

CITYtheology

The magazine of the Leeds Church Institute

“Who are the crucified in our society?”

Stroma McDermott reflects on mercy, justice and **welfare reform** as she hears from testifiers from Leeds Poverty Truth Challenge.



Is there life after death?

Author **David Rhodes** asks some big questions relating to his book **Finding Mr Goldman**

Hospitality & Sanctuary: Redemptive Gift in the Suffering of Strangers
Eight Pictures of Marriage
Engaging with the City - One Blade of Grass at a Time

Mercy, Justice & Welfare Reform

by Stroma McDermott



As well as impacting on claimants, Welfare Reform has also impacted on the Local Authority. For Leeds City Council and other social housing providers the reforms to date have resulted in rent arrears increases and an associated decrease in collection rates for Council Tax. In addition, there are increased requests for emergency help, growth of foodbanks, homelessness, and increasing payday and high cost lending. The impact on relationships, families, community cohesion and social care is harder to determine. Welfare reform therefore impacts the whole of the District. As the roll out for Universal Credit commences towards the end of 2015 it is likely these impacts will increase.

On 5th March Oxford Place Methodist Centre hosted a multi-agency workshop on Welfare Reform. The presenters offered a powerful combination of statistics on the impact of Welfare Reform, the experience of testifiers and a theology that calls out for a Christian response. The Christian witness on the day reflects concerns of the Church nationally and internationally.

Impact of Welfare Reform on claimants in Leeds:

- Leeds has 55,000 working age benefit claimants and many are already affected by the reforms introduced since 1st April 2013
- Under occupation measures (Bedroom tax) affects 6,600 tenants in Leeds, and as a result 2,500 children, with an average loss of benefit of £13 per week
- Reduction in Council Tax support affects 27,000 claimants with an average weekly loss of £3.40
- Overall Benefit Cap affects 307 claimants with a weekly loss of £47. The Cap has a disproportionate effect on larger families and so 1,444 children have been impacted.

At the workshop, the voice of testifiers from the Leeds Poverty Truth Challenge was heard. They made real the experience of Job Seekers Allowance, under occupation measures and other impacts of changes. The testifiers' experiences are not uncommon but are often not heard, yet without hearing them we cannot know the truth of poverty, and without their voices and influence on policy society runs the risk of making things worse. The Poverty Truth Challenge strap line is:

**'Nothing about us,
without us,
is for us'**

The Church both nationally and locally is responding practically to the changes but also in raising its voice to speak about the reforms, for example, the recent ecumenical report Time to Rethink Benefit Sanctions. The introduction of

sanctions is one of the most controversial elements of the reforms. Those applying for and in receipt of benefits have claimant commitment agreements which makes receipt of benefits conditional on completing the requirements of the agreement. Failure to meet the terms of the commitment means claimants are sanctioned and their benefits cut or stopped for up to a month. Last year nationally there were 1,000,000 sanctions imposed with 1,300,000 people potentially subject to sanctions, and perhaps most worryingly 100 people nationally with severe mental illness are being sanctioned every day. Niall Cooper, Director of Church Action on Poverty notes:

“If you commit a crime, no criminal court in the UK is allowed to make you go hungry as a punishment. But if you are late for an appointment at the Jobcentre, they can remove all your income and leave you unable to feed you or your family.”

The report calls for an independent review of benefit sanctions to avoid what the churches are calling the ‘deliberate imposition of hunger’. The Poverty Truth Commission contrast the treatment offered to those on benefits and those in regular well-paid employment. For the latter, the laws of contractual employment provide for those needing time out for illness, maternity, paternity, adoption leave and special leave circumstances ensuring the benefits of employment provision and monthly remuneration. However, for those with no or intermittent patterns of working in low paid work, such systems of security are diminishing.

At the recent ‘Think, Pray, Vote’ conference Archbishop Justin Welby suggested that a contemporary reading of the gospel allows Christians to look at politics as the business of increasing welfare and the common good. One of the Church of England’s five marks of mission concerns tackling unjust structures and oppressive systems. This is not simply because injustice represents a failure to ‘love our neighbour’ but because tackling oppression and inequality provides an opportunity of healing for the whole community.

Concern for the common good builds upon God’s concern that societies should operate on the principle of interdependence and covenantal ethics. As Jean Vanier, founder of the L’Arche Community puts it:

“If you enter into a relationship with a lonely or suffering person you will discover something else; that it is you who are being healed. If you let yourself be moulded by the cry of the poor and accept their healing friendship, then they may guide your footsteps into community and lead you into a new vision of humanity... They will lead you into the kingdom Jesus speaks of.”

During his talk at the workshop in Leeds, John Battle considered welfare reform from a Lenten perspective. His challenge to us was, “What does Good Friday mean to you and who are the crucified in our society?”

John highlighted that it is the poor who are being adversely affected by welfare reform and linked this with the centrality of the poor to the Gospel. He quoted Pope Francis, “whenever food is thrown away it is stolen from the poor” and also the challenging words of St John Chrysostom that the “rich steal from the poor”. In the rebalancing of the public purse, do we recognise that money is being re-distributed away from the poor and perceive this as detrimental to society as a whole?

As I have reflected on the workshop, I have been reminded of the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18: 21-35). Peter is reminded by Jesus of the need to be extremely generous where grace and forgiveness are concerned. Many in the upper echelons of our banking, economic and governmental systems have been forgiven much over recent years: tax avoidance, expense scandals, the collapse and public bail out of the banking system, insider trading and conflicts of interest regarding second jobs and cash for access amongst other misdemeanours. Yet they have been ‘forgiven’ and allowed to continue, even retaining the grace and favour of unconditioned self-regulation. And in response how are they repaying us? Verse 33 asks ‘should you not have had mercy on your fellows...as I had mercy on you?’

Those caught in the snare of sanctions, cuts and austerity measures are receiving a very conditioned and punitive allowance of grace that is a concern not just for them but also for society as a whole. The parable is a stark reminder that God does not broach a two-tier system of grace and mercy.

Hospitality and Sanctuary:

Redemptive gift in the suffering of
the stranger

By Inderjit Bhogal

This article is an extract from 'Hospitality and Sanctuary for All' by Inderjit Bhogal. The complete study resource is available to download on our blog site, or request a copy.



Last year, 51 million people were forcibly displaced globally.

Over the next 20-30 years we will see huge movements of people as a result of environmental degradation, climate change, famine, war and persecution. It is a sign of our times and we are required to pay attention to it. Is there a distinctively Christian understanding of this and response to it? What might it mean to recognise and respond to the redemptive possibilities in welcoming the stranger?

Most refugees and people seeking sanctuary come from situations of pain and suffering. We cannot ignore or tolerate this pain and suffering. Many of those who suffer thus identify with and find meaning in the experience of the rejection, suffering and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. We want to eradicate suffering, but there is also the gospel call to redeem suffering.

Biblical witness declares that redemption comes through bearing suffering, not ignoring or evading it [Luke 24:26]. In Isaiah 53 there is a humbling acknowledgement of the “suffering servant” who is:

- **Afflicted and acquainted with suffering**
- **Considered to be of no account**
- **Taken away by a perversion of justice**

But it is the suffering, stripes and bruises of the suffering servant by which we are healed.

From his childhood to his crucifixion, Jesus Christ was familiar with the experience of vulnerability, rejection, persecution and suffering. In many ways he was a stranger in his own community. Even his own disciples did not always understand or recognize him. He was arrested though he had committed no crime. There were those who stood up and gave false testimony against him [Mark 14:57]. He was tortured. He was crucified outside the city gates, the ultimate acknowledgement that human community is

defined by who is “in” and who is an “outsider”. Jesus was betrayed, denied and abandoned by his best friends. This hurt him the most. He was nailed and crucified.

The earliest disciples and followers of Christ saw him as the “suffering servant” who bore the weight and agony of human sin as he hung on a horrible cross.

The insight and truth proclaimed in this biblical testimony is that salvation and liberation comes through suffering that is taken on and redeemed. The crucifixion of Christ declares that God is with us in the human agonies and tragedies, and gives us hope in our most awful experiences. The crucifixion of Christ declares the depth of God’s presence and love, and insists on maintaining hope. The resurrection declares that there is never a dead end. There is the reality of hurt, and there is always hope. In the words of Romans 5:20, “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.”

The gospel does not go from crucifixion to crucifixion. It goes from crucifixion to resurrection. We bear witness to this truth when we acknowledge, challenge and redeem suffering and injustice. We cannot live with the gospel if we allow people to go from torture to torture, homelessness to homelessness, persecution to imprisonment.

We are called to practice the gospel by listening to, entering into and identifying with the stories of pain and suffering told by refugees and those seeking sanctuary. In their stories we shall know the weight of the sin of the world, and glimpse a new world.

In working alongside and with those who are hurting through the violence of war, famine, poverty and persecution, we together take on human sin and bear its weight; we shall struggle together for justice and seek the freedom of all. Thus we share in God’s work of grace and redemption.

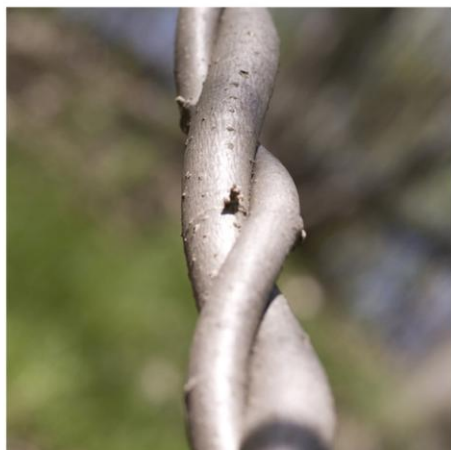


Eight Pictures of Marriage

Professor Adrian Thatcher explores Christian understandings of marriage

Professor Adrian Thatcher explored Christian understandings of marriage drawn from the Bible, tradition and contemporary theology at the study day 'Making Sense of Sex and Marriage'. He outlined eight models of marriage reflecting a complex multiplicity of ideas around marriage which have, over time, been progressively re-interpreted. These models of marriage, described below in words and pictures, are open to exploration and questioning. A key question is, are these models only inclusive of opposite sex couples or can they also include same sex couples? For a full exposition of the lecture, please see www.adrianthatcher.org

A Union of Heart, Body and Mind



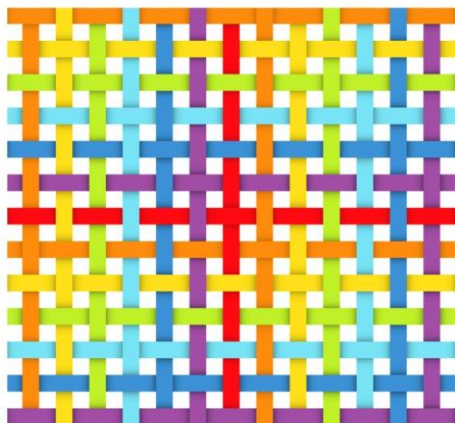
Jesus spoke of husband and wife as 'one flesh' based on Genesis 2:24. One reading of 'one flesh' would be the union of two individuals in body, mind and heart through mutual interdependence. Conversely, 'one flesh' has been used to support the legal belonging of a wife as a chattel to her husband, putting women second in the hierarchy of gender.

A Covenant



Marriage understood as covenant offers an holistic understanding of human relationship that contrasts with other forms of personal relationships. Covenant language and ethics articulate the meanings of a couple's commitment to themselves and to each other in ways that defend against notions of dominance, ownership, calculation, or obsolescence.

An Image of the New Covenant



Marriage understood as covenant can be seen as illustrating the covenant between God and God's people reconciled through Christ. In this way, Pope John Paul II explicitly drew a parallel between the mingling of divine love with human love in marriage. The bond of love between married couples is what they hold in common with the covenant-love of God for God's people.

A Gift of Bodies



Many writers, including those of the Pilling report, note parallels between the sacrament of the Eucharist and the sacrament of marriage. That Christ gives us His body in the Eucharist (Ephesians 5) is represented in the giving and receiving of persons, exclusively, faithfully, and permanently in marriage. Marriage therefore is a mimesis; it mimes the profound mystery of the love of Christ for the Church.

A Sacrament of Mutuality



A couple is validly married (assuming no impediment) when they make vows to each other in the present tense before witnesses, a priest may then bless their marriage. This follows the ancient understanding that the couple, being co-ministers,

marry each other. This joint ministry of the couple offers equal regard and full mutuality over every detail of the marriage.

A Sign of the Coming Kingdom



As the Church awaits the culmination of the ages and the restitution of all things through Christ (e.g. Acts 3:21), marital imagery can be seen as an expression of this hope. The union of husband and wife in common life images the divine love for the world that triumphs over everything set against it.

A Communion of Persons



Human life is made for communion, both with one another and with God. Being married is a communion of persons which involves deep intimacy. Lovemaking in marriage, together with the sharing of marital life that it expresses, provides a powerful instance of communion among or between persons. Within this communion of persons, the divine Communion of Persons abides.

An Ascetic Discipline

Marriage as a God-given institution is an ascetic discipline that encourages faithfulness and perseverance. It shares with celibacy the difficulty



of remaining chaste, and requires discipline, aided by grace, to sustain it.

So quiet you hardly hear it?

by **Helen Reid**

Good news should come with a drum roll surely? When news is actually good, it should grab attention and make us all feel positive about life. But when the good news comes as a whisper, unexpectedly, perhaps even as a secondary meaning of what is heard, it is both precious and perhaps overlooked.

In Luke's account of the passion there is a whisper of good news that was heard contemporaneously, but it is hard to spot. Jesus is condemned to death, nailed to a cross between two other dying men. Looking back we can see good news, he was reconciling the world to God in love, but at the time?

There was a spark of hope. One man at his side said 'Remember me when you come into your Kingdom'. If he said 'when' and not 'if', then he was speaking good news. And these were the only words of resurrection hope that Jesus heard. At the point of Jesus' absolute weakness and abandonment, the word of life is spoken to the dying Son of God.

We took this theological reflection from David Rhodes' Faith in Dark Places as the focus for February's 'Four Seasons in Harehills' retreat. We reflected together on our experience of the good news of Christ coming to us as a whisper, just a fragment of hope. And we also read together a short play Tale of Two Thieves written by Tom Lusty and Steve Palmer, which helped us enter into the experience of the story.



This is available on our blog under Resources, alternatively staff at LCI can send you a copy if you would like to look at it. We took this focus with us in the hour and a bit we spent outside on retreat. It is countercultural to come on retreat in Harehills, an area scoring highly on criteria of multiple deprivation. It would be more usual to be in the countryside or a centre that is warm, a prayed-in space, perhaps beautiful or old. But we choose to be outside in a place that not many choose for spiritual refreshment. Lots of people live here, work or shop here, visit friends and family, but it is not well known as a retreat destination. Our group

comes together each month and experiences God here. We don't take an attitude of 'looking on the bright side of life', but we are content to be in God's presence here, with an awareness of people and place. We find inspiration in the bricks and mortar aspect, the natural aspects of trees and parks, hills and geography, and the human presence in the diversity of people and the busyness, smells and noises of the area.

If you want to join us, we meet on the fourth Wednesday of the month, 10am, Trinity United Church, Banstead Terrace, Harehills LS8 5PX

Engaging with the City - One Blade of Grass at a Time

Pippa Woodhams launches the second (warmer) half of the year for Wild City Retreats.

Recently I was talking with an asylum seeker recently under imminent threat of deportation. The deportation had less to do with the justice of her case than with an agenda to improve statistics leading up to our general election. This cut me to the heart. What does one do in the face of such feelings of fury and helplessness?

I increasingly turn, like poet and environmentalist Wendell Berry, to the natural world, to find a grounded sense of reality:

**When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and children's lives
may be, I go and lie down where the wood
drake rests in his beauty on the water, and
the great heron feeds. I come into the
peace of wild things. I rest in the grace of
the world, and am free. (1)**

Poetry doesn't solve everything, and neither does time outdoors. But perhaps they can gradually change our hearts, and re-orientate our priorities. Love for the earth and its people can truly motivate change.

Matt Freer suggests that as human beings, we are motivated to change more by good emotions, than we are motivated by guilt and talk of impending disaster. (1) In order to inspire a change of heart and lifestyle that will affect how we relate to the earth, and its people, just being, in our own locality, can sometimes be more effective than cramming



facts about deforestation, pollution and climate change far away. Piling up these dreadful and all-too-real statistics may lead us to switch off, lead activists to burn out, and children to learn that the problem is Out There, a long way away, insoluble. Can we break this negative spiral? If we can also look close by for experiences which stimulate a feeling of awe, wonderment and, yes, love for our earth, we can perhaps increase motivation to change attitudes and actions, from the heart outwards.

We have been starting this process in small ways during Wild City Retreats, monthly events in an urban farm in the centre of our city of Leeds. Each month we observe inter-related strands of experience: seasonal events in city life, changes in the natural world, and a look at the myths, saints and festivals offered by our faith stories. People think about personal resonances to the particular time of year, perhaps making us feel out of step with the mood of the season: both happy and traumatic echoes which can affect us, sometimes unconsciously, but once acknowledged, enable us to move on.

On our retreats, we discovered Bridget, a woman ordained bishop by mistake, not in 2015 but in the fifth century. We learnt the phrase “biomimicry”, discovering the similarities between organic tree patterns and drawings of how people relate today on social media. We wondered what the “trees of the field” were saying when they clap their hands: they do not always clap gently. Close examination of particular trees linked by ancient Celts to different months of the year, revealed metaphors relating to our lives: from the peeling skin of silver birch, to the characteristics of willow. (2)

We do not have to go far for this kind of acute observation, or to discover awe and love for the “First book of God” within our city. As the naturalist and nineteenth century philosopher, Henry David Thoreau once said,

“I spent the summer travelling. I got half way across my back garden.”

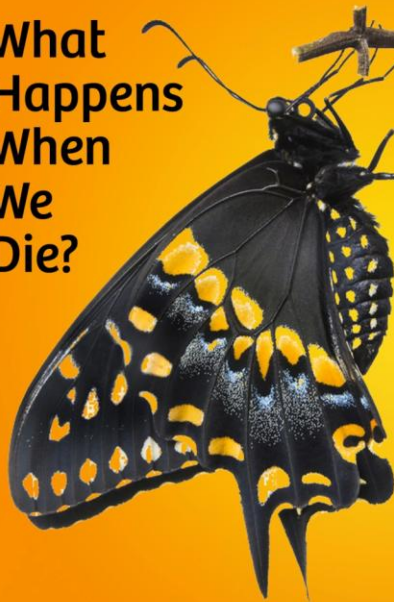
I believe we are working to change our hearts and our perspectives. We are nearly half waythrough a year of Wild City Retreats. Passing the Spring Equinox, days are longer than nights, and having worked through the cold winter months it will be exciting to see where we will go through spring and summer. Will it change our priorities approaching a general election? Who knows?

Wild City Retreats are once a month at Meanwood Valley Urban Farm, working from a cosy eco-classroom, outdoors as each person decides and as weather allows. A number of people stay in touch and enter our discussion by internet only: for this and for further details contact pippa.woodhams@gmail.com

**April 18th; May 16th; June 20th; July 18th
Saturday mornings 9.45 to 12.45. BOOKING
REQUIRED.**

1. Quoted in Matt Freer, ‘the power of nature connection to change the world’ in “Earthed: Christian perspectives on nature connection” ed. Bruce Stanley and Steve Hollinghurst. 2014.
2. www.allhallowsleeds.org.uk see Ash Wednesday reflection.
3. Start Birding, with Linda Jenkinson. See www.startbirding.co.uk

What Happens When We Die?



by David Rhodes

Hannah was about nine and the small green caterpillar was a lot younger. They shared a bedroom for several months before they finally parted company. It was a brief but important relationship that has not entirely ended.

Like many children, Hannah was fascinated by what happens to caterpillars in the winter. One day she decided to try an experiment. The caterpillar was moved into a jam jar and spent many happy weeks eating the carefully selected leaves Hannah

provided. Then one day it curled up in a chrysalis and went to sleep. Or had it died?

The answer came in the Spring when the chrysalis wriggled and broke open, and a butterfly emerged. Suddenly the jam jar was too small and the butterfly was released into the outside world. Hannah never saw it again, but she still remembers it. The caterpillar she nurtured so lovingly - and the butterfly she released into the world.



Meanwhile, her elderly neighbour, Myra had died. She was a great age and it was a gentle death. But then what? Were Myra's 94 years of life simply deleted like an unwanted computer file? Here one moment and gone the next? Gone into oblivion: or gone somewhere else?

Death fascinates us, at a distance. Television programmes are full of films about ghosts, vampires, autopsies and murders. But, in real life, people are reluctant to talk about death. Especially their own and what might happen afterwards. Here are a few leads to consider if you dare to think about death.

Did Jesus believe there was life after death?

Some gospel accounts suggest he did. For example, there was a conversation in which Jesus was asked about marriage in heaven (Matt 22. 23-33). The controversy was about marriage: heaven was taken for granted.

Or the story of Dives and Lazarus (Lk 16. 19-31). The rich man died and found himself parched with thirst in a place of pain. But the beggar, who died at the same moment, was in a place of joy and blessing. Their earthly roles were reversed.

Jesus lived in a world sharply divided between rich

and poor. Most people lived in extreme poverty like Lazarus. Meanwhile a tiny elite lived in inordinate luxury and wielded total power. It was a world of oppression and exploitation. Into that world came Jesus proclaiming good news for the poor, release from destitution and the healing of the vulnerable whose lives were destroyed by the rich.

The Dives and Lazarus story is a proclamation of hope for the poor and marginalised. Would Jesus have told it if he believed there was no after-life?

But if there is an 'after-life' what is it like?

The medieval Church painted a picture of life after death as a harsh judgement. The virtuous are elevated to heavenly bliss and the sinful cast down into the fires of Hell. That was brilliant propaganda in a world where the powerful needed to control the population and keep them in their proper places. But what about God? Was he a ruthless feudal king dispensing harsh justice?

How does that fit with the Lord's Prayer and its first word, Abba? Loving father, not tyrannical ruler. How does that fit with forgiveness in the parable of the Prodigal Son? Welcomed home unconditionally by a father who runs and flings his arms round the boy, regardless of his filth and defilement.

How does that fit with the story of the Good Shepherd? God going out of his way to find the lost sheep. How does it fit with forgiving someone who offends against you, not seven times but seventy times seven? Do we worship a God who will hurl us into the fire of Hell for a single mistake - but then demand that we repeatedly forgive other people?

No wonder so many reject that image of a monstrous, vengeful God. An image written in words in Dante's *Inferno* and painted on the walls of medieval churches.

But what about fairness?

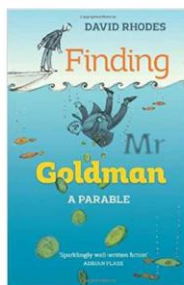
What about punishment for wrong-doing? Surely reason demands that the wrong-doer gets his due deserts? We instinctively want retribution for wrong-doing. Even revenge.

An eye for an eye may sound grim, but it was very rational. It was a way of limiting violence. If someone blinds you in one eye you are allowed to blind them in one eye. Only in one eye. It was a way of preventing violence escalating into war.

But, surprisingly, Jesus tells us to forgive. Not to strike back. Not to demand retribution or revenge. That may be workable in a minor disagreement, but what about murder? What about mass murder? The book *Finding Mr Goldman* explores exactly that question. How does God deal with a wicked man who has caused the deaths of thousands of innocent people? Reason and our sense of punitive justice suggest that he should burn in Hell. And, indeed, the wealthy Mr Goldman experiences something quite close to that.

But what about the love of God? Is it conditional on good behaviour? Or is it unconditional? Unconditional for Mr Goldman? Unconditional for Adolf Hitler? The Prodigal Son behaved badly but the father's love was unconditional. So maybe that's

how it will be for us when we die. We, too, will be greeted with open arms and our sins washed away. When we go down into the grave we may not be



forgotten, just as a small child still remembers with fondness and delight a caterpillar in a jam jar, a child whose love helped it to find new life. And if a small child can remember with love, does not God do the same? Perhaps **that** is the meaning of resurrection.

Finding Mr Goldman is available to buy from
www.spckpublishing.co.uk/shop/finding-mr-goldman/



LCI: Learning for a faithful city

Leeds Church Institute is a place where people meet and learn together. We explore meaning, culture and city life. We talk about God and living out our faith in Leeds.

LCI draws together a diverse range of people: different ages, denominations, faiths, backgrounds, men and women. We have a wide view of the city that takes in the hard difficult places, not just the comfortable or successful ones.

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