

The Common Good: An Anglican understanding and contribution

1.

The organisation Together For the Common Good describes the Common Good as “an idea whose time has come”. They’re right.

Over 20 years ago, the Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales published a substantial report entitled *The Common Good and the Catholic Church’s Social Teaching*. Five years later, its 2001 election publication was called *Vote for the Common Good*, which was followed by *The European Common Good* in 2004 and *Choosing the Common Good* in 2010.

The last of Professor Michael Sandel’s 2009 BBC Reith Lectures was entitled ‘A New Politics of the Common Good’. And he is speaking again on Democracy and the Common Good at St Paul’s Cathedral on 19th March this year. In July last year, York Synod called for “values-based politics based on the common good”. The Green Party entitled its 2015 election manifesto *For the Common Good*. I have a Hansard alert set up for the phrase “common good”, which comes up at least once or twice a week in Parliament.

Everyone, it seems, is using it. The problem is not everyone is using it in the same way. With popularity has come imprecision. At best, the Common Good means community, caring and cuddles. At worst, it is simply a way of virtue signalling who you are against.

To my mind, the best definition of the phrase is that found in Catholic Social Teaching, first articulated in 2nd Vatican Council, namely that the Common Good is

“the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily”

This is a careful definition, and avoids falling into the error of confusing Common Good with a single vision to which an entire nation, and especially the government of that nation must subscribe and work towards.

In this understanding The Common Good does not replace other more local goods but acts as a facilitator to them. By this reading, in Oliver O'Donovan words:

“political authority has no special mandate to pursue a public goal, “the common good” conceived as a giant millennium dome.

Mankind in his and her native social existence, to the extent that that is not impeded and hindered by sin, serves the common good simply by being *societas humana* [human society]. Government's task is to respond to threats to the common good, repelling whatever obstructs our acting freely together.” [*Ways of Judgment*, 67]

Not only is this understanding of the Common Good the most precise and realistic – for reasons we don't have time to go into in this lecture – but, crucially, it plays right to Anglicanism's strengths.

But before I point out why, and how Anglicans and contribute to this vision, I want briefly to explore Common Good ideas within Anglicanism itself.

2.

It is fair to say that there is not much of a tradition of talking about the Common Good in Anglican social theology.

That said, there is a mainstream strand of Anglican social thought, starting with FD Maurice in the mid-19C, which places an emphasis on themes and motifs that correspond closely with the Common Good.

Maurice rejected the individualism of much political economy and much theology of his time, and emphasised in its place social fraternity and fellowship, communion and co-operation. He began with the infinite goodness of Christ rather than corrupting sin of Adam as the foundation for human nature. For him, the human tendency towards moral failure remained strong, but it was no longer primary. Maurice's Christ was not simply the object of worship but also “the elder Brother of the race and the head of it.”

Maurice emphasised Christ's incarnation as a counterbalance to the evangelical focus on his atonement. The incarnation was the centrepiece of history, in which God dwelt among and shared the sufferings of his

creation, thereby sanctifying it and granting it a spiritual significance that a concentration on atonement, judgement and other-worldly salvation lost.

He also placed a singular focus on the Kingdom of God. Maurice tried to straddle the gap that had threatened to swallow so many Christian radicals in the early nineteenth century. On the one side, which he rejected, was the Kingdom of God as entirely other, restricted to the hereafter, simply to be anticipated with patience and perseverance. On the other side, which he also rejected, was the secular radical cry that all theology was humbug, and a distraction from the proper human task of building heaven on earth, here and now. For Maurice, Christ had inaugurated his kingdom and the job of Christians was to recognise this and participate in it.

In various different guises these thoughts, which may not seem radical now but were far more so in the mid-19C, have been played out in different social, political and economic theologies through the last 150 years. Our good is to be sought in relationship – in being with and for the other – and the role of government, to use O’Donovan again, to “respond to threats to that common good, repelling whatever obstructs our acting freely together.”

In their different ways, and to different degrees, Octavia Hill, Brooke Foss Westcott, Henry Scott Holland, the Christian Social Union, William Temple and the tradition in his name, and Rowan Williams have held this line, although that does not mean they have spoken with a single voice about what exactly the state should do. To be fair, there is a pretty broad range of views on that questions among Catholics, even with a much better structured magisterium. We shouldn’t set the bar of unity too high!

There is, therefore, a live strand of Anglican Social Thought that echoes the concerns and ideas of the Common Good, even if it doesn’t always use the same language. However, my argument is that a distinct Anglican *contribution* to the common good comes less from Anglican *theology*, and more from Anglican structure and geography.

The Anglican Church is a global communion with 39 Member Churches, in around 165 countries with over 80 million adherents. The Church of England is the established church, with 2 provinces, 2 Archbishops, and 106 diocesan and suffragan bishops, 26 of whom sit in the House of Lords. This established church has what it calls “a regional presence”, with 42

dioceses and cathedrals, each serving as the mother church of an area, and very often as a *de facto* regional centre of identity and pride. It is also, of course, an emphatically local church, with 16,000 churches in 12,500 parishes, covering every inch of the country, boasting a living Christian presence in every community.

I've left out many other important levels, such as deaneries, chaplaincies or schools. The point is that Anglicanism itself isn't just "the Church of England" but exists in lots of different geographical formulations. And this makes talking about Anglican contribution to the common *goods* that lies at the heart of *The Common Good* eminently appropriate. It means we can legitimately ask about the common good of which the Communion is most conscious and suited, and that of the established church, and the diocese, and the parish. Let me take each of these four in turn.

3.

When we think about global common goods we need to be careful not to slip back into the vague usages of the term with which we started. Global common goods are those which are *intrinsically* shared – ones that it is impossible or at least very difficult for me to enjoy if you don't. And they are also – going back to our definition above – the kinds of goods that enable the flourishing of more localised common goods.

The obvious global common here is environmental care. Climate stability is self-evidently a global and an irreducibly common good. For all that the rich feel they are able to insure and protect ourselves against its consequences, ultimately – whether directly through extreme weather conditions, or indirectly through crop failures, food prices, or large-scale environmental migration or resource wars – we can't. We are all in the environment together.

Mention of war highlights a second global good which is identifiably common, namely peace, stability and security. Much as some global leaders rhetorically favour building walls, pulling up drawbridges and reversing into what is feels like a giant private housing estate, the reality is that in the world today more than ever before, the violence and insecurity of one region, or even one country, is the risk of violence and insecurity of all. The Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil war taught Europe that. These

are the kinds of global common goods to which the Anglican Communion does and should contribute. I want to give a couple of examples of this.

First, the environment. It is telling that one of the five marks of mission is to “strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.” As part of this endeavour, the Anglican Communion Environmental Network was established as a response to the 1998 Lambeth Conference and its desire that such issues be given greater visibility and better coordination across the Anglican Communion. The ACEN is mainly a forum for information exchange and focus for pledges, but it did issue its own vision statement, under the chair of Archbishop Thabo Makgoba in 2015, in the same year as *Laudato Si'*, although with somewhat less global attention.ⁱ

In one regard, the Anglican Communion is as helpless as everyone else when it comes to safeguarding the global environmental commons. However, the very fact that the Communion is a global forum in which different voices can speak in palpable solidarity about this issue, and to bring moral force to bear on global institutions, is not to be sniffed at.

Second: reconciliation. Reconciliation is a particular focus of Justin Welby. In his words,

“In a world plagued by conflict, division and indifference, the Church has a crucial role to play as a community of reconcilers. Jesus calls every one of us to love God, our neighbours, ourselves and our enemies – a challenging command, with nobody left out.”

One example of this is the Anglican Communion’s Indaba project. This involves people from different dioceses across the world visiting each other to learn about life and mission in their contexts as a precursor to conversations about the similarities and differences they have encountered. Theologians from Tanzania to India, Kenya to Canada have developed a range of theological papers and resources, to reflect on conflict transformation from around the world and offer guides to enable people to implement reconciliation programmes and events in their church and community.

Third: diplomacy. Diplomacy might easily be subsumed under a category of reconciliation, but I thought was worth pulling out separately. As noted,

Justin Welby has made Reconciliation a particular focus of his archiepiscopacy and in his position as head of the Communion he is one of 18 global leaders asked by UN Secretary-General António Guterres to form a new High-Level Advisory Board on Mediation, and to provide advice on mediation initiatives as part of the UN's "surge in diplomacy for peace".

At a more bilateral level, Justin Welby, partly as head of the Established Church but also as head of the Communion, has been active in bridge building with the Russian Orthodox Church. Patriarch Kirill made his first visit to Britain as head of the Russian Orthodox Church in 2016, a visit that included time with the Queen which further underlies the Church's soft power. A year later, Archbishop Welby made a return visit Moscow for talks, primarily about the persecution of middle eastern Christians but also about relations between Britain and Russia. *Prospect* magazine discussed this relationship in its edition last month, going as far as to say that

“Official state-to-state connections between London and Moscow are in tatters, as icy as during parts of the Cold War. But when it comes to communication between the countries' religious leaders, a definite rapprochement is underway... When it comes to healing schisms, perhaps religious leaders have something to teach their political counterparts.”

The place of Anglican Communion in fostering these global common goods is inevitably different from what it was. Now that we have more or less instant global communication and see more images from abroad in a day than people a century ago would have seen in a lifetime, the place of a global network is more limited.

But visibility is not the same as solidarity, and a network is not a Communion. The Anglican Communion can have a purchase on global common goods of peace, security, diplomacy, and environmental conditions and resources that is not attainable at more local levels.

4.

Moving from a global level to a national one seems easy, if only because most of us here will naturally think nationally. We are far more familiar

with a national political infrastructure than we are with European or global institutions, and I guess we recognise Anglicanism first and foremost in its established English incarnation.

That said, national *common* goods are not that straightforward. On the one hand, some common goods, like a stable climate, are self-evident global. On the other, some common goods are really *public* goods, amenable to political supervision and co-ordination but not really to any action of an established church.

National defence, education, transportation infrastructure, public safety, sanitation, utilities, rule of law and functioning legal systems are all public goods but it is hard to see what role, if any, the Church of England has in securing them.

There is, however, another way of looking at this. The debate over whether and how human societies progress is a live one. Increasingly, historians and political scientists argue that it is the presence of “inclusive institutions” – as opposed to “extractive” institutions – that determine the peace, affluence and relational health of a society.

Inclusive institutions are those that

“allow and encourage participation by the great mass of people in [political and] economic activities that make best use of their talents and skills and that enable individuals to make the choices they wish”

Extractive institutions, by contrast, serve the personal goods of leaders, elites and cliques, and/ or exclude minorities (and even majorities) from the common life of a nation.

Human nature being what it is, we are constantly having to safeguard against slippage. Particularly in times of financial, political or social uncertainty, there is a real pressure, even in long-lived polities like our own, to slide away from those institutions that safeguard social wellbeing.

I would argue that, at its best, this is precisely what the Church of England has fortified in the past. In the mystical thing of which we hear so much – the national conversation – the established Church has, through having one foot both at the centre of power and one at the grass roots level across the country, managed to integrate voices and perspectives into a conversation.

The person who has best phrased this over recent years was the Queen herself who remarked during her 2012 Jubilee:

‘the concept of our established Church is occasionally misunderstood and, I believe, commonly under-appreciated. Its role is not to defend Anglicanism to the exclusion of other religions. Instead, the Church has a duty to protect the free practice of all faiths in this country’.

One might conceivably make the same point about Rowan Williams’ Sharia lecture, except for the fact that the incomprehension and furore surrounding it ended up having a more destabilising than stabilising effect. You could also make the same argument for the way in which bishops in the Lords bring to heart of that national conversation voices from dioceses and parishes that might not otherwise be heard. Supremely, you could make this point of the function the church plays within our constitutional set up in the first place. In the words of John Milbank and Adrian Pabst:

“establishment means that the Church qualifies the authority of the state as less than final and absolute. The role of the established church is neither to sanctify the state nor to supplant the government but rather to transform public institutions in the direction of both individual virtue and public honour.”

A number of years ago, Theos conducted a research project into the question of who actually now wants a Christian coronation, given that the next one, whenever it is, will be in a country radically different from that of 1953. The answer, it seems, was the British people, and not only those who considered themselves Christian. We should not underestimate the significance and power of this event, nor the sense of stability and inclusion it has generated.

What the established church can do, at its best, is to facilitate that common conversation, incorporating new voices – especially those from faith groups otherwise alienated by the creeds of liberalism, secularism and consumerism – and grounding the debate in an ethical framework that is humanistic, in the true sense of that word.

Now, there is an important caveat here. None of this is *essential* to the church, or rather none of it should be. There are political mechanisms of

representation for minorities. The media can – or at least should be able to – facilitate a national conversation. And the church could be disestablished tomorrow which destroying the fabric of the constitution. A Catholic colleague of mine was less than impressed by our coronation project and there is a real danger of such data being used to shore up a self-serving agenda and fortify the “effortless superiority” that allegedly accompanies establishment. I for one would not go to the stake over establishment.

However, being where we are and when we are, I do think that the Anglican Church in its established format today can and does serve a national common good by framing and grounding our shared life in a humanistic commitments that make life better for all of us.

5.

When one moves to a diocesan level, it becomes a little more difficult to imagine what kind of common good we are talking about. After all, beyond the church, people don’t naturally think in dioceses, and even regions have only an attenuated grasp on our national imagination. That said, I don’t think it’s an entirely irrelevant level when we are thinking about common goods.

A few years ago, Theos, in partnership with The Grubb Institute, conducted a project for the Association of English Cathedrals, looking at the present and future of English Cathedrals. A number of things emerged from this study, but the one I want to highlight in this context was the ways in which Cathedrals stood for the identity of the region in which they were. The vast majority of people surveyed agreed that “this cathedral reaches out beyond the Church of England”, or that it was “a ‘hub’ to engage the life of the wider community”.

Cathedrals were icons of local identity. They were authentic places, simultaneously conveying the history and tradition both of Christianity and of the area that they inhabit. This was not limited to believers: over 90% of the ‘non religious’ group (generally the most hostile) said they felt connected with history and tradition in the cathedral. Nor did it come at the cost of being Christian. Well over a half (59%) of church non-attenders within the local survey sample agreed that, “the cathedral gives me a greater sense of the sacred than I get elsewhere”.

It would be easy to sniff at such factors, or to point out that the Cathedral is not the same as the diocese. However, in an age of relentless cultural and geographical homogenisation we might briefly dwell on this fact. Most people want to live somewhere, rather than anywhere or nowhere. In an age of commodification, authenticity is prized and cathedrals offer their locales precisely that kind of authenticity.

Put another way, the common good that is on offer here is pride, a shared sense of respected identity, a sense of commitment to a place that has its own character, significance and worth, that is not replicable or tradeable. If people like and feel connected to whether they live, they tend to make an effort to maintain, protect, preserve and improve it; if they don't, they don't. It's the difference between buying and renting.

In a small but significant way, cathedrals could do that for their towns and diocese. The extent to which they did naturally varied, not least according to this history of the diocese in question. But the way in which ex-mining communities in Durham refer to the Cathedral as “wor cathedral”, and use it, for example, in the traditional Miners' Gala, and are now joined now by communities that were never part of the industry but have their new banners as an expression of their pride, and all of which ends with a service in the Cathedral, celebrating and blessing what the banners represent – none of this should not be ignored. This is a sense of regional pride that is a deep and intangible common good for which the Cathedral can play a crucial role.

6.

The level of Anglicanism with which I imagine we are most familiar and comfortable is the parish.

Of course, as units of geography go, parishes are almost completely irrelevant to the vast majority of people in England, including churchgoers. Most parishes will not have beaten their bounds for quite a few years.

I think that in itself is an irrelevance, however. If we don't understand the idea of the *parish* readily, we do not get the idea of the local and for all intents and purposes they are exchangeable. The word parish, after all,

derives (ultimately) from the Greek work *paroikos*, coming from *para* meaning near and *oikos* meaning house.

The employment structure and strapline of the Church of England – if I can use such terms – emphasise this: a living Christian presence in every community, and even if not every parish, let alone every parish church, has its ordained minister, the comprehensive organisation of the church around local communities and commitments is what makes the established church what it is.

The common goods that can be served here are, I think, clearer than at other levels. Because, we can – without stretching the imagination too far – envisage the parish as *the level about which we can have a meaningful, embodied and committed conversation*.

At a prosaic but not unimportant level, you see this in the way in which churches and church halls facilitate hustings every five or so years. It's one of those things that is, again, easy to sniff at but given how Western democracy has at least one of its roots in congregational worship in the 17th century, and how today the bigger forums for this kind of political debate are characterised by bad faith and controlled communication, these local forms of democratic assessment are also important forms of local solidarity.

One might say that any place can do this, and that is half true. There is no problem in holding hustings in schools or... well, to be honest, it's usually schools. But this fact then points to a second fuller contribution to local common goods at the parish level.

A number of years ago Theos tried but failed to get off the ground a project, in partnership with the National Churches Trust about churches building communities. The National Churches Trust is interested in buildings but between us we recognised that there is an important and symbiotic connection between buildings, congregations and community.

“Community” is, of course, the watchword of the day: everyone is for community, no one is against it. However, the term is used with such elasticity that it is easy to assume that community just happens. Where two or three people are gathered together, there is a community. The reality is

more complex and more challenging. Community, in the fuller sense of the word, doesn't just happen but needs certain things.

If people are going to gather together they need space – ideally sheltered, heated, well-maintained, clean, and accessible space – to do so. If they are going to drink, they need facilities. If they are going to eat, they need a kitchen (and tables, chairs, etc.). If they are going to engage in activities, they need equipment. And all of this requires investment, maintenance and on-going funding.

Alongside this essential physical infrastructure, community also needs people: staff and volunteers who can organise and manage. Moreover, true community needs an *ethic of hospitality*, a mindset that welcomes, hosts and affirms other people. After all, most towns are packed with the kind of places in which people can congregate and commune. They're called cafés, or restaurants, or pubs. There is something significantly different about those places whose doors are open on a non-commercial and non-contractual basis. For community to be community, physical, human, and moral capital are all necessary.

I will return to the last of these factors in a minute but it should be reasonably clear that this is the kind of local common good that churches do day in day out across the country.

Over and above Sunday services and weddings, funerals and baptisms, the research we have done shows that they are used by

- those with particular social needs (e.g. foodbanks, addiction support, depression, counselling, debt advice, credit unions, crime prevention, healthy living);
- those in need of pastoral and relationship support (e.g., marriage preparation and guidance, separation and divorce support, befriending and bereavement services);
- those with young families (mums and toddlers, dads and lads groups);
- those with older children and young adults (e.g. breakfast, after-school, holiday clubs, youth work, parenting support);
- and those in the evening of their lives (coffee mornings, lunch clubs, outings).

They are used, as we have seen, for democratic processes (e.g. hustings, polling stations) and for cultural events (arts, music, theatre, film, dance). They provide an unparalleled breadth of opportunities for volunteering; for meeting, feeding, befriending others; in short for building community.

A survey we commissioned from ComRes when working with CUF a few years ago showed that around half the adult population in England had used what might be loosely called a ‘social service’ at some point in the last 12 months and half of those did so via a church (though, note, not necessarily an Anglican church; the distinction is irrelevant to most people ‘out there’). ResPublica’s report *Holistic Mission: Social Action and the Church of England* which spoke enthusiastically of the church’s hyper-localism made a similar point.

Moreover, research commissioned by Ecclesiastical insurers last year showed that this social role of churches is invisible, with three quarters of the public not aware of church activities outside of religious services.

Now there are a few important caveats to get in here. First, as noted: neither of these surveys was about Anglican churches alone. Second: there is nothing in principle which says that this kind of community building activity can *only* be done by the established church, or by Christians, or by faith groups. Third, and perhaps most importantly, Jesus did not come commanding his followers to hold coffee mornings and hustings. He did not even come heralding the common good.

Isn’t this vision of what the parish can contribute to the local common good rather selling the Kingdom of God short?

Well, I think it’s here that we might return to pick up some of the theology we talked about briefly in the first lecture, as it helps us understand why these open doors and this spirit of hospitality are integral, not only to local common goods, but also to the gospel.

The Christian view of the human – of which Anglican theologians like Maurice, Temple and Williams wrote cogently, albeit in different registers – is of the human person, a material *being* who through relationship and communication is also a *person*.

“The self is not a substance one unearths by peeling away layers until one gets to the core”, Rowan Williams has observed. Rather it is something

sculpted by relationships, by love. In such exchanges, we discover “the distinction between that mysterious, relational, conversational, environment-building activity that we call ‘the person’, and the individual as simply one example of a certain kind of thing.” [Theos, 2012]

Put another way, it is no accident that there are these buildings called churches and these things called congregations that stand at the heart of virtually every settlement to which we give the name “community”, across the country.

If the second greatest command is to love your neighbour, and if your neighbour like you, is a frail material being, then your shared good, your local common good, is served by arenas of un-coerced and non-contractual communication. Or, less pretentiously, places of love. The parish serves the local common good by being place for that kind of gathering and mutual service.

But it only does so, by imitating and drawing sustenance from Christ, as the model of a life of relationship, a life of gift, a life of true communication. The physical infrastructure of the building and the “human capital” of the congregation are only animated by the spirit of generosity and hospitality. Communities of this nature are only sustained by love and love only avoids being exhausted by remaining in Christ. Loving neighbour in this way comes after, and as a result of, the love of God.

“The deeper I go into the attempt to understand myself, who and what I am, the more I find that I am already grasped, addressed, engaged with,” observed Rowan Williams in 2012’s annual Theos lecture. “Before anything else happens I am in relation to a non-worldly, non-historical everlasting attention and love, which is God.” [Theos 2012]

This being so, we need to guard against the very proper and important local common good served at the parish level from becoming another social service provision. To be clear: it’d be better for churches to be like this than to be a club for like-minded believers or worse. But for it to serve the local common good, it needs to be cognizant of the heart that fuels such service. In other words, in trying to be and reflect Christ in local communities, we should also not neglect speaking about and introducing others to him.

We are familiar with the Christian Social Action in which congregations serve local common goods. But, I have called it somewhere, we need to shift the lens here towards Christian Social Liturgy, action that carries the visible signature of the love of God.

7.

Let me conclude.

Writing on the role of the Church of England in fostering the common good, theologians John Milbank and Adrian Pabst have said:

“As the established church with its unique parochial system, the Church of England is exceptionally well positioned to offer courageous leadership and translate perennial principles into transformative practices.

“Far from being a mere ‘super-NGO’ or the poster-institution and moral conscience of civil society, the Church of England is a polity in her own right that co-constitutes together with Parliament the shared public realm under the aegis of the monarchy.

“In this manner, the established church has a particular duty to promote a sense of individual virtue and public honour on which a society governed by reciprocity or gift-exchange depends. The Church of England is indispensable to a new politics of the common good beyond the liberalism of both left and right that underpins the global ‘market-state’.”

This isn't a bad summary of what I've been talking about today.

We sell the Common Good short if we only talk about *the* Common Good. It is better understood, to paraphrase its definition in *Gaudium et Spes*, as

“the total of those social, political, legal and cultural conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to recognise, seek and achieve their own various more local common goods”

Looking at it this way, avoids subsuming local goods into some overarching national good, a Millennium Dome of Common Good in O'Donovan's phrase.

And it opens the door for a realistic contribution from Anglicanism that, for all its theological breadth, not only has a live tradition of social thought that is consistent with Common Good thinking but also, crucially, has a structure and geographical identity allows it to serve the common good.

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ⁱ <http://acen.anglicancommunion.org/media/148818/The-World-is-our-Host-FINAL-TEXT.pdf>