

Speech given by the Reverend Clare Herbert at the 379th Anniversary Feast

My Lord Bishop, Madam President, honoured Guests of Sion College and dear colleagues:

Thank you for your kind invitation to speak this evening to which it is an honour to respond. I want to speak of trains and trends!

When a train rolls into Cambridge railway station there is a sign –

“Cambridge: Home of Anglia Ruskin University”

I used to giggle over this until I became a student of that August Body – reading for a doctorate, as I now am, in Pastoral Theology with the Cambridge Federation of Colleges via Anglia Ruskin, because Cambridge itself doesn't do it.

So I decided to use tonight in your company to speak in defence of pastoral care and its academic brother Practical Theology, because I've discovered it's not only the Academy which is sniffy about those disciplines – the Church of England can be too! In circles of senior clergy, including to my horror senior women, its becoming common to describe pastoral posts as softer options to be eschewed in favour of the top jobs embracing the hard disciplines of finance and management. I don't mind the hard headed careerism in this – clergy disguising ambition is neither healthy nor helpful. But the modern tendency to compartmentalise the priestly tasks so that care for people becomes Devalued and split off from what our most intelligent and ambitious priests are meant to do, is in my view an unwise move.

Recently at St Martin- in the Fields where I now work as Lecturer we held the funeral service for a flamboyantly dressed transgender woman whom the Church warden described in his memorial speech as being the first sides-person in the history of St Martin's to sashay down the nave with the collection bag! I had loved her because seeing me wade into the unutterably burdensome pastoral challenge which is Sunday morning coffee at St Martin's she would usually whisper in my ear

– “only an hour to go, think of the gin!”

To most of our amazement we so misread this woman that when she was tragically killed we had not spotted that she was in her identity as a man one of the most famous human rights lawyers in this country. The task of unpacking her history and family life for the funeral following her apparent murder, of helping her former wife and children and present boyfriend through all that, was hardly easy or comfortable, let alone soft. Pastoral sensitivity and skills of a high order were necessary if the Church of England in that place was to be ready for the family, the legal profession and the media all gathered for the farewell.

I think too of a recent piece of work where two of us as clergy became involved in the care of a young asylum seeker who had been tortured and beaten in Uganda and her partner killed – and wonder exactly where in all the boundary making, evidence giving and careful assessment of that person's complex needs the so called softness lay? – Certainly not in the witness box where we were grilled not once but for a second time by a Home Office Barrister for most of a morning. Easy or amateur or innocent our pastoral knowledge was not – our own personal integrity and what was virtually a child's life were on the line.

Now it may be that some of the blame for downgrading pastoral care so that we now call it soft can be traced back to blind alleys down which practical theology has itself walked. Before the Second World War it consisted of little more than hints and tips about how to do funerals - how not to fall into the grave. Then it became in the 70s so closely aligned with pastoral psychology that most of left theological college convinced that we would spend long hours in carefully planned counselling sessions with our parishioners only to find them slightly glazing over if we timidly asked them if they would like to “talk”

When I worked as Rector in Soho as it was for me as for many of you I am sure – the important conversations happen at the Christmas Fair just when you think the raffle, that important priestly task, is over for another year, or on some wretched sponsored parish beating of the bounds when your feet are killing you. I shall never forget sneaking one day into the French House just for a drink – it was after all dead opposite the Rectory - and coming out some two hours later with one of the most complex wedding services I have ever had to manage landing in my

lap. How did that happen? It was never the 1970s counselling session which did it – but nevertheless the same underlying pastoral skills were needed to create a context of listening and to create a route through to offering acceptable support.

False trails and time consuming detours there may have been in Practical Theology but it has moved on and is now undergirding major fields of theological study and research. It no longer deserves the description soft or the misrepresentation as of second order importance.

In doing so it has developed in three main directions. Don Browning of the Divinity School in Chicago must fully developed one path. He tried to create a new horizon for theology by bringing together in dialogue a contemporary issue or context with traditional Christian texts and norms. This new horizon would be he hoped a theological position publically intelligible and defensible in wider civic society. The former Bishop of Oxford's discussion paper "Some Issues in Human Sexuality" is just such a brilliant piece of horizon setting work in Practical Theology.

Meanwhile another path has been developed by Henri Nouwen and Tom Oden. They both veered away from a major engagement with the human sciences in their writing to centre on the authors' personal spirituality or their pursuit of the truth as revealed in the classical Christian tradition. The widespread popularity of Nouwen's books the Wounded Healer and the Return of the Prodigal Son underline the hunger to tap the wisdom accumulated through centuries of pastoral theological reflection – to use this wisdom in forming a Christ-like mind in preference to separating it and side-lining that mind which is what we have above all to offer from managerial and financial decision making.

Yet a third path has been explored by liberationist practical theologians. Stephen Pattison and James Poling are examples of such theologians who have explored in their work how power functions in particular contexts, sometimes to the detriment of peoples psychological, physical and spiritual well-being in ways therefore deserving of comment by Christian pastors like us. Feminist pastoral theology, black practical theology and the theologies emerging from the experiences of disability are other examples of this path.

The thinking and care involved in strategic dialogue with secular horizons, involved in spirituality and spiritual direction, involved in investigating forms of social and theological exclusion are all elements in pastoral care which is in its person and context centred understanding vital to staff management, leadership, fund-raising, preaching, teaching and spirituality. For it reads the living human documents whom we meet daily and allows those living documents in their turn to critique and renew the life of the church.

I do hope Madam President that when you and equally skilled women become Bishops among us we shall as men and women together be encouraged to own the whole of our priestly ministry: to manage certainly and to steward our resources but also to celebrate communion among people for whom we care minutely and in detail, to see none of these tasks as soft or hard, none as higher or lower, but together creating a whole spectrum offering human growth in the things of God. I hope too that we will allow ourselves be fed by that sub-discipline within theology which turns to the human in its aims, concerns and methods, and which has developed so distinctively as a discipline over the last 50 years – that is Practical Theology.

But then I would hope that wouldn't I – I am doing a doctorate at Cambridge – Home of Anglia Ruskin University! But that's another story between me and Eastern Railways.

May I now,
in honour of this College's capacity to keep things well connected,
to bring together work and study, prayer and good wine,
invite all of you as guests to stand and join me
in a toast to Sion College...