

## Ways to God

*A sermon peached on Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> January 2016 (End of Week of Prayer for Christian Unity) by Geoff Oates.*

Exactly thirty years ago (Grove Road Methodist Church Harrogate, Christian Unity week 1986) I gave a sermon about railways. Thirty years ago, I'd still get a few older people in the congregation who remembered the dozens of old railway companies that existed until 1923.

Locally, there was the Great Northern, which built Hertford North, the Great Eastern across town at Hertford East, the Midland Railway at St. Albans, the London & North Western at Watford. After 1923, the government merged them all into just four big companies, and Hertford became LNER territory – a few of you will still remember them. In 1948 the whole railway system was nationalised and became British Rail. After the difficult years of the war, it seemed so natural and sensible.

And 30 years ago I thought that might be a useful parallel for a similar unification, one not too distant day, of Christian structures in Britain. Instead of thinking and acting separately as Catholics and Anglicans and Methodists and United Reform and Baptists, we might learn to see ourselves, and organise ourselves simply as Christians. It seemed so sensible and efficient.

So, how has my metaphor survived over 30 years. Where is British Rail now? It has ceased to exist – replaced by a whole swathe of regional operating companies.

Hertford was all WAGN for a while, then it was split up. Hertford East is Abellio; Hertford North was 'First Capital Connect'; and now we've gone full circle and I travel to town on a Great Northern train like my commuting ancestors of 95 years ago. Unification has gone backwards.

But the railways are thriving!

From the 50s to the 80s the railways were shrinking; they had inflexible infrastructure – railway lines, freight depots, country stations

– built to serve old, declining industries in established places, and they lost their freight and their passengers markets to new competition from lorries and buses that could reach new suburbs and new industrial estates quickly and flexibly. They were all set up to meet needs that our economy didn't have any more. And as years went by, 40% of our railway lines and half our railway stations closed.

Can you see the parable here. Look at our Church infrastructure. Built for a different age, for a time with different needs and expectations. All Saints is 100 years old, and it was built to look 1,000 years old. But it's not just the stonework, it's the whole pattern of piety we work to. It's not meeting the needs of a changing society, it doesn't answer their questions. Most of our churches are the wrong shape, and in the wrong place – and not just physically.

I'm going to push the railway metaphor further, because 30 years, on I see a sign of hope for us. After half a century of patience, railways are relevant again. They don't carry coal from pits to steelworks and power stations anymore, they don't carry cattle and potatoes from country halts to market towns, but they carry commuters. 1.6 billion of us last year. 60% more than a decade ago. 50% more than in the historic peak year of 1957.

Railways are reopening, new stations are being built, trams run again in the streets of Croydon and Manchester. Forget the Flying Scotsman; the golden age of the railways is right now. All those buses and cars, that seemed to spell the end for trains, have ended up in traffic jams and 'car park full' signs. There is a new need for rapid transit.

It is open to debate whether the return of privatised, regional railway companies has played much of a role in this revival – maybe it is just about being in the right

place at the right time and finding a new market to serve.

So cheer up, Church of Christ. You can be in decline for a very long time, but that doesn't mean it's all over. All those distractions and alternatives, the new freedoms that pulled our society away from traditional religion, have created their own spiritual traffic jams, their own 'dead end' signs. The answer is still the Gospel of Christ, but we will have to change the way we deliver it.

It is already happening. There are plenty of new believers and new congregations in England, even in Hertford; but a lot of them call themselves Community Churches or Free Churches. They don't have problems with old infrastructure – they lay their tracks wherever they see the need.

But where do we fit in? Well maybe I can turn to railways again for that one. Until 1923 there was a Great Central Railway running from Manchester and Sheffield to Marylebone. 93 years on, there still is, and they run steam trains between Leicester and Loughborough. The Heritage railways keep the old traditions alive for those who remember and love them, doing things the old ways. 120 of them in the UK, running nearly 500 locomotives, 700 miles of track, thousands of staff and volunteers and millions of visitors. They do it to please tourists, to draw in new volunteers, or simply for the joy of seeing beautiful and powerful technology at work. It is very different from the High Speed Javelins zipping commuters home to Kent in HS1, but it is still part of our railways.

And it's not just about keeping the past alive until an old generation dies out. Heritage has a future. They're building new steam engines again, a new generation of enthusiastic apprentice engineers is preserving the old skills.

Yes, there is room for 1662 Evensong and Tallis – and stained glass and choir stalls. There is room for new choral music and new Eucharistic liturgies. Heritage Religion? Why

not? But these will not bring the British people back to our churches.

We need something else to bring them back. And maybe it isn't actually to our churches, at least, not to the buildings.

I say our railways are thriving, but of course the downside of that is that they are usually overcrowded. If only the Church could have that problem. If you'd come to Messy Church in October or November, we were. We've seen how hard it is to get young families into Church on a Sunday morning, even if you're offering All Age services and crèches and Sunday School.

But we've found something they do need. Put it in a space that is right for what you're doing; use a medium that children can relate to even in the i-phone age (you can't beat glue and poster paints for making a creative mess), tell the stories of Jesus and teach them songs.

And we watch as the unchurched parents, the ones who have no childhood memories of church, because we're already in the second post-Christian generation, we watch them start to listen, and join in. And slowly, a new heritage is taking shape. It's not all that radical. It's very much like Sunday School was when I was a child. But it's aimed at beginners, and it's what they need.

We don't want them to stay beginners. I don't know yet what it will lead on to. But it won't bring them into this building. It's the wrong shape for them.

But it doesn't matter.

What matters is that God is calling people to him, and ministering to their needs, wherever he finds them. The right place at the right time.

The new passengers may not be on our train – but they're on the railway, and we're all travelling to the same destination.

That's good enough for me.