

CITYtheology

The magazine of the Leeds Church Institute

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Mark Powley considers Leeds Limited in a time of environmental crisis.



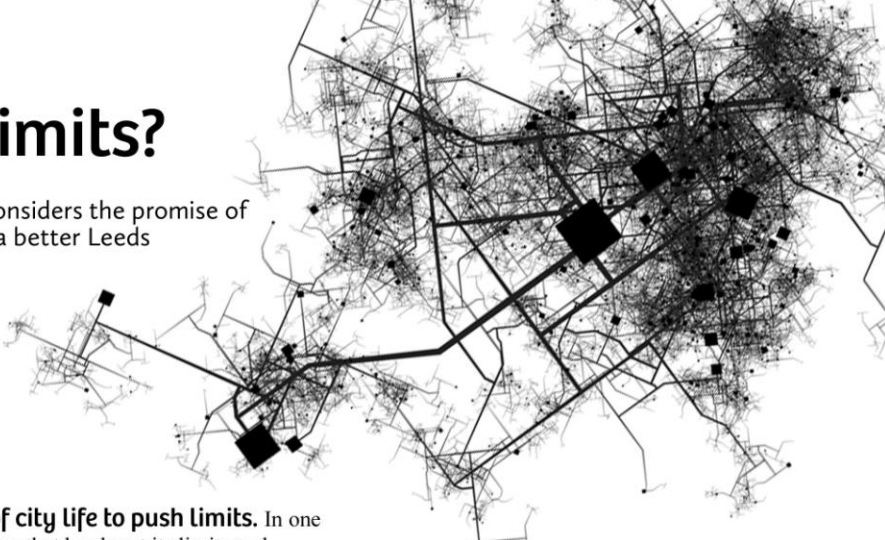
Jesus and Wild Nature

Noel Moules asks how the earth-man, Jesus, should affect our response to ecological crisis

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City Limits?

Mark Powley considers the promise of boundaries for a better Leeds



It is the nature of city life to push limits. In one sense, a city is a town that has burst its limits and become something new. Globally we are seeing the rise of the city and the mega city as populations shift towards urban centres. In cities like Leeds we can shop longer, buy more, work harder, and party later. As a friend once said, 'let's be honest, most of us live in the city because we're driven'.

This fits with our modern conception of life: we don't like to be limited. Which of us, for instance, would appreciate being described as 'a profoundly limited person'? Speaking personally, I have an ambivalent relationship with limits. Whether it's amber lights, working hours, budget constraints or the deadline for submitting this article, I tend to push things to the max and sometimes beyond. It is hard to submit to limitation – and for those of us who would prefer not to, Leeds is a great place to live.

Unfortunately, the myth of limitless consumption, if it ever had currency at all, is surely bankrupt now. Ecologically, financially and personally, we are being forced to consider our limits. The question is whether the Christian narrative has something to contribute at this point. It is suggested in some presentations of Christianity that faith is effectively life without limits. But this way of interpreting Jesus' offer of 'life to the full' is all too easily co-opted by the consumer dream. Others, looking critically at the history of the Church, have seen warrant in the Scriptures for an arrogant human subjugation of the environment which is intolerant of limitation. I would like, instead, to propose a different reading of the Bible, one in which limits play a crucial role and

which therefore holds promise for life in congested 21st Century Leeds.

Reconceiving Limit

At the heart of the Biblical narrative, is a concept of limit as something that blesses rather than inhibits. This requires us to revisit our notion of limit. We tend to see limit as an oppressive restriction, but this obscures the crucial protective function of boundaries. A goldfish bowl, for instance, could be described as a restrictive limitation, but for the goldfish it may be preferable to a rather brief 'no limits' existence on the dining room carpet! Strictly speaking, although limits are themselves a gift, it is what they safeguard that is most precious. Football, to take another example, is not really about lines on a pitch, however without the lines it could not take place at higher levels. The limits enable play.

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A richer analogy still is marriage. The marriage vows are not, 'To have and to hold, 'til death do us part, unless I get an offer from a supermodel...'. Marriage is a covenant in which the boundaries of unconditional commitment safeguard the space in which partners can flourish. It is this kind of relationship – covenant commitment – that describes the way God relates to creation. The limits God gives are covenant boundaries in which relationships are safeguarded and God's blessing can be experienced.



Retelling the Story: Limits Broken, Limits Redeemed

The whole story of the Bible can be told in terms of limits. The garden in which the first humans are depicted includes a limit: do not eat from one particular tree (Genesis 2-3). But the fact of there being a limit does not make the garden a place of meagre subsistence. There is enough, more than enough. There is every kind of plant and provision. The limit given by the commandment is in place simply to protect Adam and Eve, and to safeguard their relationship with God.

As the story unfolds, the first act of sin is the breaking of a limit. It is consumption beyond the boundaries of Eden's divinely gifted ecology. The serpent suggests that life within covenant boundaries is pitiful and diminished. Beyond the limits, it claims, is a place of abundance and freedom. In fact, as becomes clear, the opposite is true. Outside the circle of covenant relationship with God is death. The primeval choice to live without regard for God's limits has consequences both for people and the environment: 'Cursed is the ground because of you'.

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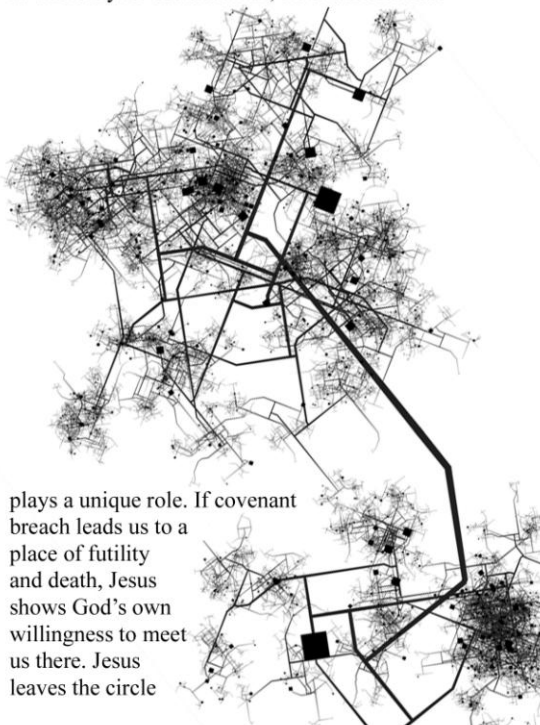
The history of Israel plays out on the canvas of a given area of land. Throughout this journey, faithfulness on, or on the way to, the land means living within boundaries. In the wilderness, God provides abundant mana, but God also gives a limit: only collect what each day requires. In the promised land itself boundary markers set limits for each family's territory. Farming laws set limits on what could be harvested so that others can glean the leftovers at the edge of each field. In the Book of Ruth we see how these laws provide for the refugee and the stranger. The Sabbath set limits on working time. Significantly, Sabbath law also limited the time anyone could demand from those working for them, whether human or animal. Then there was the Sabbath of Sabbaths, the Jubilee, which set a limit on acquisition of land and debasement of ancestral assets by stipulating return of slaves and cancellation of debts every 50th year.

In each case, what God gives as a gift is also given with a limit. To honour the limit is to recognise that the gift came from God in the first place. The Old Testament amply shows how limits protect the poor, maintain justice and lead to surprising occasions for compassion and creativity (as in the Book of Ruth). To exceed the law's limits is to steal from the poor, to trample justice. It promises abundance but delivers only scarcity, because it separates us from the generosity of God.

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The life of perfect limits was lived out by Jesus. Consider for a moment what a limited life he lived. He did not subscribe to the acquisitive creed of busy city life. His accommodation options were limited. His time was limited. His travel experience was limited. He never did just what he wanted; he only ever did what he believed Heaven required of each moment. And yet, within these limits, his one human life became a channel for the abundance and blessing of God like nothing else in history.

In this story of broken limits, the death of Jesus



plays a unique role. If covenant breach leads us to a place of futility and death, Jesus shows God's own willingness to meet us there. Jesus leaves the circle

of divine accompaniment, his natural home, and enters the place of covenant curse and broken boundaries. It is this loving act which remakes covenant between God and humanity and precipitates an outpouring of blessing through Jesus to the world. Recipients of this blessing are enabled to live lives of justice and fruitfulness, not simply on one strip of land in Israel, but anywhere on the planet.

Complex judgements

The theme above is, of course, only one part of the full Biblical symphony. Ultimately, as the story of Israel shows, the limitations of law are powerless to manage behaviour and society without a deeper work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus himself kept the covenant but sometimes broke the limits implied by law. He abrogated Sabbath law for the sake of compassion. He censured those who hid behind limits for selfish gain or used them to oppress others. His teaching on holiness went beyond the expected limits of the society of his day. Later, his apostles eschewed 'balanced' lives to work night and day sharing the gospel.

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So when should limits be broken and when kept? To work this out requires an iterative process of discovery and reflection, listening with others for the voice of God's Spirit. There are no simple answers, rather we must engage in complex judgements. But it is safe to say that the environmental and social challenges we now face require just this sort of process of reflection today.

Leeds Ltd

How might this conversation be taken forward in Leeds? We must start with the pressing political, civic and personal questions of our day. What should be the lowest limit for pay in our city? What provision do we make as a city for Sabbath? What should be the ecological footprint of Leeds, and what action is

required to achieve it? What limitation by some of us might enable space and resources for refugees to be welcomed? What boundaries do we personally need to observe in order to safeguard space for prayer, for family, for play?

Finally, in all the above, where might the process of engaging with limits become the occasion for creativity, compassion and surprising joy? We should pursue these discussions, bearing in mind that ultimately we are called to embrace not limits themselves, but the precious relationships they protect.



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Mark Powley is Principal of Yorkshire Ministry Course (www.ymc.org.uk) and author of Consumer Detox (Zondervan). He lives in north Leeds with his wife Ailsa and their four children.

An Ode to the Motorcar

A poem by Kemi
Atanda Ilori

In vain they tried to tire you with
tax
Your tyre rolled over their wits
You made a kill of their Achilles'
heel
They need taxes for public
services!

In vain they raised the smoke
Screen of pollution, their hole in
the skies
Their articeponds shrivelling
into watery wastes;
They need jobs for their mortgage
payments!

In vain they cleaned you out
Of their party agenda; their anger
boils
Down to a war of words – whose
petty policy

Is green when you need the polls
that count?

In vain they envied you, your
sleek
Curves, your sexy stats
Your nuptial dance in dazzling
forecourts
You are the icon to own to prove
their sizzle!

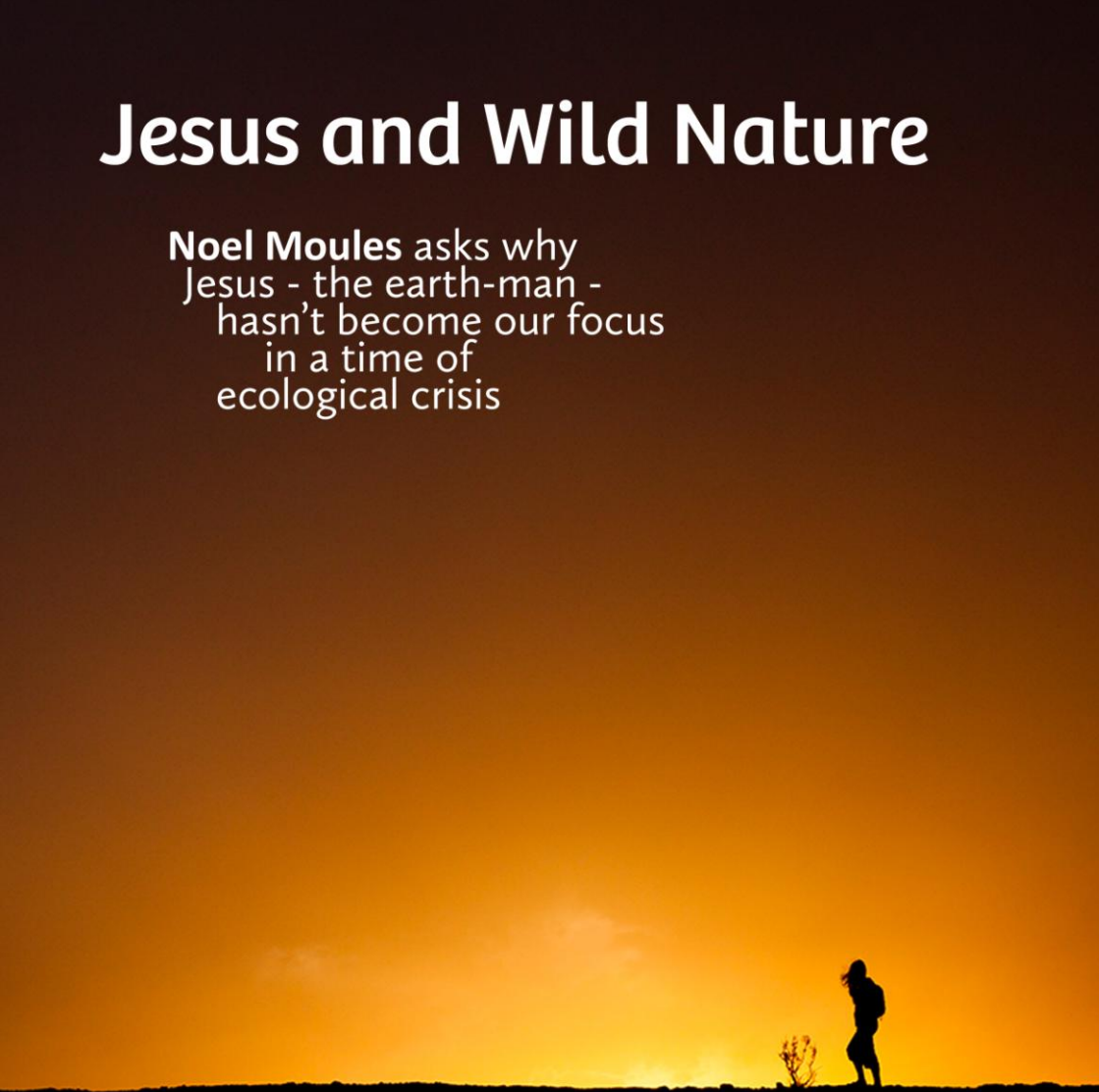
In vain they tried to cut the tar
Black macadam will run
anywhere
In vain they clamped, in vain
they crushed
The impounded jalopy, the old
juggernaut

Long live the motorcar, king of
the roads!



Jesus and Wild Nature

Noel Moules asks why
Jesus - the earth-man -
hasn't become our focus
in a time of
ecological crisis



Noel is the founder of 'Anvil Trust' and the originator and coordinator of its national training programme 'Workshop: Applied Christian Studies', which has been running since 1983 with well over 4500 participants to date. He has been involved in church leadership in several parts of the country. He is a founder member and trustee of the Anabaptist Network and author of 'Fingerprints of Fire, Footprints of Peace: a spiritual manifesto from a Jesus perspective.' On the 17th October, Noel ran a day for LCI exploring the theme Jesus and Wild Nature.

How would you picture Jesus walking the pavements of Leeds today? A metro-man, dressed in casual urban chic, with an easy street cred? It's true he moved comfortably through towns and city sharing his message with rich and poor alike, but the built environment was never his world of choice. No. Jesus was a wilderness person to the core.

Following his baptism in the wild waters of the Jordan river, Jesus is both 'filled with the Spirit' and 'driven by the Spirit' deep into the wilderness. This was the place he felt completely at ease and at home. For Jesus wild nature was not only an environment of spiritual nurture - and also testing - but somewhere for physical refreshment and joy. Whether on the mountain slopes of Hermon or the rolling hills of the Judean desert, the eastern shores of Galilee or across the Jordan, wild places were where Jesus went to pray, to grieve, to find solitude, to rest, to escape arrest and often to teach.

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We find Jesus 'with the wild animals' (leopards, bears, wolves, snakes and scorpions to name just a few). For him field-flowers like the anemone, or the pernicious mustard plant (bane of farmers whose land edged wild heathland), each radiated the divine and had profound spiritual truths to communicate for those with the eyes and ears to learn. The same was also true of the humble sparrow or dark-feathered raven, as well as wilderness reeds, rocks, the wind, waves and the very sky itself.

Jesus self-identifies as 'Son of Man'. In Hebrew this title - ben adam - quite literally means 'earth person'. His message of good news is earth-based and creation-focused. His prayer to God was, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven". Interestingly there are 863 biblical references to 'the earth', and only 494 to 'heaven'. We are told that at his birth an angelic declaration about his mission was, to bring 'peace on earth'. During his crucifixion the very geosphere was convulsed by the traumas involved. Following his resurrection he was mistaken for 'the gardener' - an interesting link with the original Adam in Eden. Among his final words to the gathered disciple community, prior to the ascension, was the instruction, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation". Liberating the

earth was the central purpose of his life. This is what his frequently repeated phrase about the 'coming of the kingdom' actually meant in practice.

All this being so:

- **Why has so little been written about Jesus and wild nature?**
- **Why has Jesus' example failed to radically shape Christian faith and practice over centuries?**
- **Why has Jesus not become our focus in an age gripped by ecological crisis?**

The answers are many and complex. There is value in considering them, but our first priority must be to put matters right.

When Jesus - 'the second adam' - rode into Jerusalem astride a young ungentled donkey colt, to speak truth to power and face the consequences, he was not turning his back on the wild. Rather, he was actively bringing the life and spirit of the wilderness into the very heart of the metropolis, the centre of the urban world.

Biblically, Jerusalem (its name means 'the dwelling place of peace') becomes the symbol of the whole earth - in fact the complete cosmos - expressing itself in dynamic harmonious paradise. 'Paradise' is a Persian loan word for a large garden or parkland. It was used by the rabbis translating the Hebrew scriptures into Greek (LXX), when looking for a word for the 'garden' of Eden in Genesis. It is also used biblically to speak of the 'future Eden', which finds its fulfillment in the image of 'the new Jerusalem' within the 'renewed heaven and earth'. This 'wild city' imagery is speaking of nature as God first and always intended it to be. Accomplishing the goal of the complete integration

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should be considering in the lead up to this important event:

I am an outsider, though frequent visitor, to Leeds. Every time I come to the city the wonderful green environment, in terms of trees and grassy spaces, always impresses me. Nevertheless, the reality in 2008 was that if all the people of the world lived in the same way as the people of Leeds we would need 3.3 earth-type planets to sustain our current life ways (the total human population of the earth would then have needed 1.8 earth-type planets to sustain its current lifestyle). I wonder what the reality is today (seven years later) in 2015? However, Leeds is sadly not alone; many of the world's cities present a similar and even worse reality.


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From 30th November to 11th December 2015 the twenty-second annual United Nations Climate Change Conference will take place - this time in the French capital, Paris. Here are some questions we

- **Do we believe that the ecological crisis is first and foremost a spiritual crisis?**
- **What practical steps can Christians and their communities take to advance Jesus' eco-vision?**
- **How can the Christian 'good news' become a beacon of wild hope for Leeds?**

Finally, I am frequently asked why I use the phrase, 'wild nature'? I do so because 'wild' is the very essence of her character. It is exactly how she was created to be: fresh, natural, self-willed, feral and free, utterly independent of humanity, yet totally expressing the person of God. This is why Jesus was so at home in the sacred wilderness. Why he tells us the wild wind is the unique example of how we should live when we are 'born of the Spirit'.

Many find my reference to 'wild nature' disturbing, because they are like Lucy in CS Lewis's, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. On finding out that Aslan is a lion, she asks, "Is he a tame lion?" "Good gracious, No," says Mr Beaver, "He is wild, but he is good." The same is true of 'nature' and 'creation' - wild to the core, yet 'good' in abundance. In fact, 'very good', but of course not safe - that is where wisdom comes in!



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L is for Lifestyle, P is for Pilgrim

Stroma McDermott takes a journey towards the UN summit on climate change

This September at LCI, we launched our new Autumn/Winter programme 'People's Pilgrimage Leeds: Theology and Action around Climate Change' to coincide with events taking place nationally as part of the run up to the Paris UN Summit on climate change in December 2015. Three events were chosen to commence the programme. The first was an evening with Ruth Valerio, author, community activist and the churches and theology Director of A Rocha UK who spoke on 'What's the Good News for Creation?' The second saw the re-branding of our monthly urban retreat *Reflect: Harehills* and finally an evening workshop with John Battle giving us his insights on Pope Francis' newest encyclical *Laudato Si*. All three events were enjoyable, thought provoking and challenging (this is LCI after all) but by the end of the week I realised things had gone beyond that and that unwittingly I had begun a journey; I was actually on a pilgrimage.



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The idea of pilgrimage is common to all the world's religious traditions. A pilgrimage is a journey of faith, often to a place considered sacred, in order to offer thanks, to atone for wrongdoing, or to seek enlightenment, healing or reconciliation. Pilgrimage supports and encourages the sharing of spiritual experiences and theological insights but most significantly it determines a process of concrete actions, some of which may well involve sacrifice and suffering, all of which seems wholly appropriate in relation to the subject and nature of climate change. Many pilgrim trails required the believer to go barefoot, perhaps a reminder from Exodus 3:5 that 'you stand on holy ground' and from Psalm 24:1 that 'the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it'. Perhaps as we consider climate change we need to remember whose world it is that we live in and perhaps some simple, humble, barefoot theology is needed.

The word 'pilgrim' itself derives from the Latin word *peregrinus*, which means a stranger, someone on a journey or a temporary resident. The term is essential to a central image of the Christian life that sees Christians as temporary residents of this world, but whose real home was heaven. As Ruth Valerio noted, this image of us belonging elsewhere has not been particularly helpful for our environmental awareness, suggestive as it can be of an eternal heaven and a disposable earth. Yet pilgrims were expected to live and behave according to the standards of their homeland as they journeyed; as Jesus' own prayer says 'thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven'. Valerio speaks passionately about how caring for God's Earth, which is our homeland, should be a main part of our Christian service, witness and mission.

Scripture reflects how God both made the world and loves it; as Genesis 1:31 says it is 'very good'. Throughout much of Christian history, however, instead of seeing and understanding God's connectedness to the world (and therefore our own), Christianity has often separated out the material and non-material, the fleshly and the spiritual. In this way, we have failed to understand what really matters to God.

We need to reconnect with the idea we were 'made in the image of God' (Genesis 1:27) for a purpose that affords a radical democratisation of God's vocation for us in this world (Genesis 1:28). Our vocation to rule over our world is a pastoral one requiring care, justice and humility, and not the domineering perspective we have misinterpreted it to be. We should be excited and ready to rediscover our original vocation and mandate to 'go out into all the world' (Genesis 9:7), but as people who offer peace and justice for all of creation.

One of the key features on our *Reflect: Harehills* retreats is that we do indeed go out, having an hour's walk observing and reflecting on various aspects of theology and prayer as we go, allowing place and space to inform our thinking and experience; a mini-pilgrimage in itself. Using James Jones' book *Jesus and the Earth* our reflections have considered just how 'earthed' the Bible is. The word heaven is mentioned 494 times, the world love 537 times, yet the word earth is 853 times. Similarly the gospels show Jesus as a very earthed or even earthy young man. It is telling that Jesus' preferred title for himself was Son of Man, from the Hebrew, Son of Adam, the one hewn from the earth. Jesus, the incarnation of God lived here and I mean really lived. Perhaps sometimes we have understood Jesus' life from Paul's beautiful hymn in Philippians 2:1-8 as a kenotic relinquishing of his divine life in order to become a humble servant without maybe considering that Jesus liked being here and wanted to be here. As Jones notes, 'The Son of Man came eating and drinking' (Matt 11:19)!

The strap line for *Reflect: Harehills* is *Meet: Retreat: Eat*, which is interesting considering Jones suggests Christianity is a religion of consumption. As we gathered back after our walk to a wonderful bowl of hot, spicy food it was good to reflect on the fact that just as sin entered the world through one act of consumption Jesus redeemed it through another, an act that has become a central symbol of Christianity itself. Consumption does not have to be a bad thing.

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Yet humanity's overconsumption is clearly at the heart of the problem of climate change. In his

reading of the encyclical John Battle commented that Pope Francis sees the environmental chaos and destruction facing our planet as the main challenge facing humanity. It is a chaos that comes from the cultures that shape our human co-existence. As the late Leeds MP Michael Meacher noted at the UN Johannesburg Earth Summit on sustainable development in 2002, "There is a lot wrong with our world. But it is not as bad as many people, think. It is actually worse."

On this theme, Pope Francis argues that relativism, understood as the disorder that drives one person to take advantage of another and leads to global exploitation, needs addressing. He also recognises, however, the need to protect work and encourage business, which he suggests, can be a 'noble vocation providing wealth and improvement for our world'. We do have the means to act for the good of creation, and in this need to be guided by the God of Creation to look for the common good for our common home within a universal communion. In this way, climate change is a spiritual issue.



For John Battle the one word that Francis used that struck him the most was 'beauty'. Francis, like the Psalmist and other Wisdom writers appeals to the mystery and the beauty of creation and the Creator. It would be very easy to get sentimental about beauty, but in the stark world of climate change, how does a focus on beauty help? Immanuel Kant suggested 'beauty is a symbol of morality' and I wonder if we could recover or even identify a beauty that could be a moral imperative for all areas of life and most especially for our economics? A beauty of business that allows a dignity and integrity for producer and consumer, that respects and values the source and resource as much as the end product. In this way, we could consider the Fairtrade movement as beautiful and see recycling as an act of beautiful worship.

As our events programme continues, so has my journeying with these questions. *Reflect: Harehills* offers a glimmer of hope; yes there is consumerism, shops, busyness and business all around, but it is in balance, in proportion to the community and its needs. In her book *L* is for Lifestyle Ruth Valerio suggests we make personal and communal changes to how we live our lives so that we live within our

planetary resources as part of the whole of humanity and creation. We need to make adjustments for the common good. Such changes require metanoia, to change our way of believing, acting and being. They are not necessarily easy nor are they without sacrifice but they can perhaps be pilgrimage and for our planet's wholeness, *L* also stands for Life.

Who Chose the Gospels?

Revd Steve Allen asks if *Da Vinci Code* style conspiracy theories have any substance

There is a school of thought, which we see in popular culture by such things as the *The Da Vinci Code* but supported by some academics such as Elaine Pagels, William Petersen and Bart Ehrman (all building on the earlier work of Walter Bauer) that the four gospels we know today as Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, were not, in the earliest days of the Church regarded as particularly special – or to use theological language, ‘canonical’ or ‘authoritative’ or ‘orthodox’ – or at least, if they were, they were no more so than a lot of other gospels. This school of thought also claims that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were only established as pre-eminent by the church councils of the 4th or even 5th centuries.

Thanks largely to this school of thought (and the popular media which has sensationalised what it says) the idea is now widespread that in the earliest days of the Church there were dozens, some say hundreds of different gospels and the four now regarded as canonical were not particularly special or indeed, may even have been less highly regarded than some of the others, which were later discarded, or suppressed or simply lost. This school of thought is what lies behind the kind of headline that appeared in *The Independent* on the 29th July this year – ‘Jesus had a wife say scientists, as ancient papyrus scroll verified’.

If this theory is correct, how did Matthew, Mark, Luke and John come to be regarded so highly and why were the other gospels ‘lost’? That’s where the idea of conspiracy comes in; the theory goes that by various means, both foul and fair, supporters of the four canonical gospels suppressed the other gospels and persecuted those who favoured them, partly because they contained, in their view, erroneous traditions about Jesus but also because they supported a view of church life that they

disapproved of. So for example, it is argued that the alternative gospels, as I will mostly call them, supported the idea of female leadership in the Church, which was unacceptable to men. Or, it is argued, these alternative gospels reveal a Jesus who was merely a man and not divine. Or, in the case of the Gospel of Philip, there is a suggestion that Jesus had a sexual relationship with Mary Magdalene. One can easily see how these ideas and the conspiracy theories around them appeal to our contemporary culture which tends to be suspicious of tradition and authority and all too ready to see a conspiracy even where there may not be one. That there were other gospels should not have come as a great surprise since the existence of other gospels, sometimes called, ‘Gnostic’ or ‘Lost’ gospels, was well-known in the earliest centuries. Indeed, until the actual texts of some these other gospels were discovered in the last 60 years or so, our only knowledge of them came from the pens of early Christians who wrote about them in order to refute them – and in doing so, they occasionally quoted from them too.

C E Hill sums up the conspiracy thus:

‘...how did the Christian Church, apparently drowning in a sea of Gospels, finally end up with only four? ... Many [people] picture councils of bad-tempered bishops voting on which books to include one minute and voting to execute heretics the next... many, even in the academic community insist that the question of which Gospels the Church ought to endorse was still up for grabs in the fourth century.... the common idea is that the Church’s canon is the result of a great power-struggle between rivals among early Christianity.... The four Gospels, like the other books of the ...New Testament achieved their place only by finally out-muscling their many competitors.’ (p2-3).

In his book *Who Chose the Gospels?* Probing the Great Gospel Conspiracy, CE Hill critically examines the scholarship behind that conspiracy narrative and alternative explanations. At the end of the book, he is completely unconvinced that there was a conspiracy of the powerful to choose the gospels and oppress other versions. He concludes:

We cannot find who chose the Gospels. It looks like nobody did. They almost seem to have chosen themselves through some sort of 'natural selection'. (p229)..... Christian writers of the second century do not speak of choosing the Gospels ... they instead use words like 'receive', 'recognize', 'confess', 'acknowledge' (p231)...second century church

leaders would have said that neither individuals nor churches had the authority to 'choose'... but to receive the ones given by God and handed down by Christ through his apostles. (p246)

At a recent Lunchtime Conversation at LCI led by Revd Steve Allen, a group of us discussed this book. It was intriguing to think about what really happened all those centuries ago and encouraging that so much time and scholarship has gone into getting the most accurate perspective possible. We also reflected on what it means for us in Leeds today; how precious the gospels are to us; and how we have nothing to fear in probing our history to unearth historical facts and truths.



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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