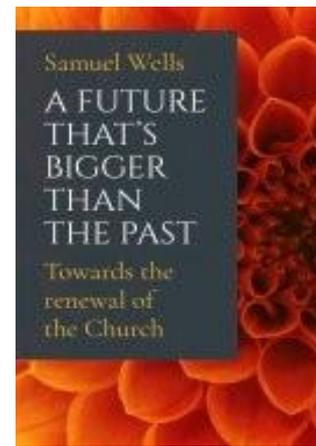


Book Review from Rev Jim Cox:

Sam Wells. A future that's bigger than the past



Sam Wells is vicar of St Martins in the Fields in Trafalgar Square and a keen observer of the church and public life. In this recent book he urges the church to embrace a culture of generosity and to face the future with confidence rather than fear.

His excellent introduction considers what the church is 'for'. Rather than its traditional role of being a guarantor of eternal existence or salvation from eternal torment (neither narrative being of great concern to most people these days) he encourages the church to address people's current fear of isolation and alienation, an absence of belonging, trust and identity: to see Christianity as an opportunity to live life fully, to be a faith of welcome, meaning and value and to enjoy simply being in the Presence of God with no ulterior motive for one's own future salvation. The church's mission should be to identify local need and to act as a catalyst for change, to be a blessing to others and a focus for community. Instead, it is his observation that the church is too preoccupied with filling the pews, which he sees as an 'economy of scarcity' (mammon) rather than an 'economy of generosity' (manna).

Wells observes that Israel is closer to God in Exile than in the Promised Land, that the sharpest focus of our faith is Good Friday. He urges the church to be alongside those who are in need not out of a sense of (patronising?) charity, but because their vision of God will be better focused than that of those more comfortable.

The chapters that follow attempt to model St Paul's vision of the church as, literally, an alternative society which embraces values ignored by the dominant culture. He is uncomfortable with the word 'inclusive' (can be patronising) and challenges models of giving based on "sell all you have" (the rich young man) and alternatively "they sold everything and gave to the common pot" (Early Church in Acts), neither of which works for the whole of society, proposing instead a more business-like model where he prefers to use the word 'invest' rather than 'spend'.

He sees an emptiness in the current culture which yearns for values of faith, order, truth and authority but which has no way of establishing them. Religion is replaced by something else - Art, Culture, Reason, the State, the People - which has become a huge anticlimax to individualism. Sport is the new church with its rituals and sense of belonging, but Wells wonders if the structure is strong enough to carry the freight loaded on to it.

The parables, he suggests, offer us not moral teaching but invite us into alternative ways of living. The church is not to be a harbour in the storm but an 'estuary' where things can grow and develop ready to pass from river to ocean. A church that thinks it has 'made it' or is comfortable or has no need of support is likely to be a church where God has ceased to act. Security is the enemy of divine engagement. Rather we are to be nomadic, challenged by those who are different and engaged in places of need, dependent on manna not mammon as we walk faithfully into an uncertain future.