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Editorial

During his earthly ministry, Jesus wondered aloud whether he would find faith on earth at his second coming. We do not yet know the answer to that question, but we can say that if he were to return to modern England, there is a good chance that he might find it very hard indeed to track down his local vicar, even on a Sunday. For the days when you could just go and knock on the vicarage door, or even turn up to a service and expect to meet him afterwards, have long since gone. Many parishes, it is true, have office hours (often manned by volunteers) and still more have answering machines, but neither of these can be said to guarantee that anything like direct personal contact with the local incumbent is likely to occur.

There are many reasons for this situation, and some of them may well be the inevitable fruits of modern life. In rural areas the chances of finding a vicar in any given village are about one in three, and if you happen to strike it lucky you will probably find that he is out visiting one of the others. This will not prevent the residents of the other two villages from claiming that they never see him, but at least there is a good chance that he is trying his best in a difficult situation. Then too, there is the usual round of funerals and other types of visit which a vicar can and should be making, and these things (as those of us who have done them know only too well) take time. Schools, hospitals and meetings of various kinds are all part of the stuff of parish life, and we should not be surprised to find the vicar in demand all over his parish. All of this is understandable, and if there were no more to it, would not only be excusable, but even praiseworthy.

Unfortunately, this is only one side of the story, and a declining one at that. Leaving aside extreme cases, like those odd vicars who spend their days in betting shops or at diocesan committee meetings, we are now in a situation where the ordinary parson is increasingly filling his time with activities quite unrelated to those for which he is paid. In one parish, for example, the vicar has refused to conduct Morning Prayer on Sundays for those parishioners for whom the later family service is too awful to contemplate, because she finds that Sunday mornings are one of the few times she can spend in relative peace and quiet with her husband and family. No doubt this is true, but what is a vicar for, if not to take services in church on Sundays? Lest this appear to be a male chauvinist remark, let it be said that in a neighbouring parish to that one, the male vicar is frequently absent from Evening Prayer because he is baby-sitting the children in order to allow his wife to go to church. Very thoughtful of him, you might think – except that, once again, taking such services is what he is paid to do, and what his congregation expects of him. Other ordained

men are known to be almost full-time house husbands while their wives go out to work, doing the shopping, the cooking and collecting the children from school. Furthermore, they are invariably away during the school holidays, including half-terms, so that if you are planning to die in the parish, you have to choose your date (and time) with some foresight and care.

Those who used to wonder what it was that the clergy did from Monday to Saturday can now be given a wide range of answers, though quite what those have to do with the ministry may be hard to fathom. Even in the better cases, you are liable to find that the parish priest is running from meeting to meeting, with little time left to stop and think. Certainly almost the last thing you are likely to find nowadays is a scholarly gentleman poring over some obscure theological tome or biblical commentary, looking for sermon material. Such Trollopian figures may be a caricature of what a minister ought to be like, but whether the current reality is any improvement must be very much open to doubt. Styles may vary, but surely a clergyman's first duty must be to preach and teach the Christian faith to his parishioners, a task which, if it is to be done at all well, must inevitably involve a great deal of study and reflection. But in the modern vicar's life, where is there time for that?

The results of this pattern of life are not hard to find. Any Christian publisher will tell you that his market has collapsed in the past few years, which means that the clergy are not reading, and are not encouraging their people to read either. A random visit to the average vicarage will soon confirm this impression. Even if somewhere or other there is a 'study' tucked away in the corner, the vicar is likely to use it for making and answering phone calls, writing and answering letters, and doing parish business – not for thinking and reflection in any great depth. Studying at home is never easy, and with so much else going on most of the time, is often well-nigh impossible. This would normally be a source of considerable anxiety, but today's clergyman is probably not much of a reader or thinker to begin with.

For a generation now, the training of ordinands has moved away from objective research into books, towards personal encounter groups, which clearly do not need a library to sustain them. Just this week I heard a young ordinand preach her farewell sermon to her training parish, in which she recounted what she had learned at college. It was heart-warming and simple. She had learned to get over her lifelong problem of low self-esteem and to rejoice in her God-given self. Thus equipped, she now feels confident that the future can only get better as she shares this wonderful knowledge with whoever turns up on Sunday mornings to listen. But why bother to do that more than once or twice? Those who go fishing on

Sunday at least know that next week they will catch a different fish, whereas the church-goer has only the same well-worn line to look forward to, over and over again. The poor clergyperson simply does not know anything else, nor has she been equipped to find out how to acquire serious theological knowledge. In the world which she has been trained to serve, it must be regarded as highly unlikely that she will ever need it.

Of course it is always possible to say that this pattern is not universal, and that anyone dissatisfied with such a ministry will probably be able to find something better not very far away. Now that almost everyone is mobile, it is no longer unthinkable to travel a few miles to get what one wants, and reasonable church services with learned sermons are there for those who desire them. That may still be true to a large extent, and we must be grateful for it, but such arguments miss the point. The Church of England exists to provide a ministry to the entire country. With very few exceptions, it is supposed to be possible for everyone in the land to find a church within walking distance. Outside the army, the universities and the City of London, evangelism is mainly a local phenomenon – people are converted (if at all) by getting involved in their local church. You need a reason, after all, before hopping in the car for a ten-mile drive to a church service, and the uncommitted seldom have one. So if the committed opt out of the local scene, the chances are that they will find evangelism very difficult, and in the long term the church will be further weakened.

The clergy cannot do everything, but they are expected to give a lead. If they busy themselves in noble but vocationally unrelated activities, how can they expect others to take them or their calling seriously? It is time for the church to take a hard look at what a full-time parochial minister should be doing – and to make facilitating that a top priority. Unless we do that, we can only expect matters to get even worse than they already are, and for the church as a whole to go on declining at an even greater rate. A parish incumbent is not a social animator, whose main job is to greet people at the door and entertain them for an hour or so once they are inside the building. His primary reason for being there is that he is called to preach the Word of God, and that means long hours of prayer and study over many years. He will not win people to Christ by his activities, but by the depth and strength of his own consecration to the service of God. It is that which comes across most powerfully in a sermon – people only start to listen to the contents when they are convinced that the man speaking knows what he is saying and believes it himself. But how can that happen if the preacher has not taken the time needed to walk alone with God?

The easiest way to do the wrong thing is to opt for second-best. The multifarious activities in which clergy today get involved are almost all good in themselves. Virtually every one of them can be justified,

sometimes on very good grounds. The trouble is that they are not his proper priorities. What he should be doing is something else altogether, and as long as that is the case, his ministry will suffer from a certain lack of commitment – something which will be picked up most quickly by other uncommitted people whom in theory he must be trying to win. The challenges before today's clergy are great, and it would be foolish to pretend that a quick or easy solution to them is possible. But a solution there must be, however slow and painful it is. The Church of England cannot go on operating at less than half-speed, with its paid officers increasingly occupied in other pursuits. As we enter a new millennium, let us pray that our parish clergy will recover a new sense of their preaching and teaching vocation, and that they will dedicate themselves to bringing God's people into that fullness of faith which only a close and deep walk with God can attain.

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