

Urban Estates Evangelism Conference – 9-10th October 2017

Theological Reflection – led by Rev Dr Jill Duff – Estates and the Gospel

FULL VERSION

My heart leapt when Bishop Philip invited me to give this theological reflection

Pretty much all 15 years of my ordained ministry has been spent in urban deprivation areas of Liverpool Diocese. What I am to say is formed by countless friends who live in urban areas in the North West. One friend in particular has personally contributed – you'll meet her shortly.

For my day job, I'm Director of St Mellitus College North West, based at Liverpool Cathedral – where I teach New Testament, mission and church planting. We are the first Full Time ordination college in the North West for over 40 years and we are trying to build on the heritage (or re-open the wells) of St Aidan's College in Birkenhead. This College closed in 1969. When they opened in 1846 they were ahead of their time – these were the days when you either trained for ordination at Oxford, Cambridge or St Aidan's. They had the vision of training the ordinary man for ordination in the C of E – dockers, labourers, postmen. You still see this in the St Aidan's old boys today. It was also an earlier version of context-based training. The Vicar who founded it, Joseph Bayliss, saw the growing need for the gospel across the water in the burgeoning city of Liverpool, so ordinands would spend their afternoons at the coal-face of ministry with the poor in the slums.

My heart breaks that often there isn't good news for the poor, especially at a time when the poor are increasingly forgotten

But they are not forgotten in this room! In short, my hope is that our prayers and our dreams represent a magma under a volcano that is slowly but surely raising the temperature in our church and country

What an interesting time to be holding an Urban Estates Evangelism Conference...

A time when the temperature is indeed rising.

I used to be a scientist and worked in the oil industry, so I like to back up statements with data.

Here are three data points to support this:

- 1. Grenfell tower** – what a prophetic shock that over 80 people were burned alive in their homes because the one of the richest councils in the country ignored their pleas for safety and saved c £4 per square foot of cladding.
 - My boss, Graham Tomlin (Bishop of Kensington) – who I saw more on *Sky News* than in person at one point - described how he was “surfing on a wave of prayer”.. right into cabinet office where he was invited to chair a meeting of the local residents – sitting in the Prime Minister's seat
- 2. Bishop Philip's talk at New Wine** has had an astonishing echo in church and national media (I even marked an essay this weekend, quoting it - a sign that you've made it, as a significant data point!)
 - We found ourselves reflecting on your talk and Grenfell at our College retreat at start of term – what does this mean for us as a College?
 - Two weeks ago Mark Ashcroft, Bishop of Bolton came to speak to us in Liverpool about his “embarrassing data”. Given that Jesus came to bring good news to the poor and it's hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God - it's embarrassing that in Manchester Diocese the graph is precisely opposite to what you'd expect. Namely, the largest churches are in the richest areas, the smallest in the poorest. (This isn't just an issue for Manchester). He said: we – need – to – repent. The incredible thing was that very morning, one of our ordinands had come up to me to say “I think we need to repent, repent, repent” (I'd asked them in class to listen out prophetically to “What is the Spirit saying to our nation?”). So when the bishop had finished speaking, I called her out to lead us in a prayer of repentance

on behalf of our nation. There were people in tears. I said to +Mark Ashcroft – we've never had a bishop visit before who's made the students cry!

3. The insidious culture of de-humanising the poor – evil is over-reaching itself

Perhaps you've come across the film *I Daniel Blake...* (I was speaking with Abi from Rotherham last night who said she couldn't bring herself to watch it). It was lent to me recently by my friend, Sharon, in Widnes lives on £100 a week. I watched it and it left me numb – I just did not relate to the story which is about a carpenter who has a heart attack and finds himself in the social security system, where people are no longer treated as human beings, right down to the inane music they have on the phones while you wait for two hours for your call to be answered.

Sharon highlighted our TV programming – *Benefit Fraudsters*..... She said it feels like propaganda to dehumanise the poor. "Jill – they just don't feature people like me". Before bankruptcy – she used to work in the Citizens Advice Bureau in Widnes, where three people killed themselves simply because they'd been "sanctioned" again and again, so they had ended up living on £22 a week

Amid this gloom, the film does give credit to the church. There's a seminal scene in a food bank which is clearly set in a church hall run by Christians. This reminds me of a conversation over breakfast with David [Banbury, Blackburn] who was told by Blackpool Council no less, that if the church stopped caring there would be safety net for the poor; Keith [London] commented that we're often seen as the 4th Emergency Service.

The data is that nearly all the foodbanks, most of the youth provision and half the toddler groups in this country are provided by the church.

[Gear shift]

When Jesus stood up in the synagogue in Nazareth to preach his manifesto sermon, this is the passage he chose:

Isaiah 61.1-4:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,^[a]
²to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
³ and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of joy
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the LORD
for the display of his splendour.

⁴They will rebuild the ancient ruins
and restore the places long devastated;
they will renew the ruined cities
that have been devastated for generations.

This passage struck me with freshness as I prepared this talk

Bishop Philip is right – reason why the church is not growing is because we ignore the poor

Verse 4: THEY will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ancient cities that have been devastated for generations.

Who are “they”?

- The poor, the broken-hearted, the captives, the prisoners

Not the latest short term government funding scheme, not Jill Duff with her first from Oxford and mini-MBA from London Business School, how many of us on this Estates Conference, grew up on an Estate? [Br Benedict asked a good question about this yesterday]. No, – the poor will rebuild and renew the places in our country that have been devastated for generations.

It’s like the Great Reversal we find in Luke’s gospel - that Mary sings about in the Magnificat (Luke 1.51-53):

⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.

⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

May there be a wave through our country that brings up this swell of people from the underground and deposits them on the shore, like a mighty army - that brings down rulers from their thrones and lifts up the humble.

May there be a Year of Jubilee for those captives, trapped underground, desperate to mine their way out, because they have the gifts that will renew the church and restore the devastated cities

Do their gifts look like the gifts we expect? Probably not. Would you have predicted the *L’Arche* community – living with people with profound disabilities – would have taught the world so much about love and joy?

My favourite summary of the Gospel is written in the Gospel of Geoff, an ex-heroine addict from Widnes, who says this: “Jesus delivered what drugs never could”.

This is the promise of God to Isaiah, which Jesus chose to make his manifesto – Good news to the poor. It has all the hallmarks of the great reversal of the Kingdom of God. The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone. This is the Lord’s work and it is marvellous in our eyes.

St Patrick said this: “I desire to wait for the promise of God, who does - not – disappoint - us”.

This is the promise of God – let the poor get hold of the gospel, and this will transform our nation.

But how are we stopping the poor getting hold of the gospel? How are we excluding them from the banquet table?

Here's my observations (and I'm sure you'll have your own). Three thoughts:

1. We cut off their leaders

I'm not convinced that Peter – the rock on who Jesus built his church – would easily navigate his way through selection and ordination training in the C of E. Mark [Russell, CEO Church Army] highlighted that the carpenter from his church (coincidentally same occupation as Jesus) is not able to serve on General Synod because he cannot afford to lose a day's pay each time Synod meets. This restricts the governance of our church to a small subsection of our population who have guaranteed income.

I generalize here, but we invite people on selection conference in remote rural areas of the country in a cultural form that gives advantages to those from professional backgrounds; we presume that the starting point for training is Year 1 of a Durham degree; we make them middle class

I exaggerate to make a point, but that's just those who make it through selection. My friend Sharon - who would make an excellent priest – has fallen foul of Canon C4 process. She did the right thing at the time, and married each of her three abusive husbands in turn – “I'm the woman at the well”.

St Aidan's College Birkenhead – trained men from all walks of life....

Note that Peter – unschooled fisherman – was the one Jesus trusted to be preaching on the day of Pentecost. Paul (like me) – the academic – was in the wilderness for 14 years, before he could be used by God.

Peter was the rock on which Jesus built his church. Where are the rocks on which Jesus will build his church today?

A verse that's been important to us in trying to revive the St Aidan's story is Acts 4.13. It's set in the incident where Peter and John heal the lame man, get into trouble with the authorities who in the end decide if it's from God, nothing can stop this. The story continues:

¹³When they saw the **courage** of Peter and John and realized that they were **unschooled, ordinary men**, they were astonished and they took note that **these men had been with Jesus**.

I want ordinands leaving St Mellitus to astonish people with their *courage* because they have *been with Jesus*.

My brother-in-law has been involved in church planting in Central Asia for 20 years (where there was no indigenous church), and he inspired me to start church planting 12 years ago. I once asked him - What makes a church planting movement? In some cities, church plants had happened but they limped on or petered out. In other cities, they had become church planting movements. I was interested to know – what made the difference? His answer was this:

- *Extreme courage* of local believers

This is not what we train for!

St Aidan has become one of my heroes... he is often pictured with this torch of the gospel – lighting beacons across the North. Bede tells us: “Aidan's life was in marked contrast to the apathy of our own times... if the wealthy ever gave him gifts of money, he either distributed it for the needs of the poor or else used it to ransom any who had unjustly been sold into slavery. In fact, many of those whom he ransomed in this way afterwards became his disciples; *and when they had been instructed and trained, he ordained them to the priesthood*”.

We may want to debate later what we mean by priesthood.... But I would suggest that while it is predominantly from a particularly social class, we are not authentically Anglican.

Why not? Well, the best definition of Anglicanism I've come across is the strapline on C of E website: “a Christian presence in *every* community”.

So that's my first point about how we are stopping the poor getting hold of the gospel – we cut off their leaders.

(My other two points are a little shorter).

The second way we are stopping the poor getting hold of the gospel...

2. We ignore the prisoners. Literally

Incredible men are coming to faith in prisons – do they find their way into church leadership or priesthood? No, quite the opposite, many of our leaders from urban estates – find their way into prison! Mark [Elsdon-Dew, HTB] was talking about earlier about Shane Taylor in Middlesborough unable to find a leadership role in the Anglican Church. This is criminal!

We believe in the God of the Exodus – he is an expert in setting captives free under impossible circumstances, even with the armies of Pharaoh breathing down our necks. Surely it's time for a new Exodus from our prisons, our care systems, our young offenders institutions

3. We speak in a foreign language

Did you notice at the Eucharist this morning, the note greeting us on the way into chapel said this: "Welcome to the service – please take a book". I won't rehearse the well-known gripes about how 20% population are functionally illiterate but we still welcome them into church with a book, or possibly worse, with a powerpoint that changes every week?

It is never popular to challenge the language of worship. We remembered William Tyndale on Friday – he was strangled to death while he died at the stake for the crime of making the Bible available in English

Why is it we instinctively teach people to speak another language when they take up licensed ministry? I fondly remember the reader from my curacy parish in North Liverpool: when she preached like she thought she ought to, it was like she had swallowed a commentary. But when she relaxed to be herself, she was incredibly witty, theologically insightful, and most of all – people could understand the gospel when she spoke because - she was "Norma from the shop"

[Gear shift]

Those are three ways I can think of how about why we don't let the poor get hold of the gospel. There's more but I'm not here to moan... how about a bit more hope – because we believe in the God of Hope, right?

Here's the hope....

Imagine... if this underground army – waiting to renew our country with the gifts the Spirit of God - has – already - given - them... were called out – so full of the Spirit of God because they were so hungry that they had been "filled with good things" that they split the rocks apart in our country – that they broke through the strata of heavy sediment that is pressing down the poor and keeping them fossilized in position.

In the words of the *Vision* poem from 24-7 Prayer movement:

"This is the sound of the underground... Foundations shaking.... Don't you hear them coming? Herald the weirdos! Summon the losers and the freaks. Here come the frightened and forgotten with fire in their eyes..... Their words make demons scream in shopping centres."

The time is now. I am praying for an earthquake. Tidal wave. That turns us upside down and washes on to the banqueting table people so hungry for Jesus and the gifts of God that they show us how to feast again! Why – quite simply because they have been with Jesus. Because (Matt 25): Jesus is with the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, the naked, and the prisoners.

What might this look like?

Isaiah gives us three beautiful snapshots:

1st picture: Crown of beauty instead of ashes

Ever since I've lived in urban priority areas, I've developed a hunger for all things beautiful

What if the Spirit of God brought an Anglo-Catholic revival in our estates – beauty, colour, peace, order, drama

Some of our churches have more barbed wire than Category A prison! What if we got rid of the barbed wire and prayed for *Angels on the Walls* [reference to book by Wallace Brown]

2nd picture: Garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair

A spirit of despair holds sway in many of our urban estates.

Until recently I lived in borough of Halton (which is basically made up of the post-industrial towns of Widnes and Runcorn). The North West has the highest rate of mental health issues in England; Halton has the highest rate in the North West. The spirit of despair is well and truly at home.

I grew up in Bolton Lancashire and I'm a big fan of Victoria Wood – who summed up the North West spirit of despair perfectly in sketch...

She talked about how when she was growing up in Bury, Lancashire, her mum would always say – “you’ve just got to put up with it”. Victoria Wood said – “That’s what we do in the North West, isn’t it? The pits close – ‘ah well, you’ve just got to put up with it’; the mills shut – ‘never mind, you’ve just got to get on with it’.... The textile industry finishes – ‘what can you expect, you’ve just got to put up with it’. At least in the North East, they marched down to London and complained!

One time, my friend Sharon found she'd been burgled. Shortly after she spotted her mum walking the dog so ran out to tell her the news. Her mum said – without missing a step - “ah well - you’ve just to get on with it”.

This is opposite to the gospel! I've heard great things about an initiative called *Believe in Hull*. Apparently, in the run up to the Capital of Culture, the Christian leaders got together and decided *not to put up with* people saying negative things over Hull. They launched the campaign *Believe in Hull*, to do just the opposite – to clothe Hull in a garment of praise – to commend the positive. It's had a transformative effect on the city.

3rd picture: Oil of joy instead of mourning

There is a level of grief in our nation that is unbearably crushing

And in some of our neediest areas, this level of grief is literally causing people to drown. I can think of several women I've been good friends with, whose lives are in tatters, because of grief.

We don't speak of grief and people do not grieve well – we all recall the enormous national grief over the death of Princess Diana. Thank God for William, Harry and Kate speaking out on this. There's a way to go.

And I suggest there is another - heavy blanket of grief (which is criminally overlooked): all those who are grieving for gifts they have been given that have never and might never see the light of day

What if this underground army who can speak in different languages that the Spirit enabled them to speak (Acts 2) were let loose from their graves, filled with the oil of joy?

How might this happen?

Here's a suggestion and it's not new one

It begins with a story recorded by Bede from the 7th century.

You may have heard of St Hilda – she was abbess of a mixed monastery in Whitby that sent out bishops, evangelists all across Britain. You may not have heard of Caedmon. He was a cattle herd, tongue tied, he found it very difficult to make himself understood. But one night he had a dream that he could sing a heavenly song about the creation of the world. When he woke up he could remember the song. He told the steward who told Hilda. Hilda invited Caedmon to sing his heavenly song at the feast. This was the start of an incredible ministry – Caedmon would sing the gospel in the local language in words that the ordinary people could understand.

We talk of new approaches to evangelism. Here's my top tip: let's find our Caedmons – let them do it because the Spirit of God is giving them the ability to so that people can hear the wonders of God in their own languages. The Day of Pentecost today. Every day.

One bold step further – Bishop Philip has encouraged us to have Ambition...

- if we have courage to make it our ambition to be “a Christian presence in every community”, I believe we could have a church planting movement built on finding Hilda's and Caedmons.

What I mean is this. Currently there are two main models of church planting in C of E

(1) Resource Church planting [Mark E-D will correct me]

- Reviving minister model
- Planted out of strength
- 1st gen often reaching 20% unchurched, students and young professionals, 2nd gen urban
- Leaders mainly ordained men

(2) Fresh Expressions

- 50% unchurched
- Grass roots, built round “people of peace” but through local church networks
- Leaders typically lay women

What if there was a 3rd way? (Of course, the Holy Spirit is so creative that there are a myriad of different ways to plant churches), but let's call it Caedmons' network

- What if Bishops discerned which people groups were beyond the normal reach of parishes, chaplaincies, schools, *Fresh Expressions* in their Diocese. In theory, the Church of England has a tremendous reach, and yet there are still significant communities where there is no authentic Christian presence, where people do not hear the gospel in their own language
- What if there were Hilda in a Diocese – whose job it is to pray, discern and encourage Caedmons to “sing gospel in their own language”, and in turn plant churches, under guidance and support of that Hilda
- This is nothing new – this is exactly best practice cross cultural church planting internationally amongst unreached people groups... and in parts of the world, where there are Caedmons with courage, there are church planting movements happening today.
- I believe there are both Hilda's and Caedmons out there in our country waiting to be called out
- The more I brew on this, the more Hilda's and Caedmon's I spot.

This is not a new idea:

- Wilson Carlile, stopped his sermon halfway through in St Mary Abbots Kensington so frustrated by chasm between C of E and working classes he went on to found Church Army
- St Vincent de Paul...renewed a tired French church with call to the poor, following the footsteps of Christ, the servant of the poor”

- Andy Hawthorne, founder of Eden and Message Trust, and no nonsense northerner, says it as it is: "It's quite simply what Jesus did"

When will this happen?

I am always inspired by the story of Wilberforce and Clapham Sect. They were keen young Christians, and they thought the anti-slavery bill would get through parliament in 18 months. It took 40 years. But they changed the landscape beyond recognition. Nelson Mandela spoke of "long obedience in the same direction"

This is the timescale we're talking about. But what if, rather than a river (and flash flood) or a wave, we talk about a glacier that changes the landscape forever.

One of my heroines is Joan of Arc. She had a way of "welcoming the future from afar" (which we see throughout Scripture – OT prophets, letter to the Hebrews). God gave her visions that it was not right that England should be occupying so much territory in France. She encouraged the French army to fight back and they rallied for the first time in a generation. Until it was decided she was so spot on she must be a witch and she was burnt at the stake. Thirty years after her death, she was officially pardoned by the Pope and there was not a single English soldier left on French soil.

I could go on. I won't ... I'd love time to buzz and discuss and hear what you think

So I will close with a short liturgy of Caedmon from Celtic Daily prayer (page 204)

"I cannot speak
Unless you loose my tongue;
I only stammer,
And I speak uncertainly;
But if You touch my mouth,
My Lord,
Then I will sing the story
Of Your wonders...

Teach us again the greatest story ever
The One who made the worlds
Became a little, helpless child
Then grew to be a carpenter
With deep, far seeing eyes.

Some religious people were embarrassed
-they did not like the company He kept,
And never knew just what He would do next.

He said:
'How dare you wrap God up
In good behaviour
And tell the poor that they
Should be like you?
How can you live at ease
With riches and success,
While those I love go hungry
And are oppressed?
It really is for such a time as this
That I was given breath...

I have a dream

That all the world will meet You
And know You, Jesus.
In Your living power,
That someday soon
All people everywhere will hear Your story,
And hear it in a way they understand.”

Amen

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