

Life is Local: living reconciliation in the here and now

‘What they did yesterday afternoon’ is a powerful poem by British-Somali poet [Warsan Shire](#). In it she traces the horror of her aunts’ home being deliberately set on fire and her own desperate cries to God for both her native and her adopted countries ‘one is thirsty and the other is on fire’, she writes. This is how her poem ends:

later that night
I held an atlas in my lap
ran my fingers over the whole world
and whispered
where does it hurt?

It answered
everywhere
everywhere
everywhere.

The ‘everywhere’ of hurt is overwhelming, I think. We are confronted by so much brokenness, are witnesses to so much conflict, that we are at risk of compassion fatigue, or a failure of the imagination, or of inertia borne of overload. But the truth is that there is little we can do about the ‘everywhere’, about the global—except, of course, to pray—to lament, to intercede—to bear witness and to support those on the ground in their work. Where *we can* have an impact, where we are *called* to make an impact is in our here and now. Life is local.

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‘Life is Local’ was the advertising slogan for the Doncaster Free Press when I was a curate in South Yorkshire. Early on in my curacy I learnt just how local life is. At the end of an Alpha course, we hosted a social for participants and their families. I sat next to the mother of one of the Alpha ‘graduates’ and asked her if she was local. ‘Oh no’, she said, ‘I’m not from round here’, and then named her village, which was only 7.5 miles away from where we were meeting. For that woman, ‘local’ was a very discrete network of streets and shops and relationships. ‘Life is local.’

Being Interrupted by Al Barrett and Ruth Harley urges us to ‘reimagine the church’s mission from the outside, in.’ Particularly striking, to me, is their focused engagement with the local. Before they set out their thesis for being interrupted, about how that might transform what we do, they set out a detailed, rigorous analysis of Al Barrett’s parish—the inspiration and case study for their book. Context matters.

And incidentally it is because context matters that we came to realise that using Alpha-uncut in ex-mining, post-industrial, low-aspiration South Yorkshire just didn't work. The Alpha model of sharing a meal before each session was deeply uncomfortable for people not used to eating outside of their own home, and the videos of groomed and glossy people listening to Nicky Gumbel in HTB was alienating, as were many of the middle-class, middle-England references he used to illustrate his talks. We rewrote Alpha for our context and then replaced it altogether with something more indigenous.

Around the same time that Doncaster Free Press was proclaiming 'Life is Local', Yorkshire Bank ran an advertising campaign with the tagline 'Here is who we are.' 'Here is who we are.'

In theological terms this is 'incarnation'. 'The Word became flesh and lived among us' (John 1.14) - or, as *The Message* has it, 'The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood.' Jesus inhabited a time and a place, a neighbourhood, and what he offered he offered specifically there; interacting with that culture; speaking that language; dealing with those politics. There is, of course, much of what Jesus said that is for all time, too, but the conversation he had with the Samaritan woman at the well, for example, is both like and *unlike* the conversation he might have had with a woman on the till at Lidl, or the man waiting at a bus stop on The Burges, just down the road from here.

Knowing who we are and where we are—a thorough, serious, nuanced, honest knowing— is a pre-requisite for the work of reconciliation and of mission. We can't just roll out franchise models and assume they can be imposed everywhere. 'Life is Local.' 'Here is who we are.' Or, as the Corrymeela Community puts it in their daily office, 'We will live the life we are living.' 'We will live the life we are living.' Where are you? Who are you in that context? Are you living that life?

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What does this commitment to incarnation mean for us at Coventry Cathedral? Firstly, it means understanding our foundational story in careful, emotionally intelligent ways. For example, this is to focus, not just on the bombing of the Cathedral in November 1940 and Provost Howard's heroic leadership of the city towards reconciliation, it is also to understand how ordinary people responded to the devastation of their city, to the destruction of their homes and how this shapes the culture of the city, even now.

Famously, on Christmas Day 1940, [Provost Howard](#) spoke about the need to break the cycle of revenge and instead build a kinder, a gentler, a more Christ-child-like world. He was not the outlier that some have presented him to be. In fact, in a poll conducted in May 1941, asking the public whether they were in favour of reprisal

We started with Warsan Shire's agonising recognition of the 'everywhere, everywhere, everywhere' of the world's pain. I'd like to finish with a poem by [Gideon Heugh](#) that answers the overwhelm of 'everywhere':

Do not be afraid—
to complete the repair of the world
is not why you were made.
You were created to play
only your part; whatever is within your hands;
whatever is the now of your heart.

Life is local. What is within your hands? What is the now of your heart? - better where is the intersection of the now of your heart and that of your neighbour's heart?

bombing attacks on German cities, 76% of the rural north-west of England—which hadn't been bombed at all—were strongly in favour of such reprisals, whilst only about 50% of Coventrians were [Frederick Taylor, Coventry, pg268]. There was not as much appetite in the city for revenge as we might imagine, not as much desire to see other people suffer the trauma they themselves had felt. Is this because Coventry had long had a history of welcoming people displaced by trauma and violence? Is this still why Coventry has a generous policy towards [refugees today](#)? Such subtle analysis takes time, is not, perhaps, as attractive as caricature or summary, but it is vital to knowing the where and the who around you—and so to your ability to connect with them

Secondly, incarnation, the here and now, means knowing our neighbours. We are a city where over 100 languages are spoken, where nearly 30% of the population identify as black or Asian, where 10.4% of the population is Muslim. Many people who now call Coventry home enrich our city because they first came as part of the Windrush Generation, or because they were fleeing Idi Amin's persecution of Asian people in Uganda in the early 1970's.

And both of these arrival stories immediately introduce complication. Take the Windrush Generation, where the early welcome from the British Government is now wholly overshadowed by the trauma of the Windrush Scandal where people who had lived here, and served here and made their homes here for many years were told they had no right to stay here. Welcome, for them, has become conditional; a mirage; something not to be trusted.

Knowing my neighbours means I have to be honest about how they know— or perceive - me: white, middle-class, establishment; a representative of the very group that betrayed them. That impacts how we plan the annual Windrush Day service that happens in the Cathedral, means I need to step back, to make proper space for them, rather than insisting on holding to an Anglican model of worship which hasn't changed very much from that offered by churches in the 1950's who shut their doors on their black ancestors arriving from the Caribbean, telling them, sometimes explicitly, that they were not welcome. (This was the model I inherited for the Windrush Day Service—BCP evensong with a representative from the community doing one of the readings. This was not hospitality, or inclusion, or knowing our neighbour.)

I sometimes think of this in terms of the host-guest dynamic. As a Cathedral we have a lot of convening power. This is a gift and is often good for the city. For example, soon after the 7th October attacks on Israel, a Hindu leader in the city asked us to arrange a multi-faith peace vigil in the city. 'The Cathedral is where we need to be,' he said.

But its important that we don't always play host. Last year we held an [Open Iftar](#) in the Cathedral—850 people—mainly Muslim—came to break their fast here. But since then, and building on the friendships that we made, I've made a point of leaving the Cathedral precincts to go into Foleshill, the area where a majority of the city's Muslims live, to be a guest. Ceding control matters—it opens us to what we might learn from others, rather than assuming that we have all the answers ourselves; it allows others to give; it respects a culture of hospitality and it is discomforting, shows us what it might be like to be a minority. Ask me later about the Afghan restaurant I was taken to.

The host becoming the guest is risky, disempowering, forces us to reframe our 'Saviour-complex' - that we are the ones bestowing the riches—but it is also deeply Christlike: Jesus becomes Zacchaeus guest; Jesus asks to borrow Peter's boat, and in becoming the guest, Jesus allows the host to be transformed.

Incarnation means knowing our story, knowing our neighbours, and knowing ourselves.

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Understanding our incarnation is a key move in reconciliation, in reconciliation as mission. So is imagination.

If incarnation is understanding about where we are, who we are, then imagination is about seeing where we *might* be, who we might become.

In terms of being reconciled to others, imagination enables us to move towards their experience, to begin to see life from their perspective. Theologian and ethicist [Stanley Hauerwas](#) has said 'Reconciliation happens when our enemy tells our story in such a way that we can respond, *Yes, that is my story.*' To be able to tell your enemy's story authentically demands imagination; compassionate imagination.

To be reconciled to God—to all that God wants for us and for those in our neighbourhoods also demands imagination. 'How might our locality more reflect God's mercy and God's justice?' we might want to ask. 'What could loving our neighbour look like?' 'How might we better steward our part of the earth?'

Imagining what might be enables us to begin a journey from '[What Is to What If](#)', as the title of Rob Hopkins' 2019 book has it. The frontispiece quotes author and graphic novelist Neil Gaiman: 'We all, adults and children, have an obligation to daydream', Gaiman writes. 'We have an obligation to imagine. It is easy to pretend that nobody can change anything, that we are in a world in which society is huge and the individual is less than nothing: an atom in a wall, a grain of rice in a rice field. But the truth is, individuals change their world over and over, individuals make their future, and they do it by imagining things can be different.'

My critique of what Neil Gaiman says would be his use of the word 'individual'. If we know ourselves (and our privilege) and we get to know our neighbours, we will understand that imagination shouldn't be the work of an individual who imposes what reconciliation looks like on another, but that the process of imagining what might be is communal, so that even in the act of imagination itself, before anything comes to fruition, relationships are strengthened, people brought closer together, through the sharing of dreams, .

Rob Hopkins describes this sort of collective imagination in his account of 'the Transition movement', where localities come together to imagine their shared life differently. In Totnes, where Hopkins lives, the presenting issue was how to live more gently on the earth, to emit less carbon dioxide, to consume less. Together 'Transition Town Totnes' planted trees, grew a communal kitchen garden at the train station, crowdfunded a mill to grind local flour, and they have built twenty-seven homes for people in need. See what can happen, how we can be reconciled to God's plan for a loving, co-operative humanity when, together, we imagine what might be.

At the Cathedral we're in the really early stages of imagining an arts and reconciliation project which might bring diverse communities in the city together under a common theme. '[In our Coventry homes](#)' is the song that Coventry City fans sing in football stadia around the country—and will soon be singing at Wembley in the FA Cup semi-finals. We're also considering it as the title of a project, where people will be invited to photograph their homes, so that we build up a picture of the diverse, the beautiful, the difficult home life of people in our city. This might then become the springboard for imagining what better homes might look like, how home could be an expression of not just what happens when we close the door, but also how life is lived in our neighbourhoods.

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Working for reconciliation locally, developing a reconciliation-shaped mission is about incarnation, imagination and thirdly, briefly, about being interrupted—being interrupted by other people, who might well see things differently, who have a different vision, have started something divergent; or being interrupted by the *Spirit* who swirls and eddies where She will (John 3.8). To be interrupted well demands humility—to let go of our big idea, to let others hold sway, to see that they may be something better than we could have conceived, to recognise that God may be speaking to someone else, that God is not confined to the agendas of our PCCs or the conversations of Christians, however prayerful and engaged.

What is God already doing amongst you without the sign off of your strategy group or the logo of the local church? How might your question change from what should we do, to how can we help, what can we join in with?