

Marcus Walker

Is the Church of England giving up on Sunday worship?

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What a clash of the titans we witnessed at the weekend. The Lionesses vs Divine Worship on a Sunday morning. An unfortunate conflict of timings meant that just as the England women's football team were limbering up to kick the first ball in Australia, church services in England were launching into their first hymn.

The Church of England knew which side it was on. 'I know lots of people will want to watch the match live. That is fine from the Church of England's point of view. Others will prefer to go to church and avoid knowing the score until they can watch the match on catch-up, and that is fine, too. Church services happen

at different times in different places, so people can choose one that is right for them.’ So said Libby Lane, the CofE’s first woman bishop, now appointed the church’s spokeswoman on sport.

It isn’t difficult to see why. No one wants the church to look like a bunch of miserabilist killjoys. In this, Bishop Lane might be channelling Charles I. His Book of Sports, published in 1633, rebuked the Puritans for their ‘prohibiting and unlawful punishing of our good people for using their lawful recreations and honest exercises upon Sundays’.

His reasoning might also feel familiar to the bishops. He feared a ban on sports would lead to ‘the hindering of the conversion of many, whom their priests will take occasion hereby to vex, persuading them that no honest mirth or recreation is lawful or tolerable in our religion, which cannot but breed a great discontentment in our people’s hearts’.

And yet, at the risk of being a vexatious priest, there was a key factor missing from Bishop Lane’s statement, which Charles I did not miss: that church comes first. That the worship of Almighty God is, for Christians, the single most important thing we can do. Of *course* we were excited about the Lionesses, of *course* many of us wanted to bunk off church to watch them, of *course* the church doesn’t want to give the impression that ‘no honest mirth or recreation is lawful or tolerable in our religion’, but... there is an existential danger in implying that the absolute core of our religion – worship – can take a back seat when something really exciting comes along.

Or something really scary. The Church of England is living in the shadow of the catastrophic mistakes made at the beginning of the Covid pandemic, when churches were closed and priests were banned from entering them even to pray by themselves on behalf of their absent congregations. Our church leaders told people that they could worship God just as well from their sofas, and many heard what we said and have stayed put on their sofas – or switched to a church which gives the impression that it takes their souls seriously.

And there is a wider national problem too. A series of dioceses are pursuing plans to slash the number of their clergy and create vast mega-parishes, with priests doled out at random to their flocks like over-stretched GPs. Truro is ground zero for this. The deanery of Kerrier is about to become one mega benefice, made up of (wait for it) 23 churches and ministered to by (wait for it) two full-time stipendiary priests, one of whom (and I am not making this up) will not work on Sundays. She will ‘work primarily in the community, looking for exciting opportunities to grow churches for people who have either never been to church or who have had a break away’, the area dean explained.

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'I've heard it's come as a bit of a shock to some of you to hear that [she] won't be working regularly on Sunday mornings,' the area dean continued. Twenty-three churches, two priests, one of whom won't work Sundays? Shocked was at the milder end of the reactions from parishioners.

This decision is not for want of cash. The Church Commissioners' vast £10.2 billion endowment has the money to keep all of these churches going and staffed from the interest alone. They just choose not to.

Bishop Lane's comments feed the fear that many church leaders do not value Sunday worship. The hugely dismissive phrase that is now used for it in official CofE documents is 'inherited church,' like an old carriage clock that you know you're going to send to Oxfam the moment your great aunt has died.

Worshipping God on a Sunday is the primary act of a Christian. It is, to borrow from the Eucharistic Prayer, 'our duty and our joy'. Many other things may seem more exciting, may be more fun, and certainly might attract more Church of England funding. But in the end Jesus rose from the dead on a Sunday, and we are called to worship him first and foremost. If we sell the pass on that, we sell the pass on everything.

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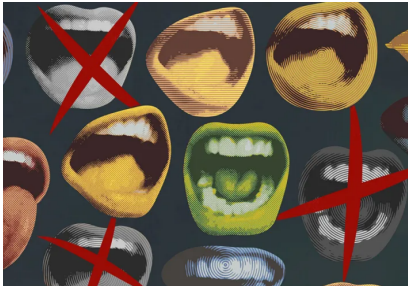
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