also a member of the Board of RBIM.