

# CITYtheology

The magazine of the Leeds Church Institute

Autumn 2016  
Issue 7



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**Dr Helen Reid**, looks for contemporary resonance in the story of Esther.



Christians in Conversation for Pride

Revd **Heston Groenewald** calls for all Christians to shine their lights upon the different facets of God's being.

**Cry, Damn You Cry: Visiting Auschwitz**  
Pointing the way to creating Christ Shaped Communities

**Are we just going round in circles? A Pilgrimage of Prayer for the City**

# Are we just going round in circles?



**Pippa Woodhams** invites us to become part of a Pilgrimage of Prayer for the City, round Leeds Country Way

**Several groups of Christians associated with Leeds Church Institute have been going round in circles recently, and we enjoy it so much, we're going to do it some more.**

Our *Wild City Retreats* have, for two years now, been circling round the seasons, within the boundaries and the teeming life of the City. We offered quiet spaces for those looking for new or deeper forms of spirituality through listening to the earth alongside the city. Meanwhile *Reflect: Harehills* has taken walks round and round one small part of the city, with prayer and theological reflection on the way. We have thought about the fruits of this kind of perambulation, as we return to the place we started from and find some things have changed. Building on these experiences, we are taking on a new reflective challenge, to explore how the City connects with the Country.

Change often sneaks up on us, unawares. Take Saint Francis for example: I'm sure you remember how he preached to the birds. Quaintly amusing story. How were the birds changed? We don't know the answer to that, but the experience for Francis himself *was* transformative. Once he'd recovered from the shock of deeply sensing their

responsiveness to God, he started to question himself and rebuked himself for failure to take these creatures seriously. The most important part of this story is not that he preached to birds, but the impact that preaching to birds had *on him*. He realised an integration of his calling as a preacher with his love of the natural world, *and* gained a new outlook and identity in his ministry.

I'm not a preacher, but with St Francis, I find that the physicality of walking can be an instigator of insight and change. As a therapist, working with refugees in Harehills, I would often walk home through Potternewton Park or Gledhow Valley Woods. It was a refreshing way to process some of the unimaginable trauma I had been listening to through the day, and quite often, once I let this go, insights would come when least expected, as I watched the seasons turn in these small green spaces of the city. In this instance, I think I would call this walking *prayer* situated on a route where natural space is very close to one of the most densely populated areas of inner city in Europe.

*"Walking prayer"* could be one definition of Pilgrimage. A pilgrim takes time out to visit holy places, seek enlightenment, show solidarity with others, often sharing food with them: the word

“companion” means one with whom you share bread. This time last year, many were involved with “The People’s Pilgrimage” walking for theological and practical action around climate change. (See Stroma McDermott’s article in this magazine “L is for Lifestyle, P is for Pilgrim” for more about pilgrimage) Many people were changed through this process, though political shifts leave much to be desired.

## City Pilgrimage?

How can we turn the hearts of our politicians, serve the suffering in our city and seek change ourselves? One answer is in this elusive practice of prayer. LCI has been part of many initiatives which help us to pray for the welfare of our city. Now, we are proposing an exciting new project to walk the boundaries of our city, the Leeds Country Way, in sections over a year, circling the city in prayer. That other Francis, the current Pope, has written a powerful short book: “*Laudate Si*”- Praise Be – ‘*on care for our common home*’, which was spoken about memorably at LCI by the politician/theologian, John Battle. John will be joining us on this pilgrimage, providing reflections to help us connect pilgrimage to issues of justice and environment. As a starting point, *Laudate Si* will provide provocative stimulation. And as “companions” we’ll be seeking out pubs and cafes to share more than just bread on the way.

“But a pilgrimage is to a sacred site” objected a friend recently, “which sacred sites will this one go to?” I don’t want to devalue the fact that certain places are clearly sacred in a very meaningful way. Perhaps we will discover that our “feet are on holy ground” in most unlikely places. Perhaps there *will* be traditional places of pilgrimage found on the way. Or just perhaps, the circling of the city in this way is a declaration that the whole city itself is a place of sacred worth. You’ll have to join us to find out some answers to these questions, and no doubt unexpected surprises as well. And if you aren’t able to join us, for whatever reason, there will be plenty of ways to follow the story, on LCI’s website.

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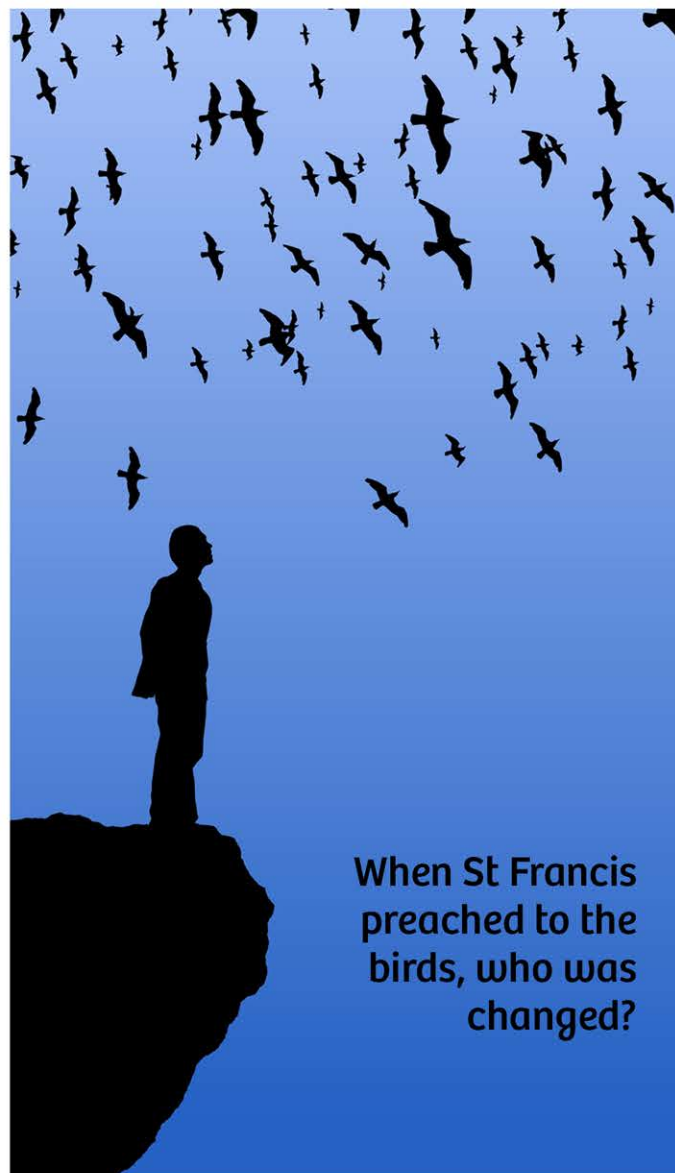
So don’t let’s go round in circles. The spiritual journey has been perceived as a spiral. We often

return to what feels like the same place. Wisdom allows us to understand that it’s not just a circle, but a spiral, of ever deepening integration in our busy lives.

## Dates and details

Leeds Pilgrimage will start on Wednesdays, monthly, walking about four miles, with time to reflect and relax together. We will aim to start and finish with access to public transport, approximately 11.00 to 2.00, and the Autumn dates are: 21st September, 19th October and 23rd November. If you would like to be part of the pilgrimage, just once or at every stage, please let LCI know, and they will send you details of times, transport and meeting points: [events@leedschurchinstitute.org](mailto:events@leedschurchinstitute.org)

Also, join us for *The Glories of Autumn Wild City Retreat* on Saturday morning at 10am at 22nd October, All Hallows Church, 24 Regent Terrace, Leeds, LS6 1NP. Wheelchair accessible.



**When St Francis preached to the birds, who was changed?**



# Rise and Be

from 'Naked Soles' by Gbemisola Adeoti

Those who behead the mahogany  
and leave the Iroko trunk  
forsaken in the forest  
those who from the root  
cut the curling foresight of baobab  
and rupture the promise of maple,  
to them is never the last laugh.

The dying stump  
will sprout in spring  
the trees will rise again  
like stilt dancers  
casting long shadows  
across meadows  
the ironwood will mend  
its saw-gashes  
and scorch of the hearth.  
From fiery February sun,  
and rains of May  
come the greenness of oak  
in the fullness of time.

# What Would Esther Do?

**Dr Helen Reid** reflects on some ways the Book of Esther can speak to us today.

**Earlier this summer, Rabbi Esther Hugenholtz led a study session at LCI on the Book of Esther.** She described the Megillah (Book of Esther) as a comedy of errors revealing divine intentions. Certainly the key characters make instant decisions, take on disguises, make mistakes that they regret, and under pressure find the bravery to be heroic and win the day. Imagine yourself as a reader for the first time, you would never guess where the story would lead, nor what you might learn about human nature and about God. Perhaps learning about God is the most surprising aspect because God doesn't get a direct mention in the story.

Rabbi Esther also talked about the Feast of Purim when the story of Esther is commemorated and celebrated. She described it as a 'two faced' festival, that is, one that is seen as having two souls; One that is joyous and playful, while the other remembers the thread of anti-Semitism over many centuries and settings. These two faces or souls are clear in the Book of Esther when we hear of Haman plotting 'to destroy all the Jews', and Esther is reminded that even in the palace there is no safe place for a Jew. Yet conscience and ingenuity overthrow this plot, Mordecai becomes powerful and the Feast of Purim is established.

At the study session, we studied the book of Esther in pairs, as in the Jewish method of *havruta*. As well as questions relating to particular aspects of the story, we were given two big questions to consider:

- **How can the Megillah speak to issues of power?**
- **How can we live through Esther's example?**

During our reflections, my partner for the study and I were struck by the image of Mordecai at the gates of the palace, wearing sackcloth and ashes, wailing with a loud and bitter cry while Esther within is embarrassed and deeply distressed. Rabbi Esther's comments on this part of the story were:

*Ch. 4, v. 4: Is Esther embarrassed? Was her embarrassment inappropriate? How do we feel about*

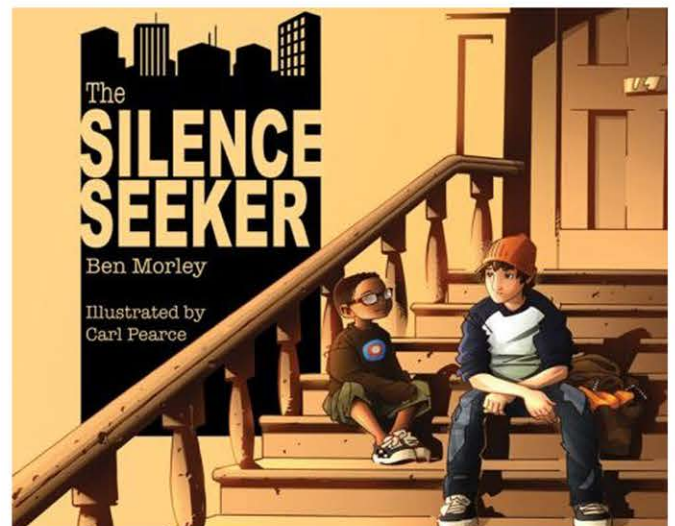
*public and principled displays of strong emotion or powerful ideology?*

*Ch. 4, v. 13: Check your privilege, Queen Esther! Do you really imagine yourself to be safe or morally exempt?*

*Ch. 4, v. 15: This is the fulcrum of the Megillah: Esther's transformation and galvanisation. What was a pivotal act of bravery in your life? Did God give you strength?*

**Reflecting on this in our lives, we talked about the images we see in the news of refugees and migrants at the gates of Europe calling out for help and struggling to find a place of safety. To us they seemed like Mordecai in the story, and we saw ourselves within the palace. We heard the message not to assume we are OK because we are in a safe place and not to turn from the need of another soul. It felt like a powerful challenge.**


This Autumn, LCI will be sending out a book to Leeds primary schools called *The Silence Seeker*. It is a fabulous story with inspiring illustrations that will help children to think through responses to Asylum Seekers and how we can all try to be part of the solution to injustice, not just a witness. This is intended to be a response to the spirit of the Book of Esther, playful and serious at the same time.





# Cry, Damn You Cry

An extract from an article by **Professor Ivan Reid** based on his experience in leading a group of British young people on a tour of Poland, together with a group of English speaking Polish youth, in 1967. The full article was first published in several languages in the magazine POLAND in 1968 and Ivan was awarded a medal and a cash prize [donated to the victims] by the Polish Government for services in the dissemination of Polish culture.



**What is Auschwitz?** An important railway centre. A small market town with bars and a night club. A museum to inhumanity. Graveyard of four million people murdered by the Nazis. A place to lay flowers and to shed tears. A place never to forget, or never to remember. A place to pull down or to repair. A place to be sad, or a place to be glad, or thankful.

Whose is Auschwitz? The Pole's for owning the land. The German's for devising the use. Twenty-four European nationalities for supplying the victims. Europe's for allowing Nazism. The Devil's or God's.

To those who have not seen it the questions above are real, interesting and to be debated. When you have seen it they are pointless and unasked, for Auschwitz is an experience and it belongs to humankind.

Auschwitz to me is two hot, dry, dusty, parching days in August. Strained Polish and English faces, handkerchiefs, clenched fists, stiff walking . . . . silence, thought and prayer. Electric barbed wire, concrete posts, watch towers horribly regular, cold and cutting. Gallows outside the kitchen made of railway line, twenty corpses at a time. Wooden fence, laced with flowers, somewhere twenty thousand shots still echo and lifeless bodies fall.

A room filled with human hair; a room of artificial limbs; a hundred thousand toothbrushes in complete disarray; the clothes of children deemed too socialised to be of use to the German race.

Great ovens, spewing flowers laid in memory of some of the dozens of bodies burned each day, each day of the week, each week of the year, each year of the war. A low roofed concrete chamber, with crude mock shower points in the ceiling, for gas, of course; one nearly misses being shocked.

A railway line, always a place of arrival and departure, yet never quite as final. On to view the mounds of human ash covered now and blown. Here are the sleeping blocks, some brick, some wooden, in each a thousand men or women held tight, six to a plank bed less than eight feet wide.

Now, at last, exhausted, we can burst out. Slowly life creeps back, a match is struck, a sweet unwrapped, somebody whispers, almost laughs. Later, reinforced with coffee and tobacco, we mumble "why" and "how" and go to bed, changed.

When next you are overcome with self-satisfaction; when you contemplate the achievements, wonders, beauties of the human race; when you are comfortable, warm and safe; pause, and think of Auschwitz. This too is an artefact of humanity, this too a product of human thought and emotion, grotesquely ingenious. Nor think it is past, history, or best forgotten, for what stage of evolution has humankind gone through since then to make it such. So remember Auschwitz, Treblinka, Dachau, Nordhausen, Weimar, Lublin, Natzweiler, Belson, Sachsenhausen, Wolzek, Belzek, Bauchanwald and today, and perhaps spare a tear.

# Pointing the way to creating Christ Shaped Communities?

**Canon Ann Nichol**, an LCI Council Member and Anglican Lay Reader, explores some of the values at the heart of Christ shaped communities in Leeds today.

**We have received an incarnational Gospel. It is our work to interpret it faithfully, to learn afresh what it means to be a Christian community in *this* time and place, which is not quite like any other.**

We have had many conversations recently in the Anglican Diocese of Leeds about being Church and engaging in mission. We are particularly reflecting on 'Christ-Shaped Communities' and the responsibilities we have in being the creators of such places in Leeds. This has encouraged many of us to reflect together on communities and on being Christ-shaped.

Our community can be the area we live in, the people with whom we spend our time, our work environment, our extended families or even wider afield the society in which we live. Not wishing to be prescriptive, the answer is personal, but the ideas and values which will follow relate to all of the types of communities described above.

For an individual to be Christ-shaped is to be part of Christ's work in reconciling all things. This is a significant vocation and requires us to build communities that are focused on justice, compassion, love and healing. Together we need to find ways to be inclusive and offer opportunities for all to explore and deepen their spirituality. It is our desire to be a blessing to all who come to Christ, and indeed those who don't.

For a community to be Christ-shaped, writes Alan Botton, we need to live together in harmony. This means we need to cope with the pain caused by troubled relationships, vulnerabilities, and deep rooted violent and selfish desires. These are significant challenges, and how do we respond in a distinctively Christ-like way? How as Christians can we begin to bring about this sense of harmony, justice and tolerance and build a society where there is peace and equilibrium?

Robin Myers suggests that a particular understanding of Christ will help us in this time and place to be most equipped to build these communities. Given that we seek to follow the example of Jesus in our daily living, we can prioritise that which builds reconciling communities of blessing. He purports that our understanding of Christ should focus on:

- **Jesus as the Teacher rather than the Saviour**
- **Faith as Being rather than Belief**
- **Easter as Presence rather than Proof**
- **Christianity as Compassion rather than Condemnation**
- **Religion as Relationship rather than Righteousness**
- **Original Blessing not Original Sin**

That is not to say that other aspects of our understanding of Christ are not helpful, rather that this focus may be particularly good here in Leeds as we seek a Kingdom of God which embodies peace and forgiveness. A kingdom that challenges the systems which oppress the weak and the poor, seeking to be an influence for good. As Adrian Alker emphasizes, we see in the Synoptic Gospels the Jesus we know as a charismatic healer living his life intensely in the power of God. He expected his followers to live out their lives in this faithful way. Is it too controversial to prioritise how we follow his example? If we do, will it help us to meet the challenge of creating more Christ-Shaped Communities in Leeds?

*(With thanks to Alan Botton, Robin Myers and Canon Adrian Alker for ideas presented in this article)*





# Christians in Conversation for Pride

Revd Heston Groenewald seeks to throw light on a multi-faceted, rainbow-coloured God

## Why do we Christians find it so impossible to see Christ in each other?

This was our recurring lament at *Christians in Conversation for Pride*, an ecumenical gathering of Leeds Christians in August with special guests Jayne Ozanne and Jamie Fletcher. Both Jayne and Jamie were fascinating guests. Jayne finds herself ‘one foot in each camp’ in the Church of England’s sexuality and gender conversation because she is both an Evangelical member of General Synod and an avid campaigner for an Inclusive Church. Jamie is a writer and director, who uses film and drama to explore the relationship between spirituality and sexuality.

Jayne joined us to share afternoon tea and something of her life story. Her story includes many years of church and workplace ministry, and

a prolonged struggle – including two major breakdowns – to reconcile her faith and her homosexuality. After tea, we watched Jamie’s film ‘The Alphabet Club’, created to engage audiences in conversation about LGBT+ issues.

In our conversations that day, we were confronted with each other’s ‘otherness’ and we put this alongside our shared identity in Christ. Believing that we are ‘fearfully and wonderfully made in God’s image’ made us ask why then are we surrounded by contested claims, entrenched interpretations and lots of pain. To ask an old question anew, **‘What’s wrong with the 21st century Christian world?’** Chesterton’s 20th century answer still stands: ***I am.***

So, starting with myself, I confess:

*Dear friends and family in Christ, I am. I am an awful idolater. I go about most days under the sure and certain assumption that God looks like me, walks and talks like me, and thinks like me about life and the universe and everything. BUT! God is not a man. God is not a white man. God is not a heterosexual, cis-gendered white man (like me). And, thank goodness, neither are all of my fellow human beings. In my self-centredness however, I struggle to remember this, so I need YOU to remind me, and to challenge my far-too-small vision of God and of humanity.*

C.S. Lewis (in *The Four Loves*) observed that:

**In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity; I want other lights than my own to show all his facets.**

If this is true of a human being, how much more so of God! Half of my salvation from idolatry depends on you then: I need Christians of all shapes, sizes and stripes to shine their lights upon different facets of God's being, and so teach me that God is far more Christ-shaped than Heston-shaped. And the other half of my salvation from idolatry depends on God because in order to see Christ in you, I need the miracle of a change of heart. This particular miracle I find (as did St Francis) God is willing and swift to provide, whenever I am willing to meet the miracle halfway. As St Francis commended:

**'Start by doing what is necessary; then do what is possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible.'**

Perhaps it may be so for us all... As a Church, can we start by doing what is necessary? Believing that it is necessary to seek Christ's will amidst our conflicting perspectives and disagreement, can we then actively desire the unity that Christ desires for us? My favourite snippet of wedding card wisdom seems apt for Christians more widely: 'Good relationships don't just happen. They take time, patience, and two people who truly want to be together.'

Having identified this as necessary, can we move on to what is possible? Can we talk even if we can't agree? I would like Christians to talk more often and more courageously. Sexuality and gender divide us so sharply that we seldom brave conversation with Christians beyond 'our camp' – whether we are traditionalist or radical. Contrast the title of Jayne Ozanne's recent book *'Journeys in Grace and Truth'* with one reviewer's cynical gloss calling it *'Journeys into Darkness'*.

Talking *about* each other is far easier than the challenging business of talking *to* each other. But alas 'easier' is the path to a diminished Christian Vision, as we ignore each other's lights shining on the different facets of God and human life. And

'easier' is the path to betrayal of our Scriptures, as they exhort us to Godly boldness and humility. Can we recover our faith by boldly humbling ourselves before God and each other? Talking is possible!

If we do what is necessary and possible, can we find ourselves doing the impossible? Every time I dare conversation on such contested topics, I catch a glimpse of Christ in someone else. Every single time. Jayne's and Jamie's honesty and openness inspired more of the same from others, and everyone left with an expanded view of God at work in our lives, joys and sufferings.

Pride Sunday provided the opportunity for 35 000 such conversations, as Leeds' LGBT+ community and straight allies marched through the city centre. In my own conversations, most people were surprised to find Christians in their midst, and then delighted that Christians might be willing to meet them in the reality of their sexual and gender identities. Apparently such acceptance is a rare thing, withheld by Christians and non-Christians alike. According to one marcher,

**'This is the only day of the year that I can be myself without being scared to walk down the street.'**

This was a huge challenge to me.

Christians in Conversation at Pride has left me hoping and praying. That I may see Christ in you, and so see a more multi-faceted Christ. And that we may grow together into Christ's image, becoming a more multi-faceted (rainbow-coloured?) people of God.



Jayne Ozanne

If you are a conservative Christian, please shine your light on God's holiness, and the wonderfully demanding words of life and love in our Scriptures.

If you are a liberal Christian, please shine your light on God's compassion, and the wonderfully demanding realities of life and love in our Scriptures.

**If you are heterosexual, please illuminate God's love in my own marriage.**

If you are homosexual or elsewhere on the sexual spectrum, please spotlight the many lessons that God has to teach me about love and goodness and virtue, which transcend my own experience and comprehension.

If you are cis-gendered, please light up the reflection of my own gender identity within God's image.

If you are trans-gendered or elsewhere on the gender spectrum, please enlighten me! Refuse me the arrogance of thinking that my gender identity can capture all the fullness of the

**imago Dei.**

I want to see Christ in you.  
Please can we get together  
more as Christians in  
Conversation?

**Revd Heston Groenewald**



# Hook Lecture LORD BHIKHU PAREKH "Religion and British Public Life"

How do secular changes in British society, and its diversity, affect the public role of religion?

Lord Bhikhu Parekh has helped shape the British understanding of multiculturalism and is now patron of the Commission for Religion and Belief in Public Life.

**Tuesday 24TH January**

Jointly organised by:  
Leeds Church Institute, Leeds Minster and  
Theology and Religious Studies, University of Leeds

**7.30pm at Leeds Minster, LS2 7DJ**

Admission is FREE but by ticket only. To reserve one, please contact LCI at [events@leedschurchinstitute.org](mailto:events@leedschurchinstitute.org) or 0113 391 7928  
Tickets available online at [www.LCILeeds.org/hook-2016/](http://www.LCILeeds.org/hook-2016/)



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