Article Review

Ecclesiology for a Travelling Church

Mary Tanner
Bainton Farmhouse, Tallington Road, Bainton, Nr Stamford, Lincolnshire PE9 3AF, UK
marytanner@tesco.net


Seeking the Church is, according to Martyn Percy’s endorsement, a book ‘on the nature of the Church for our time, and by one of our wisest and most creative scholars’. But it is not an easy read, certainly not for someone who has spent most of her working life in ecumenical dialogue. But when I did get the point of what Stephen Pickard was saying I began to understand the radical nature of his ‘mini systematic ecclesiology’ and to sense its challenge to current ecumenical ecclesiology and to my own ecclesiological thinking. I got lost at places due to my lack of knowledge of some debates among social theorists and some contemporary systematic theologians. But on reaching the final chapter I was glad I had persevered to the end. My advice is to read the very last paragraph of the final chapter first. Here the author explains what he has been aiming at. There are, of course, clues throughout but nowhere is it put quite so succinctly as in the final paragraph:

This book is written in the conviction that the ecclesia of God is a natural companion for our post-modern types because it too is a travelling people. Moreover, the secret of its own life, its deepest mystery is neither owned nor can be claimed by anyone. Rather, the secret of its life is the attractive love of God; a divine lure, which draws people to each other and at the same time to God in whose image we have been made.
Furthermore, this Church moves at a pace that gives time for wisdom to be found, take root and expand among people. It is the pace and presence of the slow Church coming that carries in its corporate memory the faithful of the past. The Church at any time is always travelling with the saints and sages of past time and space. In such an ecclesial environment, organisational structures and ministrations of ancient lineage can take on a new significance as enablers for deeper freedom and peace. The remarkable thing about such an *ecclesia* is the presence of a surplus of renewable energy, which is continually released through attentive listening to God and one another; to re-remembering and celebrating and to care, service and joyful telling of the story of Jesus. This is the unfinished Church of Emmaus Road companions; the slow Church coming on a journey with the peoples of the world. (p. 238)

The paragraph gives the reader a taste of some of the book’s themes: the *ecclesia* as mystery; a Church of companions, drawn together by the love of God; a Church walking at a slow pace; a Church which carries the memory of the past in which ancient structures take on new significance; a Church blessed with renewable energy; and a Church which comes out of the future and is on a journey with people of the world. All these contribute to the portrait of the *ecclesia* that Stephen Pickard gradually sketches.

The first four chapters set the scene. The remaining five build up the portrait. The final chapter – ‘Slow Church Coming’ – puts the final brush strokes to the author’s portrait of the Church. Pickard writes as an Anglican theologian referring often to Anglican writers and history as well as to questions concerning Anglican polity today. In the moving opening chapter, seeking God and seeking one another belong together: movement to God and movement to others go hand in hand, embodied in the life of the Church, involving ‘a desire for God and a corresponding desire for one another’. ‘Ecclesiology concerns “a journey into the unmeasurable height, length, depth and breadth of the God of love”’, a journey in the company of others. It is a foretaste of the coming Kingdom. The task of ecclesiology is to study the emergence of the Church which, for Pickard, involves: a first phase, the history of Israel for ‘the Church is Jewish to the core’, welded to Israel and existing in Israel from the beginning; a second phase, the 33 years of Jesus’ ministry, his call of a people, baptism, eating together and teaching about the Kingdom; and a third phase, the emergence of the Church stretching out to the Kingdom. Ecclesiology also involves looking at how the Church is sustained as well as its purpose in the world. The Church is always oriented beyond its own life, reaching deeper into the world. Pickard’s ecclesiology is thoroughly Trinitarian. He surveys the contribution