

Grave

[Aim: to examine the contrast between the continuous history of generations and its effect on community, and the influx of others whose histories lie elsewhere]

Story

A committed church-going couple, Tim and Roma, who were possessed of considerable personal success and wealth, bought a large house in a tiny, rural village. They immediately devoted themselves to the local church, and became major contributors to its financial resources. They then quickly became frustrated when they discovered that all decisions tended to be filtered from the small church council through the mind of one very elderly churchgoer, Cecil, who took a very long time to pronounce his view on any matter. Tim and Roma, who were supporting the church with a great deal of money, really felt that their commitment should count for something and wanted to have their views given more weight in the decision making process. In particular, they had strong feelings about the re-ordering of the church to be more family friendly and about the use of more modern kinds of worship. They discovered a general resistance to their ideas of what the church could be like coupled with a quiet refusal to discuss some ideas as non-negotiable issues. There did not however seem to be any such qualms about asking Tim and Roma for more money. Unused to this way of doing things and these kinds of attitudes, they began to challenge the habit of referring everything to Cecil's generally conservative opinion as if this

settled the argument. This generated hostility among other members of the congregation until Tim and Roma wondered if they should leave and find another church.

Eventually, one of the most senior church members took them out to the churchyard and pointed out the rows of ancient headstones belonging to generations of Cecil's family. In that village, churchgoers came from families who had grown up with, died alongside, and intermarried with, members of Cecil's family. Their histories were bound up with his, until he had become incontrovertibly associated with the life and health of the church. Cecil took a long time over decisions because he tended to think deeply about the consequences of those decisions for the entire community of people, and the rest of the congregation trusted him. A point was made to the couple that they were not unwelcome in the local church, nor were their views deemed unworthy or trivial. The difficulty was that the new couple were felt to be caught up in a contemporary notion of church which was different every Sunday and therefore ephemeral. Tim and Roma couldn't yet belong to the long history of prayer and worship in that place on which the church and local village life was based: "you might as well be Americans".

Discussion

The theologian Walter Wink, in his *Powers* trilogy, argues that the "angel" or spiritual personality of a church can only be understood by proper attention to both a current "snapshot" of what is happening at the present moment, and a much longer view of the history of the place. The present situation matters, but so do the life-stories which have, over time, been

played out in history. Both perspectives are needed to make an accurate and sensitive assessment of what God has been doing in the life of the church and what the possibilities are for the ongoing and future life of the village community. In this story, the two perspectives clashed rather than integrated, causing difficulties on both sides. If each church has its "angel", then the histories of worshipping communities do make a significant difference to the life of the church, but this has to be seen as a liberating influence and not as a trap. What is important, is that the interaction between the two perspectives should be an open and creative process and not hindered by secrecy or by the assumption that everyone somehow knows how things are done. This is particularly true for a new incumbent entering a new situation, who may be unfairly expected to have an intuitive understanding of the traditional functioning of the church. Similarly, change in the church, outreach and witness to the wider community has to emerge from a general willingness to be inclusive and welcoming. This is despite the fact that outside influences may bring challenge and what feels like dangerous change.

Some ideas for Bible study:

Wisdom 7:15-22

Ecclesiastes 5:1-7

Luke 2: 25-35

Choose one or two questions for discussion:

Have you come across, in Agatha Christie's phrase, a "lingering, feudal spirit of English villages"? If yes, what were the circumstances?

Why might it be important to learn as much as possible about the history of a place before attempting to change anything?

Do you think change is always for the better? If so, why? If not, why not?

Possibilities for drama or role play:

Try being Tim and Roma discussing new ideas for worship with members of the church council. Where would the question of money come into all this?

How would Cecil explain his understanding of responsibility?

How could church people make Tim and Roma feel really welcome and valued?

Reflection:

If it is a missionary task to seek to understand the "angel" of a place, then this requires a sensitive "mission audit" to include not just what is going on in a local church, but what brought it to be that way. What history of Christian witness has been inherited by the present congregation, or what problems and difficulties have arisen and perhaps never been properly resolved?

A Hymn and a Prayer

**For example: *God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year*
or *How lovely is Thy dwelling-place, O lord of hosts***

God,

You hold all history in your hands. All time is yours and all eternity.

**Help us to look beyond the small demands of our anxious present
and catch a glimpse of our everlasting home.**

Amen