

Downton Abbey and the Church

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One of the joys of retirement is being able to take up the hobbies I didn't have time for before. I cultivated those hobbies while I was working, and now I have the time to indulge them fully.

I've also had time to binge-watch some TV series. It was a good thing that our spring was so cold and wet; I had a great excuse to stay indoors to watch!

One of those series is Downton Abbey. Quite a few folks recommended it when it began, but I wasn't particularly interested. I wasn't about to spend my limited time off watching the sad remnants of a bygone era.

Besides, I have always been strongly anti-hierarchical. Titles and honours just don't mean that much to me. I understand the need for structure in an institution, but within that structure I would always try to find a more egalitarian way of doing things.

I just wasn't interested. So I was quite surprised how quickly I got caught up in the lives of these people. I argued with them, laughed at them, felt sorry for them. I couldn't stand the casual cruelty of the eldest daughter Mary, and I absolutely hated the implicit assumptions of both small communities about how life should work. I tsk-tsked at the easy life of the upstairs community, at the cost of those who served them. I laughed at the thought that none of them would be able to fend for themselves if they didn't have servants. They couldn't make meals, or clean, or organize their life, or even get dressed by themselves.

In one episode, Sybil, the youngest Crawley daughter, decides that she wants to learn to cook for herself. She goes downstairs to ask for lessons from the housekeeper and cook. They chuckle to themselves and agree to help her. They ask, "Do you know how to boil a pot of water?" Sybil says, "Of course I do. How hard can it be?" She picks up a kettle, goes to the sink, turns on the water, and splashes everyone in the kitchen while managing somehow to avoid getting any water in the kettle.

I was also quite surprised at the keen sense of hierarchy within the community of servants. Carson the butler is clearly in charge and expects the other servants to obey him. Each of the servants also has their own place in the pecking order, and woe betide anyone who might get in the way. They snipe at each other, fight with each other, and work hard to maintain their position. Some of the servants are quite vindictive, while others try to live in a kindlier way.

And then there's the Dowager Countess Violet. It's still a wonder to me that Maggie Smith could utter her lines with a straight face. But utter them she did: "I don't know what it would mean to apologize for being wrong; it has never happened to me." "If this is what the future holds, then let us stay firmly rooted in the past." "I certainly do dislike change. I'm perfectly content in my God-given station." Every line delivered in a dry, upper-crust, stiff-lipped British accent without a hint of irony. She wants to pretend that change isn't happening.

As I watched the series unfold over six seasons and two movies, I couldn't help but think how similar Downton's situation is to today's church. We are watching an institution slowly disintegrating, presided over by a slightly befuddled Lord Grantham who can't quite deal with the changes which are happening to him and his family, and to society at large.

Life is changing, and old traditions are being erased. The chauffeur marries the youngest Crawley daughter. Women who used to stay at home are going out to work. The staff of servants is becoming smaller as finances become more tenuous, and the family can simply no longer afford a full contingent of servants to run the estate. As a result, the people at the bottom end up working harder for less and resenting it more.

I couldn't help but hear Tevye the milkman in *Fiddler on the Roof* sing, "Tradition!" It's a similar story of change overwhelming the way things had always been done.

The same thing is happening with the church in today's world. The institution is failing. It is coming apart at the seams. In my own tradition, bishops are no longer addressed as "My Lord Bishop" or "Your Grace" and some really don't like the change. No longer are clergy automatically honoured and respected because of their station, even though some clergy still parade their titles proudly. No longer are church buildings filled on Sunday mornings with families who come together for worship. Many church members remember Sunday Schools filled with happy children; they no longer exist. It is no longer true that "if we build it, they will come."

Indeed, for many congregations, buildings have become a white elephant. Maintenance has been neglected as costs go up; buildings slowly fall into disrepair, and they end up being abandoned and sold. Many church people end up like Thomas Barrow, the sad, broken footman in *Downton Abbey* who has given up any hope of improving his lot in life and ends up being increasingly resentful of those who manage to make life better than he. They want to pretend the change isn't happening.

Leaders, both clergy and lay, are working harder with less, and they are increasingly finding it difficult to make any headway at all.

Downton Abbey and its lifestyle no longer exists. I can't help but wonder how soon that will be true of the church. It's time for some significant and meaningful change. In my opinion, it's always better to get out ahead of that change than it is to simply get swept away by changing circumstances.