

25th October 2021

Vacancy

“There’ll be another vacancy soon.”

J B Priestly, Radio Interview, 1977

The English novelist, dramatist and critic, J B Priestly, died in 1984 at the age of ninety. Seven years before, he was interviewed on radio after he’d been awarded the *Order of Merit*. Established by King Edward VII in 1902, the award recognises distinguished services in the armed forces, science, art and literature, and is restricted to twenty-four living recipients. When asked for his comments on his award, Priestley remarked, “I’ve only two things to say about it. First, I deserve it. Second, they’ve been too long giving me it. There’ll be another vacancy very soon. “Very soon” was longer than Priestly expected, it appears, though he knew that, with limited numbers, there was always going to be a vacancy at some point.

“Vacancy” is a word we use in Church circles. When a minister goes, and before a replacement can be found, we say a parish is “vacant”. But what does “vacant” mean? It implies emptiness, a “lack” of something, in this case a minister. A house might be “vacant” before new residents move in. There may be a “vacant lot” before a building appears. We look at the “job vacancies” knowing that a specific skill set is needed to fulfil a particular role. But should this be the case in ministry and in our churches?

One denomination calls such a vacancy an “interregnum”. The king is dead. But before we say “long live the king” – or queen – we have to live for a time when there is no “king” to minister among us *or* rule over us.

No! This is *not* true. Of course there’s a period of time before a replacement is found for the “ministry” in the hands of a designated person. But in our churches, is ministry not in the hands of *everyone*? We minister *with* each other. We are not just ministered *to*.

A colleague suggested recently that the word “vacancy” should be banned in our churches. Why should we imply “emptiness” when there are so many people doing good things with and for each other? So, let’s celebrate the ministry of all. Let’s value the contributions made by every person. Let’s be *together* in our service and mission. Vacancy? No, not when it’s already being filled by good people doing so many good things!

A prayer for today

Fill me, Lord, that I might offer my loving service in your name. Amen