

SPIRITUALITY IN THE CITY

Liverpool Festival of Spirituality 2016: Wake Up in Liverpool

A lecture at St. Bride's 18 April 2016 by Ray Simpson

I have focussed my thoughts as to what the flowering of God's Kingdom in Liverpool might look like in three words, so that you can remember them and work at them over the coming season. These three words are Heart, Hope and Hospitality.

HEART

In Waterstones bookshop is a large print quotation from Carl Jung, the psychiatrist who studied the collective unconscious: 'Liverpool; the Pool of Life'. In his *Dreams and Reflections* Jung tells of a dream he had about the pool.

As you know, Liverpool's first dock, built by 1715, was the earliest commercial wet dock in the world. It was made possible by the channelling of the tidal river waters into a deep, man-made dock called The Pool. Liverpool's sudden and phenomenal rise from a little known village to a large port would not have been possible without this. But Jung's dream was not about external infrastructures, it was about the deeps of his own and of all human life. As part of the Festival a group said Midday prayer there earlier today which began 'We gather at the pool of life, a symbol of the calm, creative centre from which life flows'.

The liver, according to the old view, is the seat of life. In the Bible, the heart is the seat of life. Whatever things developers, including church developers, do on the surface of life, God is surely calling you to dive down into the deep of the individual and collective soul where nourishment and transformation may take place.

In Jung's dream everything in the city was dark and dank, but it was organised radially around the square. In the centre of the square was the pool, in the centre of the pool was an island and in the centre of the island was a tree that radiated transforming light. The dark and dank speaks of low self image and negative dynamics. The radiant tree nourished by the deep pool speaks of our True God-given Self being nourished by God's wellsprings.

Deep speaks to deep. The Bishop of Woolwich, Christopher Chessun, once asked us to help bring the Desert into the City – meaning Desert Spirituality. This is about creating space to work on our inner demons, to identify and strip away the eight destructive passions until there is nothing left but the love of God. Crowds were attracted to Jesus because he had done this deep work and thus had deep, unforced authority.

The Bishop of Woolwich had taken his staff to the Jerusalem Community in Paris. Their vocation is to live in the heart of the city, in the heart of God. They quote Jesus' words 'Father, I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one' (John 17:15). Since human beings are created as the most beautiful likeness of God, the monks and nuns want to meet God in the city, among its inhabitants. Through a life of community and contemplation, revealing God's

presence in the heart of this world, they want to serve and to reach out to all those who seek God.

He felt that this faith community never pounced on people. Rather, they lived a life and invited others to enter into it. Their liturgies (which are preceded by 30 minutes of silent prayer) and some meals are open to others.

So is God calling you, in the first place, to journey deeper into the heart of God - through soul friendship, discipleship courses, reflective reading and meditation -by journeying into your Shadow (the Pool), there to find the transformative elements that, when others look at you, perhaps unknown to you, is like a tree of light?

HOPE

Liverpool is, of course, associated with hope because its two vast cathedrals (the English one and the Irish/Catholic one) are connected by Hope Street, they sponsor the Hope Foodbank, and because those two iconic bishops, David Sheppard and Derek Worlock, popularly known as fish and chips, became inseparable in fighting for the good of Liverpool. The Hope Street sculpture of these two men of hope records these words of David Sheppard: 'Close the gap between life and religion'.

There are many other gleams of hope. In addition to Hope University and the football teams there is, for example, The Beatles and John Lennon who brought 'The Liverpool Sound' to America.

Not all hope is soundly based. The derelict Albert Docks were replaced by the wonderful Festival Gardens, but parts of them now lie derelict, awaiting purchase by some property tycoon. Other derelict parts were replaced by rich people's dwellings from which the poor, even skateboarders, are excluded. Without community is hope but a vapour? Market forces may be an instrument for good, but they are not God. Market forces do not know compassion, conscience or community. So although money is indeed needed in order to create hope, the fancy shops and fashion houses in the new Liverpool One are an insufficient basis for hope. They could disappear in a whiff in a global financial crash. The hope that is enduring, that springs eternal, that animates a whole person and a whole community is the Christian Hope. It is a thousand little people taking a thousand little creative steps. Hope that believes all things, endures all things because it knows the reality of death and resurrection. This reality, enshrined and re-lived in our two great sacraments of baptism and Eucharist is what we must share and celebrate with our neighbours.

Rock and Roll came to Liverpool through the arrivals on ships from USA. Liverpool became a land of singers. Now Paul McCartney funds a big Centre for the Arts. Our Community of Aidan and Hilda likes to tell the story of the illiterate Whitby cowherd Caedmon who crept out of the community's 'Karaoke' of those days because he was too shy to sing. But he dreamed that a radiant young man invited him to sing to him a song of creation. His foreman was impressed when Caedmon sang this to him upon waking, got word to Hilda up at the monastery, who taught him Bible stories which he turned into popular songs. He became the first pop singer in the English language. We take this story as a universal call to release the song locked in every human heart. That is a second key in releasing the kingdom of God in the city.

HOSPITALITY

A google search tells me that over 80% of Liverpudlians have Irish descent. It's so easy for the Irish to pop across the sea. Many were economic migrants, many sailed on to USA, but many settled here. They brought with them hearts of hospitality and humour which have been in their DNA from the days of Saint Brigid and Ireland's early villages of God

In his book *Colonies of Heaven: Celtic models for today's church*, Ian Bradley points out that early Christians in Ireland often lived together in monastic colonies, which were the hubs of tribal life. They served in many ways, as 'hospital, hotel, school, university, arts workshop, open prison and reformatory, night shelter and drop-in day centre as well. They were open and accessible to visitors coming and going. Both the active and the contemplative roles made the monastery a colony of heaven, rooted in the world, serving it and intimately involved in its affairs, yet the embodiment of radically otherworldly values.'

At first sight there is no connection between the context of today's global village and the world of these monastic villages, which St Aidan introduced to the English. However, in a lecture at St Andrew's University entitled 'Does the future have a church?' I made the following points. They have become a kind of mantra and I repeat them here:

A 24-hour society calls for seven-days-a-week faith communities.

A café society calls for churches that are eating places

A travelling society calls for churches that provide accommodation.

A stressed society calls for churches that nurture retreats and meditation.

A multi-choice society calls for churches that have a choice of styles and facilities.

A fragmented society calls for holistic models and whole-life discipling.

An eco-threatened society calls for more locally sustainable communities that have roots in the soil.

Moreover, globalization is, paradoxically, bringing a revival of the city. Graham Ward, Professor of Theology and Ethics at Manchester University, in his book *Cities of God*, notes the city states that made up medieval Europe, and that contemporary social atomism has led to cities of desires fed by capitalism's ephemeral vanities. This leads both to emptiness and to a hunger for something more real and lasting that might inspire cities to something greater. . Bruce Katz, Vice President and Director of the Metropolitan Policy Program at The Brookings Institution has suggested that in 2016 'nations may govern but cities rule'. In some cities there are signs that churches are responding to this emergence of the city. The focus of the two thousand member Central Church Edinburgh (a Baptist and trans-denominational church which attracts

people from a wider spectrum to its leadership team) is to bring in the kingdom of God to the whole city.

It seems to me that, although selfish individualism reigns, longing for community and ultimate significance also grows. With the advent of advanced technology and freedom of movement, endless forces now move and coalesce. The Holy Spirit accompanies all these external forces and the movements within people's hearts. Globalisation and mass communication enable the rise of what has been termed 'liquid church'. This fluidity enables separate entities to flow together, the parts to coalesce with a greater whole, and this coalescing requires intelligent and coordinated responses from Christians. That is why Graham Ward foresees cities of God emerging through the coalescing of a kaleidoscope of spiritual dynamics.

We must plant expressions of Christ in the places to which people gravitate today—in blogging and eating places, in pilgrim and study places, in natural and social places. The mushrooming of Christian projects, culture-friendly church plants, missional groups and networks, alongside the decline in the 'one-shape-fits-all' type of church, makes possible patterns that are more flexible than the old. Villages of God start where people are. In the future, a few may be designed from scratch, as Quakers once designed model villages such as Bournville. Some can grow piecemeal, as a core group responds to the Holy Spirit at work in their area. A virtual village may evolve even in rural areas when isolated churches and projects link up. The primary basis for a village of God is a hub church or monastic community with varied facilities that develops partnerships with service providers around it. In Russia, monastic kremlins of over a mile in circumference are being rebuilt and repopulated in town centres. Leo Tolstoy thought that the bee hive was a model for human community.

With God, the piecemeal way is not as naïve as it may at first appear. The American independent pastor Paul Sparks broadcasts his discoveries of how powerful the gospel can be when it takes root in the context of a place, at the intersection of geography, demography, economy and culture. He acknowledges that his is not a new idea—the concept of a parish is as old as Paul's letters to the various communities of the ancient church—but, in an age of dislocation and disengagement, the notion of a church that knows its place and gives itself to the place where it finds itself is like a breath of fresh air, like a sign of new life. (He encourages people who drive to a church from elsewhere to take an interest in the neighbourhood that surrounds the church building and to ask what are the signs of God at work there. These signs may include the witness of Christians from other churches, but also people of goodwill who run shops, clubs, services and planning departments. Sparks writes:

Christians can build into a secular shopping centre village by placing an eating, praying and listening space there. Most villages of God will grow from a hub church that creates transforming relationships with resource providers in the marketplace around them, as yeast transforms dough.

In my book *High Street Monasteries* I explored 'spaces' that a village of God might embrace. The hub of a village needs to include praying, meeting and eating spaces. Further out may be work, art, music, healing, guest, exercise and play spaces, plus facilities such as a Godly Play atrium, wifi study area and craft workshops. Green spaces might include community gardens, compostable products, wild areas and farms. Social and special needs, as well as upmarket housing, are natural components

of a village of God, as are cooperatives and solar, wind, earth or water energy projects. Silent, meditation and learning spaces may be near to green spaces

As I travel, I meet people who want to add to this list. I shared in a house church that, after lunch, engaged in wrestling in the park opposite and urged me to add a wrestling arena to my 'village of God' chart! This is not as 'way out' as it might seem. The sixth-century Irish saint Abban, who is associated with a cell on the Isle of Jura, was sent by his father, a king, to be fostered and instructed in feats of strength and valour. In holistic villages of God, not just in Buddhist centres, well-being of body and soul are linked.

Other suggested additions to a village of God include prayer stations, clubs and credit unions, healthy food bakeries, twelve-step programmes for addiction recovery, prayer rooms for Muslims, car boot sales, parish nurses, cash machines, busking, prayer trees, massage, spa, cinema, interfaith and ethnic dialogue rooms, art exhibitions, libraries, interactive worship on big screens, and land care experiments. The revival of 'The Abbey' on Raymond Island in Australia's Gippsland Diocese has begun with a land-care project. Some villages of God might emulate Oslo, which is developing a 'bee highway'.

An example of a hub church that has spokes into the surrounding region is Northern Ireland's Causeway Coast Vineyard Church, Coleraine, which seeks to 'wash the feet of the city'. It offers healing in the streets and groups that serve social needs along the coast, as well as groups for personal spiritual growth. It asked a local school, 'How can we serve you?' The school needed approved volunteers to assist with playground watch. The church earned the school's trust; now, suitable members also contribute to It says 'We do not have a dream for the church: we want the church to have a dream for the city'. Although St. Bride's is part of the minority English tradition, one of its founders was inspired to place it under the patronage of St. Bride (Brigid). She is known as the spiritual midwife who brought Christian Ireland to birth. Can you be the spiritual midwife who brings post Christendom Liverpool to birth as the Christ-for-others city? To incarnate Jesus in the Market Place. If John Lewis had only allowed English people to have shares and work in the company it would be bygone or back street shop by now. Come on churches – learn from John Lewis and from Brigid. Isn't it time to develop Ecumenical Partnerships throughout Liverpool?

Brigid is the patron saint above all others of hospitality. Brigid teaches us to lay a spare place at table in case Christ comes in the guise of a stranger. She speaks of hosting feasts – giving barrels of apples to lepers. The patron saint of the soul friend and of the ever fruitful Christian. She calls us to bless all that is good in the city around us – to bless every blessed thing.

CONCLUSION

Heart – go deep.

Hope – rise up.

Hospitality – reach out.

For the love of God calls us to leave our limitations and go ever deeper, higher, and wider

In the Celtic tradition we sense how God's kingdom in the city will be sensitive to the land under our houses and streets and to the people who are at the bottom of the social pile.

We seek also the healing of the land and of wounded group memory.