



## The Bishop of Ebbsfleet's Pastoral Letter - August 2008

### Spoilt for Choice

**T**HE GOVERNMENT TELLS us that choice is the driver-up of standards. Give the consumer choice, they say, and what's on offer improves sharply. We see that principle at work in the shops and the dizzying speed at which stuff ordered on the internet arrives. Want to buy an elephant or a tortoise-shell mirror? Will tomorrow morning do by special delivery? Or can you wait till Thursday for ordinary delivery?

Choice doesn't work for everything: sometimes there's only one gym, pub, school, shop or surgery in easy reach. Choice – at least on the TV I don't watch – seems to lead to more and more unwatchable programmes.

It wasn't until I became a priest that I ever went to the parish church – the church of the parish in which I lived. In towns and cities people usually choose their church – if they go at all – just as they choose which other facilities to use and things to belong to. The Church may have carved up England – so that everyone lives in a parish – but it is only in the countryside where the boundaries count for much and, even there, there are signs of church folk commuting in to town churches – just as they go into work and shop at the supermarkets on the ring roads of our towns and cities. I met one person recently who travels from Birmingham to the West Country to go to church on Sundays. I long to show him a couple of wonderful congregations nearer home!

Patterns of belief and belonging are more and more complicated as time goes on – and the internet plays a part in that. The Church always looks for signs as to how well the ministry of the parish church is rooted in the neighbourhood it serves – and in areas of low mobility that is an important question. But a more important question is 'how many belong?' And an even more important question is 'how can we so order the life of the local church that people are drawn into its life, and once drawn into its life are drawn into the love, worship and service of God?' Meanwhile do people even know which their parish church is? Have they ever seen inside the building? If not, what impression does the outside give? The church grounds? The noticeboard? Would you dare go into a strange building as forbidding and grand as that one looks, with its huge doors and fortifications?

Like it or not, choice is a driver-up of standards. If every parish church sought to be everything it needs to be to those who live nearby, that would certainly help. What does it need to be? It needs to be a place where one discovers something of what it means to belong to the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, reaching forward to us from the time of the New Testament, and taking us forward into the Communion of Saints, meanwhile deepening our lives as disciples of Christ and giving us a foretaste of the heavenly banquet.

May God bless us as we make our choice for him.

*The Bishop of Ebbsfleet*  
*Bishop's House, Dry Sandford, Abingdon, OXON OX13 6JP*  
*Tel: +44 (0) 1865 390746*  
[www.ebbsfleet.org.uk](http://www.ebbsfleet.org.uk)