

Of Piers And Piety (August 2018)

August 2, 2018

By Rev Paul Graham

"Didn't we have a lovely time, the day we went to... Clacton" the Fiddler's Dram song could have said (instead of Bangor). Because yesterday that's exactly what we did. Packing up the car with a couple of chairs, a few bottles of water and the promise of fish and chips, three quarters of the Graham family (Oliver's away staying with family) took Ashley to visit one of our local seaside attractions.

Ah, Clacton; with its pier, its part-pebbly beach, its beach huts, its seagulls and its many ways of persuading you to part with money of all denominations. The Waltzers and the rollercoaster were visited, the obligatory ice-cream-at-the-end-of-the-pier was consumed and a good time was had by all.

However, amidst all the razzmatazz and the presence of two real-life ex-X Factor contestants (it was the grand opening of the new bit of the pier's attractions), there were also signs of faded glory. Once great buildings stand unloved and unkempt, their Victorian paints peeling and dirty windows hiding spectres of the past and secrets of the present. One can almost still hear the sound of charabancs echoing around the roads, as their excited passengers disgorged onto the now litter-strewn back streets to enjoy their day at the seaside.

There is much to excite and entertain in Clacton; there is much to commend it for a good day out. But scratch below the surface and I find the sad sense of decay. Behind the glitz and glamour there are ghosts and grime. There are plenty of highly polished theme park rides and you can just about make out the constant rattle of the 2p machines over the sound of enthusiasm and laughter. But I feel there is also a melancholy about the place. As much as I enjoy the noise and the hubbub, there is a part of me that wishes to have seen Clacton in its former state. Possibly even to return to those halcyon days of bathing suits and beach belles, promenading and parasols.

But would that be right?

There is obviously a market for what goes on now; such was in evidence yesterday. There were plenty of people enjoying the glitz and the glamour; the people stepping up to redeem prizes were all smiling and having a great time. So who am I to be curmudgeonly and backward-looking? What right have I got to complain about former glories? Particularly as they may not have been as wonderful as I might like to think, what with harsh working conditions, slum-life, child labour, severe punishments and injustices left, right and centre.

Maybe I should let the past be the past. There are still bits to enjoy; the occasional moment when we can revisit days gone by without compromising the new and the modern. The buildings, though some are more dilapidated than delightful, are still standing and there are quieter stretches of beach when the noise gets too much to sit and ruminate. We can still touch and connect with the past; Punch and Judy continue to fight in defiance of any marriage counsellor's advice and donkey rides still prove popular.

Maybe I need to remain suspicious of the modern, though. Just because it's new, doesn't mean it's right. Why should I play every game, go on every ride, attempt to win every prize, just because the music entices me to? The right to pick and choose remains mine, as long as I leave with some sense of enjoyment and the aftertaste of ice cream.

Maybe I should take off my rose-tinted, backwards looking spectacles and embrace the spectacle of the present, with all its noise and laughter. If there's a time for everything, maybe the past is something that

we need to let go.

And if all else fails, there's always Frinton...

Something similar continues to go on in church life. There are always some who remember the church as it used to be. There are always some who probably prefer a different style of church that reminds them of days gone by, whether this is through song choices, preaching or coffee.

But, do we try to cling on to too much? In our attempts to hold onto what God did back then we're not looking for what God is doing now. Do we allow God who is the same yesterday, today and forever be true to that promise, or are we too busy trying to recreate who he was in our youth? Do we want to make church in our image, rather than let God build it as he said he would?

Probably the most common example of this is in our sung worship. Do we despair when the faded glories of great hymns are reworked, reworded and remade for a modern ear? Do we still hear the ghostly strains of the old organ and wish we had more of Sankey in our hymn choices? Do we fear that we will lose the old standards of our faith, hymns that have formed the backbone of Sunday services for generations?

And as in church as it is in Clacton, we're right to be suspicious of the new. Just because it uses funky instruments doesn't mean it's worth singing. There is the risk of embracing "celebrity culture" even in church life where we raise one of the crowd above their equal status without asking "why?" There is the risk of discarding too much of what forms the foundation in favour of what is new and shiny but has little substance.

There is also the risk of missing the boat because we're still looking back at the previous sailing...