

Mark Chapman – Speech at Friends’ and Former Members’ Day, 24 May 2024

Twenty years ago almost to the day, we had a large gathering to mark the occasion of 150 years of theological education in Cuddesdon. Our keynote speaker was the then Archbishop of Canterbury, and it is wonderful that he has been able to return to speak today. Just as I did today, I organised the liturgy then, and I have various cherished photographs of the day in my office. Little did I think then that I would still be here all these years later, and that I would be speaking. At my best estimate, I have taught at least 1200 clergy, which is well over ten per cent of the clergy in the Church of England. It’s lovely to welcome back so many to this very special place where the genius of place mingles with a breadth of exploration and a richness of formation.

In 2004 Archbishop Rowan gave a wonderful lecture on ‘The Christian Priest Today’, inspired by one of Cuddesdon’s greatest former members, Archbishop Michael Ramsey. In the lecture, Rowan spoke of the priest as being a lookout, an interpreter and a weaver. One phrase in particular stood out for me: ‘There has to be in every priest just a bit of the poet and artist – enough to keep alive a distaste for nonsense, cheapness of words and ideas, stale and predictable reactions.’ When I reflect on my time here, I think that the only real way of surviving in priestly ministry is by having a deep distaste for nonsense, a developed sense of the ironic and, dare I say it, of irreverence. Teaching church history, which is where I have rather accidentally ended up, is really about teaching about the nonsense that has always accompanied the Gospel as it has been handed down from one generation to the next. So much of what I have done is to teach about the humanness of the church and its tradition – it’s a tradition handed on by sinners as well as saints; every priest needs to have some capacity for distinguishing between the words of holiness and the words of sinfulness. The alternative to this kind of critical discernment is to take the church at face value, to take everything seriously, and to forget the sheer audacity of the claims we make for ourselves.

I have been ordained thirty years this year and through that time I have preached at least 1500 sermons. Every time I do so I claim to speak in the name of the Holy Trinity, but I also know that it is this bald and bearded 5 foot 5 man who is doing the speaking. Who am I to make all these claims for myself? And who are any of those 1200 I have taught to make those sorts of claims? Last time I lectured in a tent I was in India speaking at the Maramon Convention of the Mar Thoma Syrian Church and I had about 70,000 in the audience. While I was there I simply couldn’t help thinking that this was a very strange and very funny thing. Here was a

little man from an obscure Oxfordshire village speaking to Taylor Swift-sized audiences. These days I get lots of invitations to speak all over the place and I always have a similar sort of experience – I simply can't take myself too seriously, however much I might try. And as I reflect on my time here, I can't help thinking that my real vocation in theological education has been to prick pomposity and to show a healthy distaste for nonsense, in myself, in society and most crucially in the church. I still passionately love the Church of England, but I also think it is one of the funniest and silliest institutions that has every developed in this country (which goes for all the other churches as well). When they made me Canon Theologian of Truro Cathedral, they gave me a red almuce so that I could dress up as one of Santa's little helpers while trying to proclaim the gospel to the good people of Cornwall. The church I love so much is also at times a rather ludicrous church that makes me laugh.

This vocation to prick pomposity may well be connected with the way in which I have rather drifted through life with very little by way of ambition. I always knew I wanted to be ordained from the age of about six growing up in Essex as boat boy to Father Tatham and later as a teenager in Berkshire. But I was never quite sure, so I did the degree taken by people who don't know what they want to do – I read PPE at Oxford. Except, of course, for those who want to be world ruler like the blond-haired boy from Eton and Balliol whose first wife incidentally was one of my contemporaries at Trinity next door. We all had to go to something called the Oxford University Careers Service. I told them that I wanted to run a restaurant or become a clergyman and they suggested banking. They were, of course, fools; but after graduating I did move to theology which I found almost as interesting as coxing. I did okay and decided to stay on to do a doctorate. This was motivated by two things – first, I was quite interested in it, and, secondly, in those days the Government paid and it postponed the inevitable day when I would have to work for a living. In 1985 I went to see a DDO and had my selection conference booked in 1986. But then I had the good fortune to fall in love and this put ordination on hold. This meant I ended up paying rather more attention to my doctorate, which I finished on time and which was examined by Archbishop Rowan who was an Oxford professor at the time! And then I started thinking about what on earth I would do if I couldn't be ordained, so I applied for lots of academic jobs.

I accidentally got a job as a research fellow at Sheffield. The HR department of that august institution forgot to inform the person they had appointed which meant he accepted another job. Six weeks later I had a letter telling me I had the job, on the very same day I was due to accept the offer of a teacher training place at Westminster College. This was a great mercy for

many schoolchildren and a great opportunity for me as I discovered I really enjoyed writing and teaching. But the job came to an end after two years and I had nothing to do. So back to applications and looking after two little boys while Linda provided for the family. The interview here was one of very many – and I thought it would be a very long shot. It was for a doctrine tutor and I knew very little about doctrine, but much to my surprise they offered me the job. On the panel was Archbishop Rowan. I remember just one thing about the interview – a very strange question from the then tutor in pastoral psychology who said: ‘What will you do when everybody starts hating you?’ I can’t remember what I said, but I did think, ‘you are not exactly selling this job to me’. Linda, who was quite an urban sort of person, needed quite a bit of persuasion to live in somewhere with no shops but we came. And here we still are and we have loved living here.

I soon learnt a bit about doctrine and the art of appearing to be vaguely competent. I was also charged with the teaching of Anglicanism, which I knew even less about than doctrine. But I learn quickly and found that I really enjoyed church history – never did I think that I would become the go to man on Anglicanism and would be writing endorsements on books. There was also remarkably little administration for the first twenty years or so of my time here so I could write a lot – at the latest count I have written and edited 31 books in all sorts of different areas.

In the 1990s there were only six teaching staff and we worked extremely closely together – the first person appointed after me was Paula Gooder who was a fellow bright young thing and it is wonderful that she has come to be with us today. She cut her teeth here teaching Old Testament and I am very proud of what she has been able to contribute to the church.

After two years working here, I was ordained after they changed the rules and after nine years I became vice-principal, which was basically doing a lot of the day-to-day running of the place while the principal was out and about trying to find new sources of income or was involved in some complex pastoral situation. I have really enjoyed that supportive role for three very different principals – one becomes very aware of just how seldom there are any obvious solutions to problems and how often one simply has to leap into the unknown. I think drifters rather than planners are probably better at that sort of role – I have often felt myself to be like the bass player, the rhythm section providing support to the soloist who is forced to be the outward-facing figure. This role has been pretty important through the relentless restructurings of theological education. We’ve had ACCM 22, the Lincoln Report, the Hind Report, RMF, Common Awards and lots of other efforts to mess around with a system that wasn’t actually

broken. Sometimes it was quite surreal: I remember having to persuade the Ministry Division to continue to fund ghost students, which was like some bizarre episode of Yes Minister.

Of course, every now and then people approached me about applying for jobs elsewhere. Occasionally I had a few interviews – I think it was five or six in total, including one at a posh University and cathedral in the North-east where the bizarre house had a ballroom with a sprung floor and no garden. This was definitely not for me, and neither was one at a Cambridge College with an extremely big chapel with a famous carol service where every fellow came up to me in turn to suggest that I would be much happier if I were to withdraw. The more I thought about these sorts of jobs, the more I realised that the job here was much better – no ballroom but stimulating students and a great deal of freedom to do what I wanted unencumbered by the Research Excellence Framework and the Orwellian bureaucracy that academics have to put up with.

I hope I have been a bit of an artist as I written and preached and journeyed with so many people over the years – I remember one student saying to me after a sermon that I always preach about keeping the vision alive. And for that I don't apologize – it's part of the art of being a priest. It's about keeping alive the vision whilst pointing out the nonsense and the clutter that stops it from being realized – and doing all of that with a large dollop of humour. That's the vocation that suits the drifter who has little ambition other than to enjoy what he is doing and to meet new people who might still be inspired by the vision. This has taken me across the world from South African townships to a clergy conference in Sri Lanka at the height of the Civil War, to Japan, to the Holy Land and right across Europe and North America. The more I have learnt from other people – and especially the people I have encountered in this special place – the more I have learnt about God and about how to be a good priest. And if my artistry has resulted in anything tangible beyond lots of books it has taken form in the Edward King Chapel – in that space set apart for God and for cherishing the vision for every new generation of clergy.

So, I have rested my head in this glorious place for 32 years. It was unplanned and unexpected; but as I look back, I think I have done something to help those ten per cent of the clergy in the Church of England to keep a sense of perspective, to laugh at themselves and to discern something of the nonsense in the world and the church that gets in the way of the vision of God. I may not be a poet or a mystic, but I am a dreamer and now that I am becoming an old man, I shall continue to dream dreams because that is precisely what the world needs. I am still just as enthusiastic as I was in that church in Essex when I first handed over the boat for Fr

Tatham – we can talk about decline as much as we want, and we can have all the missionary strategies we want, but if we lose the vision then there is simply no point in the Church. And I am very pleased that I can pass on the prophetic baton to the younger visionaries in the next generations. And finally, I can honestly say that being a dreamer is great fun – and it can often be very, very funny. And it's precisely what our world needs.