

Christian Ministry in the Church of England Reflection on an Image of an Embryo

During the shared discernment process for selection for ordained ministry, candidates are invited to talk about an object or image which is meaningful to them.

I quite a verbal person, but I thought I'd have a go at something like this exercise with an image – though perhaps my reflection turns out to be more do with a concept or idea.

My mind first turned to Matthias Grunewald's Isenheim Altarpiece with its famous image of John the Baptist at the foot of the cross pointing to Jesus.



In fact I'm going to reflect on an embryo – which is arguably not unrelated to the altarpiece.

Both John and Jesus had miraculous births.

And the cross, though a death, is also a kind of birth pang.

It will lead to new life.

The tomb will be a womb.

And Mary the mother of Jesus is there.

If she is the mother of Christ and we are in Christ, is she in a way the mother of us all?

Jesus' words to Mary and John at the cross might suggest a new family relationship.



The embryo is a fecund image.

It suggests the value of every individual human life, of all sorts, at every age and stage, and therefore also our desire to resource the church's life in every place:

That as the Church of England we have a mission to the whole of society, not just to middle class suburbia.

That we don't want to neglect our inner cities, our deprived coastal towns or our rural areas.

The embryo reminds us of Jesus' particular concern for the last and the least, the weakest and the voiceless.

Everyone with whom we interact is a precious human being and a disciple or a potential disciple, not just a ministry unit to be formed or deployed.

Clergy in particular are tempted to neglect their own humanity and their discipleship for the sake of their role.

We must become like little children to receive the kingdom of heaven.

Our life together, however brilliant it might be, must be grounded in humbly receiving from Jesus.

There will be lots for all of us, even the most senior, to learn!

This reminder of the preciousness of all life also relates to valuing all spiritual life across the theological traditions and across barriers of age, class, sex, race or sexuality.

The image speaks of the miracle of new life.

We're dependent on God to grant new life, and so all our ministry should be grounded in prayer.

We should be encouraged that God's resources are infinite.

Often our resources of finance and personnel are stretched, but God loves to "give life to the dead and call into being things that were not" (Romans 4:17).

We sometimes need to bring faith and hope where parishes are discouraged and despairing.

This image places mystery and wonder at the heart of our life.

We are not primarily running Parish Church PLC but are engaged with the sacred and supernatural.

We are about something ministerial not merely managerial.

Perhaps a midwife might not be a bad metaphor for the Christian minister.

The embryo suggests nurturing something precious and fragile which has great potential.

That's important when we think about new Christians and new vocations.

It is so easy to snuff out an interest in the gospel or in Christian service – the very thing we know Jesus would not do.

We sometimes have to say hard things to people.

Sometimes we won't share someone's sense of calling.

Or we can't provide the Vicar or Curate or Parish they'd like.

But we have to remember that we are dealing with people made in the image of God and loved by him, and sometimes with their very deep sense of self and their hopes tied up with their vocational journey.

I've been doing some work on the Church of England learning review into diocesan growth initiatives in rural areas.

And one of the interesting debates is whether one should invest in areas of greatest need or greatest potential.

Whilst we are in the resurrection business, and we don't want to assume that any parish must be forever barren, there seems to be a strong case for adding resources where there is already life, even if its only embryonic.

Formation is the great word in ministry training at the moment - related to the embryo, especially when we remember its biblical basis in Galatians 4:19, where Paul says: "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you".

Christian formation is for all Christians and we ought to expect growth, both spiritual and numerical.

This image suggests that there is ideally something natural and organic about Christian growth.

Just as school is important, so we must have programmes of teaching and learning.

But we must also have the family being together around the table.

That eucharistic life is actually infinitely more important than a course or a check-list.

We want to have a pathway, an invitation, for everyone from first contact with a Christian through evangelism and discipleship to training and ministry, some of which will be at parish, deanery, or diocesan level or nationally.

A pathway, not a sausage machine.

Paul tells Timothy to let his "progress be evident to all" (1 Timothy 4:15)

The standard is progress not perfection.

None of us can ever say we are the perfect Christian or minister and so we should all always be looking to grow.

We want to encourage a culture of growth for every disciple in the parish.

That every disciple should be a minister using their gifts.

And a culture of growth amongst the clergy.

It should be normal to be reading a slightly stretching book, and a certain amount of risk should be encouraged.

We want to encourage lifelong learning so that it's not possible to tell when the Vicar finished theological college by the date of the books on her shelf.

If a minister has done no Continuing Ministerial Education in living memory, and it would be good to think about how to make him eager to do some.

Something must appeal as potentially interesting or helpful, surely?

As with the embryo, the goal is a degree of independence.

We will always remain an interdependent household of faith.

But we want Christians to look out for their own souls and for one another, and we want our curates to be ready to take on posts of responsibility and so on.

We want to encourage clergy to do those things that will make for their growth and well-being for themselves and together, and in many cases I think we know what that is.

I've blogged about this before.

In our diocese and networks we already have great resources of skills and experiences and it would be exciting to work with parishes and deaneries on using these to do more together.

The embryo suggests the necessary pain of being born, of leaving the womb and of growing in a more challenging environment.

We are not to remain in the safety of our inward-looking club.

Most of our curates won't remain assistants for ever.

The image can also be a warning against infantilisation:

Against the training incumbent who doesn't allow the curate to grow up.

Or against micro-management.

Against the clergyman who is a bottle neck on growth, who won't release and empower the laity.

Lastly, the embryo suggests continuity and development.

That we seek be faithful to the apostles' teaching and fruitful in new ways.

We are keepers of a tradition, but that tradition is also to be proclaimed afresh in each generation .

We are not to depart from the faith but neither are we to stand still.

We are both rooted in Christ and sent out by Christ as his representatives to proclaim him.

We keep the faith by sharing the faith.

Like good parents, we encourage both a sense of belonging and of individuality.

May God grant us life, growth, health and indeed multiplication of disciples and ministers.

Here endeth the sermon!

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