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**Deacon Jenny Jones** asks how good the past really was



What are you looking for?

**Dr Helen Reid** reflects on normality, injustice and liberation

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# Beware of Simplicity

Ellie Harrison reflects on losing something precious and first impressions

**I'm a Leeds based performer, artist and mentor of young people.** Since 2010 I have been making a sequence of seven art projects called 'The Grief Series' that create spaces where people can discuss death and bereavement through a range of empowering creative practices. I collaborate with photographers, performers, funeral directors and fairground sign writers.

Two weeks ago, we were all packed and ready to take our project 'The Unfair' to Brighton Festival after a fantastic reception in Leeds when our van, containing the majority of our set was stolen.

'The Unfair' is a free funfair filled with stalls and games that allow people to consider if anger could be a positive as well as destructive emotion. Because it's free and welcoming, it gets an audience that might not usually engage with contemporary art. Groups of lads. Young mums wanting a rest and some conversation. And I am constantly surprised by people...by their generosity and honesty. It's taught me, 'beware of simplicity'. People are always more kind, compassionate and complex than they first appear. What you might think at first glance is hostility, is more often than not exhaustion, or worry, or simply them thinking. Whilst 'The Unfair' was playful on the surface, people have been engaging in

profound ways with the work and we were all looking forward to bringing it to new audiences in Brighton.

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Up until now grief is something I have only known for people, not for things. Someone described me as an 'experiential expert in death' which I suppose is a fancy way of saying I have lost a lot of people. My mum died when I was 17 and over the next 5 years I lost my brother, father and two step brothers. So grief for my family is something I have sat with for a long time. But I will hold my hands up and say that, however ugly it is, I feel grief at the theft of 'The Unfair'. I swing wildly between feeling resilient and telling myself 'It's just stuff' and thinking 'It's not just stuff, it's the late nights in the workshop painstakingly painting fairground signs, head-achey from paint fumes. Or the early mornings in charity shops seeking the perfect blue glass bottles to house people's angry

letters so we can 'Bottle it up' for them so they don't have to. The objects that made up 'The Unfair' were there to show that we cared.



The grief, I suppose, is really for the space 'The Unfair' created. A space for people to come together with people often quite different to them and reflect. A space to unpack some difficult feelings. The grief is because of the young lad who was prompted to ring his mum and try and patch things up as a consequence of experiencing 'The Unfair'. Or the women of faith who found release from a difficult time at home by doing our 'angry karaoke with a punch bag'. The grief is for all the future conversations we might not be able to have about how and why people feel angry. And people do feel angry.

The recent terror attacks have well and truly put my grief for 'The Unfair' in perspective and made me grateful for not having experienced the horrendous trauma that many families are experiencing at the moment both in the UK and around the world. Whenever there is a tragedy, there is a risk: that we stop condemning the individuals involved and start making assumptions about large groups of people. The battle lines are drawn and it becomes a series of 'Us and them' arguments. The 'them' might be people on the other side of the political spectrum or people from the other side of the world. Or people on the other side of the street who we assume aren't like us. We divide. Us vs them. Good vs bad. But if 'The Unfair' has taught me anything it is, 'beware of simplicity'.

**Whenever there is a tragedy, there is a risk: that we stop condemning the individuals involved and start making assumptions about large groups of people.**

People are rarely all bad and never have I met

someone who doesn't possess flaws. Most people are a complex combination of factors and experiences and although we know we shouldn't, it can be tempting to write people off. To jump to anger when we feel a deep sense of grief. I know this because when I lost my brother in 2002 I felt angry at 'The Unfair'ness of this young man dying. And over the past few weeks I felt angry at the people who stole 'The Unfair' and as I searched the waste grounds and tips of Leeds, my face probably looked hostile. I probably looked critical of everyone I saw. I have wanted a place to rage at the world. To express anger. But underneath the anger it was grief too and I was lucky because I have been on the receiving end of kindness. Through my work on Grief Series, Churches, Mosques and Synagogues have invited me in, despite the fact I might be a little different to them. Bereaved children have invited me to share memories with them and shown me precious inherited objects from their loved ones. Widowers from the highlands of Scotland have sent me teapots made by their late wives as gifts. When 'The Unfair' got stolen we have had so many kind offers of help and donations to our crowd funder. I'm glad people saw past my angry expression, any surface differences and invited me in. Gave me space and a little understanding. I would like to continue to build these spaces for other people. To create spaces of possibility, that don't jump to easy answers and embrace complexity.

*To find out more about Ellie Harrison's work with 'The Grief Series' go to [griefseries.co.uk](http://griefseries.co.uk)*



# What are you looking for?

Dr Helen Reid explores what liberating looks like in Leeds



There's a character in *Stories from the Forests of Leeds* called the Bagman of Bagley. In the book, his story explores the idea of the baggage that we carry with us in life.

**"Look! The Bagman from Bagley. See how he struggles, what is he carrying in that bag?"**

The story was written by Oz Hardwick and was illustrated by Si Smith. Since the book was published, the pictures from this story have been placed in a triptych. A triptych is a traditional setting for an image of the suffering Christ surrounded on either side by images that tell other parts of the story.

Seen in this setting, the Bagman of Bagley looks a Christ-like figure. The way he is carrying a lumpy black sack over his shoulder is reminiscent of rubbish collection in the days when refuse staff carried bags rather than moved wheelie bins. So, it is an image which implies service.

The sides of the triptych portray various Leeds shoppers, carrying their own bags, displaying

various well-known high street brands. When you look at the three pictures together, it makes you wonder whether one day, the things in the bright shiny bags that people are carrying with pride will end up in the refuse sack, carried away when they become worthless, no longer living up to their initial promise.

As he walks along, people appear to respond with a range of looks from disparagement to avoidance. His appearance and people's responses have echoes of the portrayal of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah, who was afflicted, without beauty or comeliness, and who suffered for others (Isaiah 53: 1-7). These images together look beautiful and cast meaning on how we look at city life. They resonate for me with one of the most striking phrases in the book *The Gospel of Relationship* by Jean Vanier. (Jean Vanier is the founder of the L'Arche Community – an international network dedicated to the flourishing of people with intellectual or learning disabilities).

**"It is up to each of us to be liberated from the tyranny of normality and injustice."**

Vanier, when reflecting on the Gospel of John, sees clearly that our liberation is to be called to live out Gospel values as the unique people we are, uniquely loved by God. More than this, that we are also called to be part of other people's liberation; to enable them to overcome barriers erected by discrimination or perceptions of disability and ability for example, among other injustices enacted in the name of 'normal'.

This message is to the forefront of his reading of Jesus' encounter with the first disciples (John 1: 35-42). It begins when John the Baptist announces, "Here is Jesus, the Lamb of God". At first glance, a lamb is small and weak, needing to be cared for. It is perhaps surprising to say "Behold! A lamb!" But of course the word 'lamb' carries a weight of meaning within the Jewish tradition. The words remind Jewish listeners of the time prior to the Exodus; the misery of the Hebrew people in Egypt, the calling of Moses to liberate them and the passing over of the Angel of Death. The lamb is a positive reminder of Passover and liberation but it is also a difficult image. The sacrificial lamb of the Passover meal and the phrase "Lamb of God" carry with them a sense of suffering, albeit a suffering that liberates.

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John the Baptist's declaration, "Look, the lamb of God!" implies that Jesus comes to liberate. Jesus liberates us from our sin, sin that Vanier describes as simply our refusal of the love of God and the love of other people. We defend our hearts against God and against others, we fear and hate those who are different, we erect borders between people. Jesus came to liberate our hearts so that we might love others as he loves us.

In this story, we see a pattern for establishing a relationship of love and liberation. When the two men turn to Jesus, he asks ... "What do you want?" or ... "What are you searching for?" They respond by asking where he lives because they want to spend time with him. Jesus invites them to "come and see", and so he invites them into a relationship of love. Then, we hear that they told others about Jesus, and so became witnesses to this love.

The linked themes of liberation and witness are so critical to Jean Vanier's reading of the Gospel of John. Another inspirational example he describes is in the story of the Samaritan woman (John 4). We know that the Samaritan woman was married many times so she had experienced heartbreak, failure, rejection and shame within her community. Vanier calls her 'a wounded woman'. And the first words that Jesus says to her are a request; he asks 'Will you give me a drink?' Jesus shows himself to be in need and he puts himself lower than her. By doing this, Jesus makes it clear that the right approach of love and compassion for a person in need is to empower them. He is not there simply to do good for or to her, but rather he wants to start a relationship which will involve sharing and mutual help.

Through this encounter, the Samaritan Woman is liberated from the tyranny of normality and injustice; from her failure to fit all those 'normal' patterns of a woman's life and marriage. She recognises that this encounter is extraordinary and she tells others about it, inviting them to come and see him.

Vanier is convinced that all are called to share this liberation and witness; to share this vision of love, where the weak or those who don't fit into normal patterns have a central place; where all are called to work with the rejected and the weak to create a new world together.

Starting with the Bagman of Bagley, we can imagine what participating in this kind of liberation means to life in Leeds. In everyday life there are a myriad of individual opportunities to ask people 'What are you looking for?' and 'Will you give me a drink?' There are also a whole range of organised possibilities from Leeds Citizens asking communities what matters to them and organising actions, to the mutual sharing of Asylum Seekers and volunteers through the WYDAN initiative of night shelters. There is so much potential in Leeds for all to be liberated from the tyranny of normality and injustice.

*With thanks to my co-reflectors:*

*Revd Tom Lusty*

*LCI members at Cake Coffee and Conversation  
Members of LCI Council.*

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*Stories from the Forests of Leeds (2016) edited by  
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# How good was life in the past?

Deacon Jenny Jones asks us to re-examine the stories we create about the past



**I recall my Nanna saying ‘I can remember the days when you could walk from Southgate to Finsbury Park through fields’.** (I’m showing my north London roots here). Now with the exception of a few parks the whole area is inner city/suburban sprawl. Those memories are little over 100 years old and are immensely different from the memories of a family who have farmed land for hundreds of years. For their memories are shared with their ancestors; memories built around the cycle of nature and of waiting for seeds to grow, crops to ripen, harvest to be gathered in. The same waiting occurs around the nurture of animal stock.

Cities have a very different remembrance from rural areas – the memories are far shorter and far more intense. Every sense of what a city is, is built up rapidly; the growth is enforced by newcomers joining with those already there; new industries being introduced alongside the old. As a result of the fusion of old and new, remembrances are not naturally grown, but tend to be constructed. The result of this is that the understanding of who we are, and what we stand for, is built on a different basis from our rural cousins.

Looking back at the history of Leeds we can see the

change from a small community of 3,000 in 1600 to the vast metropolis with a population of 750,000 we know today. The increase was not steady, and was driven by changes in industry, the decline of the rural economy and continual immigration. Archive records show that the vast majority of those coming to live in Leeds had no previous contact with the city. They also show the rapid rise of the Jewish community, although the figures do not tell the full story, i.e. that Leeds was only a stop-over point for many Jews heading for America. We can look at the social history over this period, but can we relate to the events of the past that changed people’s understanding of who they were and where they belonged?

Most of us will remember the brilliant opening ceremony to the London Olympics in 2012 directed by Academy Award-winning British Film Director, Danny Boyle. One commentator described the show as ‘a love letter to Britain’. The show opened with an idyllic depiction of rural life until stagecoaches arrived bringing businessmen and early industrialists. Soon the tranquil scene was transformed into an industrial landscape with smoking chimney stacks, beam engines, looms and a crucible. The relentless rhythm of the music and repetitive mechanical movements by the actors brilliantly illustrated the incredible changes

that happened in a relatively short period we now describe as the Industrial Revolution.

That constant inevitable change changes us too. In cities our understanding of remembrance is far shallower, but it is also far more fragile. In essence, cities have to constantly restructure themselves and then reinvent their remembrances as best they can, given a ridiculously enforced rate of population change.

What is perception and what is reality? How good was life in the past? What do you think of when you think of the history of Leeds? Back to back housing? Mills? Pollution? Poverty? Still we look back and think we have lost something. 'We were poor, but we were happy', or 'You could leave your back door open' are phrases often heard. Were people really happy living in such grim conditions? Maybe you could leave your back door open because there was nothing worth stealing.

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For most people life was pretty awful. Back to backs had no proper drainage and communal toilets were used by dozens of families. Disease was rife. 170 years ago a new Moral and Industrial Training School and a new Workhouse were built in Leeds. The school attempted to provide 3-4,000 children with elementary and skills education and its aim was to break the cycle of family pauperism, but the reality was that children were forcibly separated from their parents.

Do we actually want to remember or do we want to create stories that bring us false comfort? The history of Leeds will have been written by the healthier, literate, church-going people in the north and not by the cholera-ridden illiterate of the south. I wonder what stories they would tell. Somehow I doubt we would find them cosy and reassuring tales that would make us feel good about the country that the tabloids love to call 'Great'.

Many of the Bible narratives come from city locations. Of course, their cities bear no resemblance to our modern cities,

but we can learn from them. God tells the exiles in Babylon, through the words of Jeremiah, that they should "build houses..., plant gardens..., take wives and have sons and daughters ..., seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." Wherever we are, whether by choice or not, we have to change and adapt; we have to accept new ways of being.

**Do we actually want to remember or do we want to create stories that bring us false comfort?**

The principal problem facing the Church in every time and place is to answer God's question "I am doing a new thing, do you not perceive it?" Our desire to take false warm comforting remembrances of times that never really existed and pull them around us is so tempting that we fail to see that God is always doing something new.

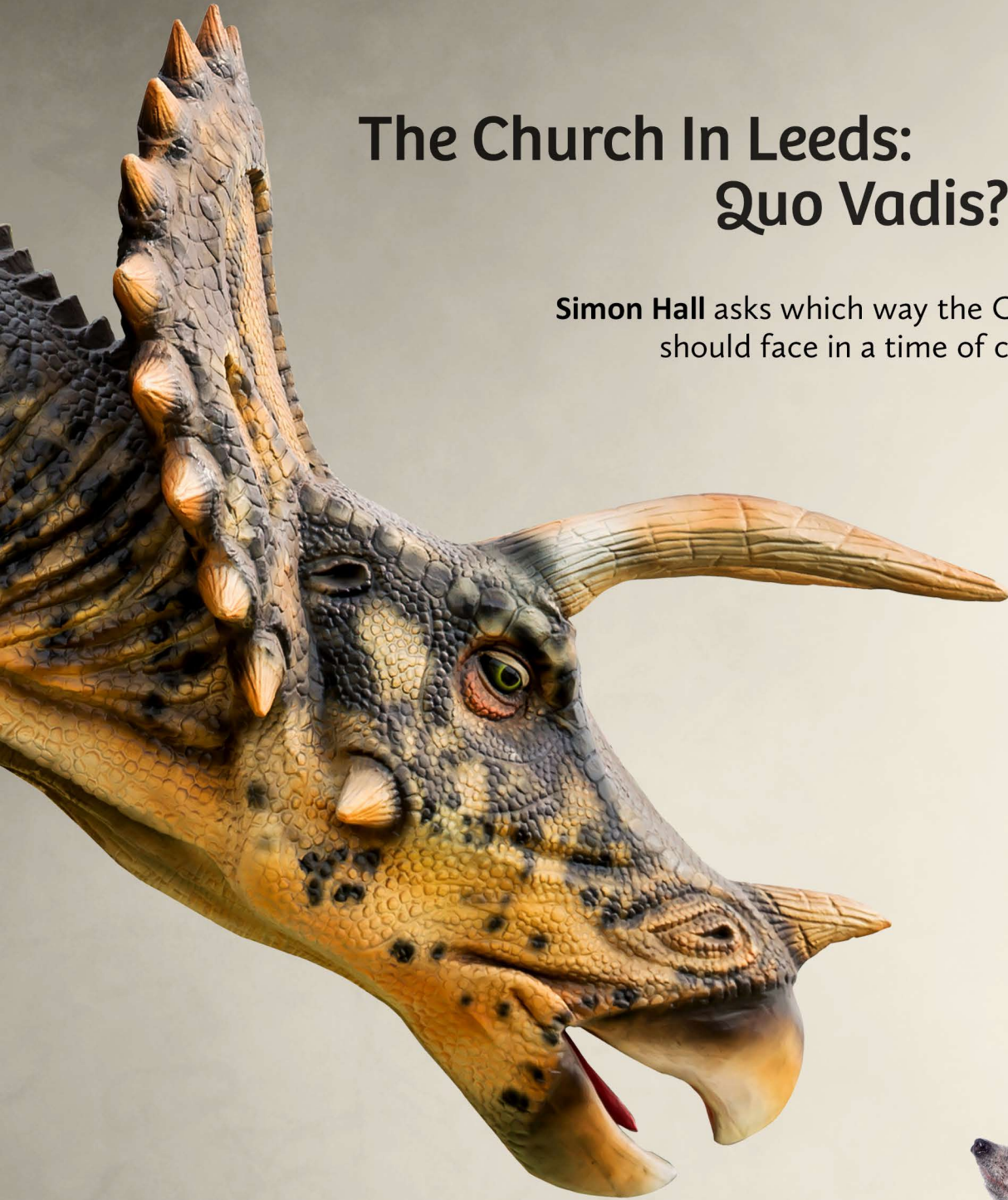
Bishop John Robinson asked a very important question: if we are invited to view the world and the church in terms of a river and a rock, why do we always think of the church in terms of the rock? If you want to remember, remember change; remember freshness out of sterility; remember hope out of despair.

*Deacon Jenny Jones has been the deacon at Oxford Place for the past seven years.*



# The Church In Leeds: Quo Vadis?

**Simon Hall** asks which way the Church  
should face in a time of change





## **There is an apocryphal story about Saint Peter that continues to resonate down the ages.**

Peter is escaping the persecution of Christians in Rome when he meets the risen Jesus on the road. Jesus is heading into Rome as Peter is running away. 'Where are you going?' Peter asks Jesus (Quo vadis? in Latin). 'I am going to Rome to be crucified again,' Jesus replies. Peter is challenged to follow Jesus back into the city, where he serves the Church and is ultimately martyred.

I am not one of those Christians who believes that because Christianity is losing its position of power and privilege that means that we are being persecuted. However, there is no doubt that the Church in the UK in general, and Leeds in particular, is going through a time of struggle and doubt, and it is worth asking Jesus where in Leeds he is going, and whether we are willing to follow him, whatever the cost.

Our current context is one of massive, and for some denominations terminal, decline. Looking at the evidence will be unnecessary for many of us, but if you need to be convinced that this is a historic cultural change then some of the latest statistics can be found here:  
<https://faithsurvey.co.uk/uk-christianity.html>

Leeds has not missed out on this national trend, but due to some demographic peculiarities (the relative lateness of its rapid growth into cityhood; the massive displacement of communities in the first half of the 20th century) it would appear that its effects are exaggerated and accelerated in comparison to other mid-sized cities in the UK. The established congregations in Leeds are becoming smaller, and older, and apart from those being replenished by new arrivals to the city, the future looks unsustainable.

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What will the Church in Leeds look like in thirty years' time? A best guess is that most churches will be of two kinds: firstly, highly stylised churches that gather people from a wide radius on the basis of personal preference. We already have a number of evangelical and charismatic churches that have a 'translocal' ministry, which might be considered to

be the prime examples of this. But it is no use blaming a particular spirituality (charismatic) or a particular generation (the young). Across the UK, cathedrals are reporting an increase in attendance, which is in a large part down to the fact that many local churches can no longer offer the music and splendour of a cathedral-like service.

We are all consumers now. I recently spoke to a Methodist Minister who told me that all but three of his congregation passed another Methodist Church on the way to their congregation of choice every Sunday morning. It's not clear what will happen to the churches planted by recent immigrants to Leeds, but if the experience of the African-Caribbean churches of the city are a guide, it is likely that they will serve an ethnic diaspora, gathering some of the descendants of the founders who now live far and wide.

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The second form of church will be very different: small and unstable, largely unseen and statistically insignificant, tiny house churches will emerge from streets, playgroups, community choirs, youth clubs, groups of friends etc. If you want to be part of a local expression of church on your housing estate or among your alternative youth culture you will probably have to start it yourself. Such groups will have no money, no building, no hierarchy, probably no institutional affiliation, and very little chance of surviving very long. They will serve a particular group, then probably die. But some won't. A few will find a way of multiplying who they are and help others to set up similarly low maintenance groups. But it won't look much like church as we know it now.

Not that I believe that 'The Church' is going to die, even if individual congregations and denominations pass away. What concerns me is that like the mythical Peter, we may be tempted to walk away from our city precisely at the time Jesus is calling us into it. While my depiction of our future might seem unremittingly bleak, I am not without hope. Of course, we cannot be complacent because we have no God-given right to persist: all seven of the churches mentioned in the book of Revelation have passed away. Nonetheless, I believe that if we can accept this future and engage with it creatively then the body of Christ may yet reach every neighbourhood of Leeds.

I am a Baptist Minister. For half my week I serve in a local church in north Leeds, one which might not be around in thirty years unless we start thinking creatively now. For the other half of my week I am part of a tiny network of small groups that I'm hoping will be a seed of the future, but might not last to the end of the decade. Every week I feel the desire to preserve what we have and the need to create something new that none of us can see.

This is how I see our future: imagine the time of the dinosaurs, when those great reptiles reigned supreme. At that moment, if you were a betting person, you would put your money on the dinosaurs ruling the earth for a very long time, and so they did. They became bigger and bigger, until, due to a massive catastrophe, they declined and were replaced by the mammals, tiny creatures who had spent several million years just trying to avoid being eaten.

A betting person right now should bet on the large churches being the future, together catering for many different theologies, spiritualities and ethnicities. Many of them are here now. However, something inside me tells me that the changes in our society are as great as the conflagration that wiped out the dinosaurs. The future may actually belong to the tiny groups that spring up across the city, the insignificant and vulnerable mammals. Of course, most of them will die out. But it is likely that these groups will be much more diverse and experimental in reaching the 'post-Christian' generations. The American author Brian Maclaren has put it this way: 'Just as the cathedrals were the last gasp of the medieval age, built with the tools of modernity, so megachurches are the last gasp of modernity, built with the tools of postmodernity.' Of course, an aphorism is not a proof, but it's

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worth thinking about nonetheless. My personal hope is that the large and the small can find a way to value and support each other – we need both. But since the large has its own ways of sustaining itself, I'm going to invest in the small.

**This is how I see our future: imagine the time of the dinosaurs, when those great reptiles reigned supreme. At that moment, if you were a betting person, you would put your money on the dinosaurs ruling the earth for a very long time, and so they did...until, due to a massive catastrophe, they declined and were replaced by the mammals, tiny creatures who had spent several million years just trying to avoid being eaten.**

I hope you are thinking about the future of Leeds now. Very soon, most of us will be travelling from our home neighbourhood to another part of the city for worship. If, one Sunday morning, we met Jesus going the other way, how would the conversation go?



# A Series Of Formative Events...

By **Abbie Palmer**

**Once upon a time, there was a professional event organiser who was called to become an ordained priest.** She needed to learn what being a priest meant for her. So, as part of her theological study, she undertook two placements: one in a suburban parish and the other in Leeds Church Institute. Here's what she learned...

Coming in to Leeds Church Institute with a professional approach to event organisation, I was challenged to develop a theology of events. I was sceptical. Could the administration and organisation of events have anything to contribute to our relationship with God? It wasn't until earlier this year that I discovered a key to unlocking this possibility. The key was in considering events and story.

Stories are made up of events. "One day...A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...". It is often said that our lives are made up of significant events. These events shape who we are, how we see the world, and how others see us. Similarly, stories shape communities. Stories which connect people through shared understanding or experience. Stories based on an event of some description. The Bradford riots. The murder of Jo Cox. The Trafalgar Square vigil after the Westminster Terror Attack.

But a story cannot just relate the event itself. It must talk about what gave rise the event: the characters involved, how the event came about. It must also look at the aftermath of the event. What did the event change? You're already thinking of a story, right?! Is it a Gospel story? Or Little Red Riding Hood?

Events at Leeds Church Institute vary enormously. I imagine many readers will have experienced or have knowledge of how unexpected an LCI event can be! Even regular events like Lunchtime Conversations (first Tuesday of the month) and Cake, Coffee and Conversation (third Thursday of the month); each has its own flavour, its own format, shaped by the speaker, the book or topic that has inspired them, and shaped by those present and how they interact. What each person takes away – how it changes them – will depend on all these factors and many others.

I am convinced that events offer great opportunities for the Holy Spirit to move and change the world through people. Often it is the events most uncomfortable or outside of our experience that promote this opportunity. These promote the opportunity to prepare, perhaps with prayer, before the event. Time to reflect on such events afterwards can also lead to growth and even transformation.

The Gospel of Matthew recounts the transfiguration of Jesus. The event itself is remarkable; the main event which sticks in the mind. But its significance was enhanced by the before and after. Before, Jesus has told his disciples of his coming death. The transfiguration narrative is then introduced with the words "After six days...". There is time for the disciples to digest the meaning of what Jesus has told them. To discuss what it might mean. To grapple and to question. Then, only three are taken up the mountain. It is a special, invitation only experience. One they will want to recount to all their friends immediately. Yet Jesus instructs them to tell no one until after his resurrection. Peter, James and John must take time to reflect on the event and see it in the light of other events, before they can truly contend with what it might mean.

Working at LCI has been a large part of my formation journey towards ordained ministry. I have been changed and transformed by my involvement and engagement with events here, through planning and prayer for them, through participation in them, and through reflection on them. They are now part of my story.

*We'd love to hear how our events have been a part of your story. If you'd like to share your experience, please get in touch with us at [events@leedschurchinstitute.org](mailto:events@leedschurchinstitute.org)*



# HOOK LECTURE 2017

**Prof. Linda Woodhead**

Remembering the dead: changing public and private practices



Prof. Linda Woodhead explores the changing and various ways in which people make their lives and deaths meaningful, both individually and collectively, and by religious and non-religious means.

There will be time to explore what this means for us in Leeds.

**Tuesday 14th November**

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

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

Admission is FREE but by ticket only. To reserve one,  
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