

The Once and Future Parish Study Guide

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Holy City with Herald, Brian Whelan (2008) Santiago de Compostela, Hostel dos Reis Cattolicos

This study guide is intended to accompany the lectures originally given at the Edward King Centre, St Stephen's House, Oxford. These were based on the book, *The Once and Future Parish*, published in September 2023 by SCM. Alison Milbank's earlier book, co-written with Andrew Davison, *For the Parish: A Critique of Fresh Expressions* (SCM, 2010), has chapters on parish mission and practical ideas which you might find useful. The original talks were recorded and are available at

https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLCn48d2Exkzlfqk7NQQadzjAGjOxy_NOB

The guide is divided into the six topics of the lectures but does not assume the group has seen them, but that the leader has and can feed in material from them as appropriate. Some groups might prefer to watch the talks, which last 30-40 minutes, but this is not assumed. Instead, Bible passages have been included to provoke discussion on the six themes. The book is more polemical. By contrast, these talks and discussions aim primarily to build confidence and understanding about what it is to be a parish.

If you would like to discuss anything about the talks, guide or, indeed, the book, or invite me to address a groups, email: alison.milbank@nottingham.ac.uk

Session 1: Where we came from: Parish History

Genesis 28.10-22.

¹⁰ Jacob left Beer-sheba, and went toward Haran. ¹¹ And he came to a certain place, and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. ¹² And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! ¹³ And behold, the Lord stood above it^[b] and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your descendants; ¹⁴ and your descendants shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and by you and your descendants shall all the families of the earth bless themselves.^[c] ¹⁵ Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done that of which I have spoken to you." ¹⁶ Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it." ¹⁷ And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."

¹⁸ So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone which he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. ¹⁹ He called the name of that place Bethel;^[d] but the name of the city was Luz at the first. ²⁰ Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, ²¹ so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, ²² and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that thou givest me I will give the tenth to thee."

Commentary

This is the first example of a place of worship in the Bible, although we hear earlier of Abraham bringing offerings to Melchizedek and Cain and Abel offer sacrifices. Unlike the later great temple in Jerusalem built by Solomon, this is a local shrine, to which Jacob will return. There, God repeats to Jacob the promises he made earlier to his grandfather Abraham.

Discussion questions

1. How old is your own church? Share your knowledge about the people who built it and why it was sited where it is. What clues does the building itself hold?
2. What prompts Jacob to build his shrine – his beth-el – house of God?
3. What do you imagine prompted the people who built your church?
4. We know that ancient parishes churches in England were often lay foundations, financed by a local landowner to offer worship for himself and his workers. Does

the fact that parish churches are so much the work of lay people affect how you feel about them? What signs of lay people's work or input are there within your church building?

5. What is a parish church for in your opinion? Does the Genesis passage offer any insight? What is lacking in Jacob's shrine compared to a Christian church?
6. What pleases you about the church building itself? What do you find difficult about it? Do you ever find it a burden?
7. If your church is old, whether Victorian or medieval, does that affect how you feel about it?
8. A parish developed as Christianity in the early centuries attracted country converts, and clergy went out from the cities to serve rural congregations in the *paroikia*, or place beside the house. The word is also linked to sojourning in the Bible, meaning spending time somewhere, often not one's original home. So, from the beginning the word 'parish' has elements of stability and rootedness as well as sojourning. Do you recognise this tension in your own parish life? Is it productive?
9. Alasdair MacIntyre describes humankind as 'a story-telling animal. That means I can only answer the question "what am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question of "what story or stories do I find myself a part of?"' We all have a family story, national story, Christian story ... Could you tell the story of your parish? You might like to plot it like a map. Does it help you to understand yourselves better as a community?

To conclude, you might like to walk round the church and thank God for the blessings you have received at the font, the altar, or the times when you have perhaps found solace sitting quietly in a pew. This could be done singly or as a group.

Session 2 Where we Fit: Parish Governance

1 Corinthians 12.12-26.

¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

¹⁴ For the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single organ, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” ²² On the contrary, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and those parts of the body which we think less honorable we invest with the greater honour, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, ²⁴ which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part, ²⁵ that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶ If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together.

Commentary

This passage is part of Paul’s attempt to question the assumption by some Corinthian believers that spiritual gifts of prophecy or speaking in tongues make people superior to Christians who do not have these gifts. He is working up from this wonderful image of interdependence to the chapter on love as ‘a more excellent way’. Here, he wants to stress that unity and diversity are not incompatible. The body of Christ here is the company of the baptised, who have been incorporated into Christ’s body and received the Holy Spirit.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss together the structure of the Anglican Church, with its three-fold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons and its organising into parishes with their PCC, deaneries, archdeaconries, dioceses and provinces. Some people may not have figured it all out before. Add the synodical levels as well. It might help to draw a visual representation.

2. Does the 1 Corinthians passage illuminate or critique anything about our structures?
3. Here is a passage from a first century bishop, Ignatius of Antioch. On his way to martyrdom in Rome, he sent letters to encourage everyone to unite behind their bishop. (Presbyter is another word for priest.)
 You should be in agreement with the mind of the bishop as in fact you are. Your excellent presbyters, who are a credit to God, are as suited to the bishop as strings to a harp. So in your harmony of mind and heart the song you sing is Jesus Christ. Every one of you should form a choir, so that, in harmony of sound through harmony of hearts, and in unity taking the note from God, you may sing with one voice through Jesus Christ to the Father. (*Epistle to the Trallians*)
 Does this passage have the same message about every level mattering as in 1 Corinthians? Which image do you prefer?
4. Bishops are very ancient and are already operating in some parts of the New Testament. What do you see as their role? How does their ministry impact the parish? Would you value a closer relationship with your bishop?
5. What do you understand the diocese to be? Diocesan administration has grown exponentially over the past thirty years. How can it help the parish? Do we need all its many roles?
6. PCCs can be very practical. How could the 1 Corinthians passage inform their working?
7. The parish priest as incumbent of a benefice holds the cure of souls from the bishop. Do you value this? What do you understand the role of a parish priest to be?
8. Cure of souls becomes very difficult when parishes are reorganised into giant units. Are there plans for pastoral reorganization in your diocese or deanery?
9. How would you respond if there were such plans? www.savetheparish.com has a parish pack to advise you. Do ask STP for help because we want to support the parish as the basic unit of the local church.
10. Do you think your parish should be more or less involved in deanery or diocesan life? How can we live out that Corinthians 12 vision?

You might like to end by imagining in your mind the links down the ages and geographically outwards from the parish to the universal church. Hold your hands together to be aware of their unity.

Session 3: Liturgical Community: Parish Worship

1 Corinthians 11.17-26

¹⁷ But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. ¹⁸ For, in the first place, when you assemble as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and I partly believe it, ¹⁹ for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. ²⁰ When you meet together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. ²¹ For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk. ²² What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴ 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." ²⁵ In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Commentary

From the very beginning, Christians met together to share the Holy Communion. In Corinth they were meeting in a large house, big enough to accommodate a wide range of people, rich and poor. The meal or love-feast was celebrated before the Eucharist proper, and v. 25 shows that the Eucharist followed the meal. People were bringing their own food and not sharing it with others, and squabbling about social precedence. They were also highly factional. Dating earlier than the gospels and Acts, this passage is the earliest account of the words of institution of the Holy Communion, and we still use them today.

Discussion Questions

1. When people say, 'I can be a Christian without going to Church', this is the passage that gainsays this. We do not just believe in Christ but we share his life in Baptism and the Eucharist. This is our work (Liturgy means the work of the people). Do you see yourselves as a liturgical community, centred round worship? Does it seem like work?
2. All parishes have conflicts and often factions and cliques like the Corinthians. How does worship help deal with these? Which parts of the Eucharist in particular challenge this?
3. Do you experience being a worshipping community differently at a service of the Word like Evensong?

4. There has been a move in liturgical theology away from the individual making his or her communion towards a more communal offering and sharing of communion. How do you respond to this change?
5. What makes for a good service? What can make it really hard to worship?
6. How can you make your worship missional and outward facing? Some people argue this is by making it informal, others by emphasizing mystery. What do you think?
7. What Christian liturgical or paraliturgical customs could be popular to those outside? For example, prayer stations, chalking a blessing on your house at Epiphany, ashing...
8. How can we make our liturgy more colourful? More dramatic? More participatory?
9. How does the place in which you are set and the specifics of your context affect the liturgy your church offers? Does it connect with the sorrows and joys of local people? How could it?
10. In the end, is liturgical belonging and sharing in the Eucharist, different from just being a club of like-minded people?

This session could conclude with a simple Eucharist, which would help to ground the ideas discussed. Compline would be another suitable way to end. Then, in the next session, you could discuss its suitability for outreach. It has been a huge success among university students, for example.

Session 4: What Holds Us Back? Parish Problems

Ephesians 4.4-7, 11-21

⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all. ⁷But grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

¹¹And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹²to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, ¹³until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; ¹⁴so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles. ¹⁵Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love.

¹⁷Now this I affirm and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds; ¹⁸they are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart; ¹⁹they have become callous and have given themselves up to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of uncleanness. ²⁰You did not so learn Christ!— ²¹assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus. ²²Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, ²³and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Commentary

There is a strong focus on unity in this passage, and again with varied gifts, as in 1 Corinthians 12. The focus is again, baptismal, with 17-24 using images that suggest the putting garments off and on in the rite of Baptism, which is the source of this unity. The passage is also concerned with growing into maturity and strength of faith in a hostile world as well as with doctrinal orthodoxy.

Discussion Questions

1. Although the twentieth century saw a slow downward trajectory in numbers of baptisms and confirmations, as well as regular worshippers, there was a reverse in the 1950s, when numbers rose. What was your experience of growing up in this period? Or in the 1960s, 70s, 80s ... What has changed? What has been lost? Gained?

2. *The Once and Future Parish* suggests that this rise in numbers was partly due to a similarity between the community minded politics of the post-war period and the Church's own community focus, so society was more unified. For those who can recall the 1950s and 60s, does this chime with your experience?
3. The writer of Ephesians writes from within a licentious, hostile world. Do you recognise any features of the world he describes today?
4. What are secularism's distinctive features?
(Features often noted by sociologists include: cars and mobility; the advent of television; the sexual revolution; turning way from traditional modes of life generally; Sunday shop opening; individualism and consumerism.)
5. How does secularization affect you personally? How does it affect your parish? Does it stop you doing anything you would like to do?
6. Has the Church, in your view, colluded with the forces of secularism? Is it 'tossed to and fro and carried away' by modern ideas?
7. The book and lectures suggested the Church too began to worship progress for progress' sake and so undervalued traditional forms of practice and prayer, as well as the parish itself as old established. Is this your experience?
8. The Ephesians passage has a lot to say about maturity in Christ. How can we help Christians to deal with a secular world? How can we help Christians who live in non-religious households?
9. How can we help our children and grandchildren to negotiate this secular society?
10. What parts of the Christian story become clearer as our numbers shrink?
11. Martin Thornton believed that the demise of going to church to be respectable leads to a holy remnant, which in some ways, is an advantage. Do you think of yourselves in those terms? Can smallness ever be an advantage?

Declining congregations can make parishioners feel lost and vulnerable. Finish your session by imagining that tiny group of Christians in hiding after Christ's death and how they felt. Invoke God's Spirit, who revitalized those frightened people at Pentecost to descend and to renew the spirit of your minds.

Session 5: Whom Do We Serve? Locality and Outreach

Matthew 25.31-46

³¹“When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³²Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the King will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? ³⁸And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? ³⁹And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?’ ⁴⁰And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.’ ⁴¹Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; ⁴²for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ ⁴⁴Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?’ ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me.’ ⁴⁶And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Commentary

In Matthew’s gospel this reading comes after the parables of the bridesmaids and of the talents, which are about being ready and active for Christ’s coming. The scenario here is a judgement after that coming. Scholars interpret the story in diverse ways. Some read it as emphasizing how important it is to love our neighbour because that is loving God; others, noting the ‘brethren’ in v.40 believe it is about how the gentile world, ‘the nations’, treat Christ’s followers. Scripture is many-layered and a multitude of meanings are possible.

Discussion Questions

1. If you read this passage as referring to your parish community, how does it speak to you? Does it challenge you? Does it seem beyond your capacities as a congregation? You may be interested to know that 81% of practising Anglicans are involved in some sort of social action in their communities.

2. Make a list of some of the ways your parish reaches out, whether through individuals or communally, through visiting, lunch clubs, collecting for food banks etc. You might be surprised to see how widely the impact extends.
3. Do you consider yourselves to be an outward-facing parish?
4. What are the needs of your particular area? Make a list – they may not all be direct physical needs as in the Matthew passage.
5. Think together about any way you as a worshipping community could or already do respond to these needs. It might be through practical action, or it might be through prayer.
6. The passage speaks about welcoming strangers? Who are the strangers in your parish? How could you welcome them?
7. Does social outreach detract from the core activity of a liturgical community? Or could it contribute to evangelism?
8. One interesting conclusion from research in this area is that you recruit new Christians most easily from those who are on the fringes of church life already, involved in some social outreach, walk club or equivalent. Does your church offer this sort of opportunity to put a toe into parish life? How could you?
9. A priest in Bradford, Revd Jimmy Hutton, observed that when government funding for a particular project dries up, the work ends, whereas ‘a local parish is committed to its community always’. What is it about a parish church that is distinctive here?
10. Walk round the outside of your church and then step inside, imagining you are seeing the place for the first time. Does it look welcoming? How does it signal that you are connected to your area? That you care?
11. During the pandemic, the Common Good Foundation issued a plea to the parish, where they described it as ‘the elemental theatre of living community’, where the drama of local life is played out. What kind of drama is being played out in your area?

You might like to hold in prayer the concerns you have identified as crucial to your area.

Session 6: Has the Parish a Future?

Psalm 1

Happy are those

who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;

²but their delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law they meditate day and night.

³They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.

In all that they do, they prosper.

⁴The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

⁵Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgement,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

⁶for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

Commentary

This first psalm in the book sums up all the others in offering two opposed ways: obedience to God's law, or deviation from it. The NRSV version given here changes the singular 'blessed is the man' to the plural 'those' to make it more inclusive but loses the possibility of thinking of Christ as the one who delights in God's law. For Christians read the psalms as always revealing Christ and then sharing in his voice of praise, as well as participating in the praise of the Jewish people. In the Middle Ages they read the two ways in this psalm as those of Christ and the tree of life, or Adam and the deviation from it. Scholars also suggest that the book of psalms was thought of as a poetic temple. The streams of water here in v.3 are the sanctuary and the trees the pillars of the temple. Ezekiel's vision of waters flowing from the temple is a similar image.

Discussion Questions

1. This psalm directs us in following God's way. What do you think it might mean to live like 'trees planted by streams of water'? What might this mean to you as individuals? To you as a parish?
2. *The Once and Future Parish* suggests that the Church has a golden opportunity to connect with society and schools as we share a common ecological vision. We

believe that creation is good and that we are its stewards, and we also have an account of how we have damaged the world. Adam and Eve are to tend creation in the Garden of Eden; the resurrection takes place in a garden and the New Jerusalem in Revelation is a garden city with leaves for the healing of the nations. Do you respond positively to this green vision of our faith? Would it be attractive to outsiders?

3. Naturalist Richard Mabey wants to extend our understanding of a parish to include all the plants and creatures within it. Do you agree? How could we do that practically?
4. Construct together a parish map. This is a project encouraged by the charity Common Ground. It is an interpretive sort of map on which you might put what places or people are significant to you, whether the dodgy underpass where drugs are sold, or the particularly lovely corner where aconites appear each year. Include nature as well as buildings and people. If there are a number of you, you could divide up and make several maps, to bring together and compare. What have you learned as a result of this exercise?
5. How could you use your parish – whether your own churchyard or somewhere else – to involve the community, or the school in studying or caring for the nature within it?
6. A second opportunity for parishes in the future will be the increasing importance of locality. More people will work from home or travel less. How does being ‘trees planted by streams of water’ speak to that situation?
7. At present, all institutions are fragile and vulnerable; it is not just the Church. *The Once and Future Parish* and the lectures give examples of how we can use our weakness to make connections with other groups and work together: a church on a Lincoln estate that could not afford to cut its grass has had it wilded as a meadow and then annually scythed by a local nature group. Can you think of a local group with whom it would be good to collaborate? Again, you might like to discuss together which are the active groups in your parish?
8. Do you feel supported by your diocese? Does it show hope in the parish system? How could it make you feel valued?
9. Psalm 1 is very hopeful about the leaves of the righteous not withering and their ways prospering. Do you have hope? If so, what gives you hope? You might like to look back to Brian Wilson’s painting on p.1 of this study guide. It shows a modern cityscape, with buildings of various religious traditions. Do you see signs of hope within it? Does it offer advice about what we should be doing?

You could conclude this series by renewing your baptismal promises round the font and having holy water sprinkled upon you.

