



When I (am) survey(ed)

We are giving some preliminary thinking to a project that has the aim of sharpening up how we – St James's Church that is – presents itself to the wider world.

At this early stage, as shorthand, especially in email exchanges, we have been calling it a 'branding exercise' or 'comms policy' ('comms' for communications). Neither of these jargony terms is ideal. We have something more serious in view. Soon the PCC will be asked to review the proposal for how we go about, which will include asking questions of ourselves, and those beyond, about this church and its role in witnessing to God in Christ.

Everyone connected in any way with our community here will be invited to contribute views and ideas, through groups and/or through online surveys. The aim is to build up a picture of who and what we are, who and what we are perceived to be, and (this is really the most important) who and what God calls us to be, and how best to communicate that over the coming five to ten years.

As part of this preliminary phase, I have been researching how good surveys are constructed and the best way to ask questions. It turns out to be quite a science and at least one member of our community is involved in this professionally. As you might suspect, there are plenty of pitfalls. Since our attention spans seem to be contacting every year, surveys need to be short. Questions should not be loaded. They need to be intelligible, and to accommodate a wide range of respondents.

You can hardly do anything these days without being surveyed. And it's unquestionably the case that some surveys

and consultations are designed by the deranged. I bet you have seen some. And in our connected age every transaction seems to be followed up by a request to rate, comment on or participate in a survey of one kind or another. It happens every time I get my haircut; it happened recently after booking a table at Pizza Express. Even my dentist does it.

These trends can gain momentum. I fear a development where your phones will buzz after the blessing and dismissal here on a Sunday, with an invitation to answer a few questions. Did the celebrant conduct the epiclesis in such a way as to highlight both the immanent and transcendent? Did the absolution convey effective forgiveness and make you feel good? Did the preacher keep you awake, or maybe disturb your sleep? Please rate us on the following scale... With this trend in mind, the internet yields up some relevant satire. In a document called *God's Total Quality Management Questionnaire* there is the following.

"God would like to thank you for your belief and patronage. In order to better serve your needs, S/he asks that you take a few moments to answer the following questions. How did you find out about your deity? Newspaper, Bible, Torah, Television, Divine Inspiration, Dead Sea Scrolls, Near Death Experience, Near Life Experience, Burning Shrubbery, Other (please specify).

It goes on: Did your God come to you undamaged, with all parts in good working order and with no obvious breakage or missing attributes? If no, please tick as relevant: Turned out not to be eternal, Was finite in space/Does not occupy or inhabit the entire cosmos, Not omniscient, Not omnipotent, Makes mistakes, Makes or

*permits bad things to happen to good people,
When beseeched, doesn't stay beseeched,
Requires burnt offerings.*

*What factors were relevant in your decision
to acquire a deity? Please tick all that apply:
Indoctrinated by parents, Needed a reason to
live, Hate to think for myself, Fear of death,
Wanted to annoy parents, Wanted to please
parents, Like organ music, My shrubbery
caught fire and told me to do it.*

*Are you currently using any other source of
inspiration in addition to God? Please tick all
that apply: Tarot, Fortune cookies, Crystals,
Burning shrubbery.*

*God employs a limited degree of Divine
Intervention to preserve a balanced level of
felt presence and blind faith. Which would
you prefer? Circle as appropriate: More
Divine Intervention, Less Divine Intervention,
Current level of Divine Intervention is about
right.*

*Finally, do you have any additional comments
or suggestions for improving the quality of
God's services? (Attach an additional sheet if
needed).*

I get cross when offered rather narrow options when rating things. Some jump from poor to excellent. Well what happened to *good*? Or better still, *good enough*? And have you noticed the temptation to either over-praise or completely rubbish some service that wants your feedback? I suppose it gives us the chance to play God ourselves, without accountability or risk of comeback.

The exercise we are scoping is important, and beyond that, it could be really instructive, in the best kinds of ways. St James's is a microscopic part of the Christian church, no more or less important than other parts of the church. We are fortunate in our location, and in our habitation – a pretty remarkable building – and also in the way our identity has evolved since the 1980s.

At times in its history this has been a fashionable, high-society church preaching an establishment, conformist gospel. Since then, against a disappearing congregation drawn from those who actually live in the parish, we've become what in the 'missional' jargon is a *gathered* church: we travel in, some from quite a distance. Also in the jargon, we are what is described as a progressive, inclusive and liberal church. For those not sure what such coded church-speak indicates, let me explain. It means that a serious effort is made to link liturgy, preaching and 'church life' with our unadorned, uncurated, lived human experience; it means that women are taken seriously as equal partners in the adventure of faith - and beyond; it means the politics tend to be towards the Left (though that's neither compulsory nor in fact always the case); it means that LGBT people form part of our community, not as welcome aliens or defective heterosexuals, but as recognisably family, our own flesh. 'Inclusion' and 'inclusive' are current buzzwords, and whilst suffering from casual overuse (and often uncritical thought) nonetheless point to a serious intention: to affirm our shared humanity rather than to fear, or focus on, our differences. And we do this from an explicitly Christian perspective.

As our project takes shape and is approved by the PCC, and moves into the survey stage, you will hear more, and we hope for the widest participation. We are going to examine ourselves, see how we measure up, we want to try to discern what is required of us as a church and think about how we communicate that.

I only recently came across the word *segue* and its meaning. I'm not sure how I missed it – or managed without it all these years. So let me *segue* now. Christians are supposed to be no strangers to surveys and asking questions, especially of themselves.

Sometimes it is called *examination of conscience*. In the night office of prayer, called *Compline*, we are invited to reflect on the day and how it has been with us. And we

get the same invitation in the confession during the Eucharist. And going back to what I complained about in so many modern surveys with unhelpful gradations of adequacy, from poor to excellent with few sensible intermediate steps, the church (at its best) seeks neither of the outliers of rubbish or excellent, it seeks 'good enough' and the sincere wish to go deeper.

At its best, the church has a deep understanding of our humanity; it understands that God is not some modern-day service provider but a mystery whose nature is to do with love and whose identity is somehow, and crucially, revealed in Jesus Christ. And it wants its sons and daughters to participate in this mystery as fully as they can, as people of their time, in the concrete circumstances of their lives, and to speak of these discoveries as best they can to the times in which they live.

In the gospel today, John has Jesus say *I am the bread of life*. We can make many things of this and similar gospel images, but for the moment let us take it at face value and consider that we are to ingest this gift and be nourished by it, fuelled by it, changed by it. We do that both individually and corporately, as the gathered body, the community and family of the church. And the reading we

heard from Ephesians gives clues about the nature of that community when its members survey themselves gently but rigorously, regularly and purposefully even though for many of us it is two or three steps forward and one or two back process - let me remind you: put away falsehood; practice speaking truthfully; don't let the sun go down on your anger; labour honestly; share what you have with those who need it; let your words be a grace to those who hear them; put away bitterness as far as you possibly can; be kind, tender-hearted; *be imitators of God*. We're called to be and do these things beyond the church building, for don't forget we are the church wherever we are.

My, how we can miss the sparkle in the familiar when it is left unexamined, un-reflected upon, un-surveyed. We really should make room for these habits. We're passing through, on a relatively short trip, this amazing thing called life. Its pretty tragic if we devote time to useless feedback and surveys, expressing opinions too readily on this and that, yet fail to pay thoughtful attention to the daily miracles we call encounter – and indeed, to the miracle each of us is. Amen

Hugh Valentine