

Good morning

This will be another week in which Middlesbrough attracts the kind of publicity that no town really wants. More funerals will be held of those killed in the horrific crash on the A66. Investigations into gang activity will continue. And over the weekend the Chief Constable of Cleveland Police appealed for more funds on the grounds that she is dealing with high crime levels on minimal resources.

I have spent most of my ministry in post-industrial northern towns similar to Middlesbrough so I was very struck by some words written by Barry Hill, the Anglican Bishop who serves Teeside.

He spoke about Middlesbrough as a town about which two stories can be told. One is a story of civic pride, of tremendous entrepreneurialism and industry and of great community spirit, the story of the town which designed and made Sydney Harbour Bridge. The other is a story of decline, of financial stagnation and of increasing poverty. That story carries with it a litany words and phrases that is all too easily spoken over many similar towns: overlooked, deprived, left behind, crime-ridden, depressed.

Two very different stories. But strangely, this is not an either/or. Both stories are simultaneously true. That's odd for those of us who live in such places. I could produce data to demonstrate Blackburn to be a town ridden with shocking economic problems and social division. And yet it is also an exceptionally engaging place to live, with strong community, a rich sense of humour and fabulously committed professionals.

Both stories are true. So what matters is which story we choose to tell, because the story itself has power. In the Bible, God's work of creation is done through the words that he speaks. There is a constantly repeated phrase in Genesis Chapter 1: '*God said... and it was so.*' That surely indicates something about the power of language. Words and stories don't just describe. They create and transform and change reality.

I think the same is true of the words that human beings speak. If words of fear and anxiety are those constantly chosen to describe a community or an organisation, the words become self-fulfilling. If by contrast joy and optimism are spoken about the same group of people, the words will have impact and can transform. Positive stories lead to positive change.

Of course, words alone aren't enough. Northern towns need sustained investment, improved opportunities for young people and better jobs. But the impact of such interventions will be fatally undermined if the negative story is always the one that prevails. And the story we choose to tell is up to us.