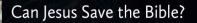
CITYtheology The magazine of the Leeds Church Institute

"In the context of the migration crisis, churches and other religious communities have often taken a lead in calling for and practising hospitality, and in re-telling stories of British identity that emphasise our responsibilities and connections beyond national borders."

Dr Rachel Muers, revisits the Parekh Report and asks what role churches can play in shaping British identity in the wake of the Brexit vote.



Revd Simon Hall talks Facebook and scripture, reminding us that Jesus is the Word of God.

Look at the stars. See their beauty. And in that beauty see...

An Advent reflection on a mother's pain #MyAdventChallenge: Hearing the voices of children and young people



Questions about cultural, racial and religious diversity in British public life seem to become more intense and urgent every year. They seemed urgent enough in 2000, when Bhikhu Parekh – the 2016-17 Hook Lecturer – was the chair of a commission that produced the landmark report The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain. Appearing in the wake of the Macpherson inquiry, the report asked searching questions about what British identity would look like in the new millennium. It held out a vision of a "confident and vibrant multicultural society at ease with its rich diversity." It also pointed to the stark realities of racism and discrimination, often very subtle and deeply embedded, that might prevent this vision from being realised. One of the key challenges it presented was for the white majority in Britain – and especially for those in positions of power – to rethink their identities, and the stories they told about themselves, in the light of the realities of a multi-ethnic Britain. It would not be enough either to talk about valuing diversity or to expect minority groups to become more like "us". There were critical questions to ask about how established British institutions and identities were helping to

maintain exclusion and division.

Among the institutions to which the Parekh Report put critical questions were religious institutions – and in particular the churches. The report noted how the history of British "civic nationalism" had been shaped by Christianity – and how the association between "Britishness" and Christianity had sometimes led to Christian identity being enlisted in support of racist policies. At a time when xenophobia is on the rise again, there seems to be an urgent challenge to the churches here.

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How can Britain's much-discussed "Christian heritage" be drawn on to create a culture of openness rather than of fear, and how do we avoid "Christianity" being co-opted for racist agendas?

The Parekh Report also picked up on the anti-racism work being done within churches (particularly Black majority churches) and other religious communities – and noted that all too often the connections between racism and religious discrimination were ignored, both by 'secular' anti-racist organisations and by the churches. Trying to improve interfaith relations without being aware of how racism affects them, or tackling racism without being aware of the role of religious identities and communities, are both likely to prove fruitless.

In fact, the report suggested, thinking better about how we relate to religious others could make an enormous difference to Britain's capacity to live with diversity in all its forms. What kind of picture, asks the report at a key turning point, do we hold of the religious "other"? Do we see the other as monolithic, closed to debate, separate from us, inferior to us? Or can we respect the other and recognise their internal diversity, openness to change, connections with us, shared goals and interests? Do we subject our criticisms of others to critical questioning? Are we sustaining our own sense of security and self-worth by running others down – and if so, how can we change?

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The Parekh Report put these questions to the whole of British society, but they carry particular weight within the churches. What does it really mean to love the neighbour? What risks might there be to my own sense of self? What virtues and what good habits might help to create a society in which disagreements do not turn into discrimination, exclusion and violence, and how can the churches help to foster these virtues and habits? The implications of these questions go far beyond interfaith relations. They might be equally relevant in situations of division within faith communities — or in a wider political climate that seems increasingly polarised and polarising.

Sixteen years after the Parekh Report, the headlines and some of the issues have changed. Laws against religious discrimination, recommended in the report, have been introduced – and have brought their own controversies in their wake. Questions about commonality and diversity – how to maintain a shared community and a shared story without creating more discrimination and exclusion – are still at the centre of British public life.

In the context of the migration crisis, churches and other religious communities have often taken a lead in calling for and practising hospitality, and in re-telling stories of British identity that emphasise our responsibilities and connections beyond national borders. British society, however, often seems to want to impose more and more stringent conditions on people seeking to move to Britain – forcing them to fit within our narrowly-defined idea of what a "good" migrant looks like. The rise of reported racist and xenophobic hate crime in the aftermath of the Brexit vote raises further disquieting issues about how successful Britain has ever been at living at ease with its rich diversity, and about what religious communities could offer towards making this vision a reality.

Bhikhu Parekh's Hook Lecture will be an opportunity to explore the challenges of community and diversity in Leeds and in Britain more generally, to ask some uncomfortable questions, and to explore the way forward with one of Britain's leading thinkers on

Hook Lecture: 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 or 0113 3917928 Tickets available online at www.LCILeeds.org/hook-2016/

multiculturalism.



I spend a lot of time debating on

Facebook. Probably not hours every day, but certainly minutes. Sometimes a lot of minutes. Now and then I can't help myself, even though I know it probably doesn't do any good. I don't always think I can change someone's mind, but it bothers me that people just can't seem to see the other side of the argument. And when you can't see the other side of the argument, you tend to assume that the person you're debating with is obstinate, or defensive, or stupid. Or maybe even evil. Think about Donald Trump supporters. Or people who voted differently to you on Brexit. The temptation to demonise those we disagree with (sometimes figuratively, sometimes literally) seems to be deep rooted in human nature, and religion has often colluded in that demonisation. In the spirit of Facebook I'm going to write an article that will probably make you want to argue with me, but hopefully not demonise me!

The longest running and most heated debate I've ever had on Facebook was about the Bible. It wasn't very pleasant, although I tried to be. A friend had vented in public about an issue concerning church politics and someone had weighed in with what 'The Word of God' had to say on the matter. I confess, that phrase really gets under my skin. Its use is normally a coded declaration that one has 'a high view' of the Bible, and yet it is very poor Bible reading, since John's gospel identifies Jesus as The Word of God. I responded to them, they responded to me; it got messy.

The longest running and most heated debate I've ever had on Facebook was about the Bible...I was surprised, but then not so surprised. After all, the Bible is central to Christian faith and so many of our disagreements turn out to be about how we read the Bible and what presuppositions we bring to it.

Sometimes Facebook deceives you into thinking you are having a chat with two or three people, but for months after that argument people mentioned to me that they had followed it right to the bitter end (which was a couple of weeks later). I was surprised, but then not so surprised. After all, the Bible is central to Christian faith and so many of our disagreements turn out to be about how we read the Bible and what presuppositions we bring to it. I meet so many people who are struggling to make sense of it. It seems as if modernity has

handed down to us two almost completely useless approaches to reading the Bible.

I say modernity handed us these views because, in very different ways, they both cede centre stage to a modern, 'scientific' worldview. Both agree that unless the Bible is a textbook then it doesn't have a lot to say to us. One group, traditionally called liberals, argue that the Bible is clearly not much use as a textbook, since its entire worldview has been superseded by science. They have spent over a hundred years raking through the scriptures, like a scavenger in a ruined city trying to find something of value. Their process, once called 'demythologisation', breaks up both the text and the Christian faith into smaller and smaller pieces, searching perhaps for 'the real Jesus', or just some small fragment of meaning. The results are often meagre pickings, and while the liberals always claimed that they were trying to make Christianity relevant, their churches are in rapid decline.

To my mind, worshipping the Bible as a heavenly textbook or dismantling it because it isn't are both increasingly untenable positions for a Christian to take.

The other group, often called evangelicals or fundamentalists, assert that the Bible is indeed a textbook of science, history, ethics and theology. Not just a textbook, but the textbook, all but written by God to tell us everything we need to know about everything. Sunday School teachers tell children that the Bible is 'The Haynes Manual for Life', but how many Haynes Manuals include a picaresque description of the creation of the car; lots of stories about people driving the car really badly; prophecies about how the car should be driven and how one day a perfect driver will come to show us how to drive properly; a rather lurid description of a loved-up couple having sex in the car; songs about how great the car's inventor is; laments that the inventor never shows up to car conventions any more; further storytelling about the perfect driver finally arriving: everyone conspiring to make him crash; then... You get the point.

To my mind, worshipping the Bible as a heavenly textbook or dismantling it because it isn't are both increasingly untenable positions for a Christian to take. There might be some short term gains from the certainty that each view gives us, but both can become deathly over time.

One question I rarely hear Jesus' followers asking is, 'How did Jesus read his Bible?' Surely this is where we should all start? When biblical scholars gather they will inevitably talk about 'hermeneutics', which is a rather academic way of saying that each of us brings stuff to the table when we engage with the Bible. My hermeneutic is a complicated array of feelings, prejudices, learning and faith, but probably the most important thing is that I admit what all this stuff is. The worst hermeneutic is the unacknowledged one. For example; I believe in God and that God raised Jesus from death; my politics are of the left and I lean towards pacifism; I come from a fairly chaotic family background but I still believe in marriage and family. All these things shape how I read the Bible just as much as my academic study of theology. The question of how Jesus read his Bible then becomes, 'What was Jesus' hermeneutic? What did he bring to the table?'

One question I rarely hear Jesus' followers asking is, 'How did Jesus read his Bible?' Surely this is where we should all start?

Fortunately for anyone wondering about this, LCI was visited by speaker, author and theologian Michael Hardin, who delivered a day seminar on this very topic. Obviously, the first thing that has to be said is that there was no Bible in Jesus' time. There were no books, only (very rare) scrolls located in the temple and in synagogues. Hardin went so far as to suggest that Jesus might have been illiterate, perhaps learning to recite the Torah and a few other scrolls the way that a young Muslim does today. So Jesus didn't have a Bible as such, just a number of individual scriptures and the traditions that had grown up around them. Parts of the Old Testament were already hundreds of years old and the question, 'how do we apply this ancient text in our contemporary world?' was one Jesus would have wrestled with throughout his life.

Some of things Hardin said were as plain as the nose on your face, but nonetheless shocking. When Jesus says, 'You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer...' (Matt 5:37f) he is explicitly overruling the teaching of the Torah. Just as Jesus sought to overturn the sacrificial system of the Temple, so he also overturned the ethic of retributive violence. This simple act surely invalidates for Christians any way of reading the scriptures that gives equal weight to the laws of the

Old Testament and the teachings of Jesus. It's okay to say the way of Jesus changes the way we see law because Jesus himself said it.

Obviously, the first thing that has to be said is that there was no Bible in Jesus' time. There were no books, only (very rare) scrolls located in the temple and in synagogues. Hardin went so far as to suggest that Jesus might have been illiterate, perhaps learning to recite the Torah and a few other scrolls the way that a young Muslim does today.

But Hardin went a lot further than that. Systematically, he went through Old Testament texts quoted by Jesus to show Jesus does the very thing a good evangelical is told not to do: he cuts out the violence, the retribution against enemies, and the sacrifice. Think about Jesus' big moment in Nazareth when he reads from Isaiah's classic jubilee text (see Isaiah 61: 1,2 and Luke 4: 14-30). Which part does Jesus omit? The part about God's vengeance. Is it possible the crowd wanted to lynch him because he was taking away acknowledgement of God's right to avenge, and perhaps, therefore, their right to revenge?

Most of us do this almost unconsciously, for example when we start reading the lament of Psalm 137 and skip over the psalmist's invocation of infanticide. But it is remarkable to realise that this is happening in the New Testament too. Perhaps our desire to turn away from the violence is actually a sign of the Holy Spirit working in us. Throughout the day Hardin suggested that Jesus was, in effect, 'saving' his followers from ideas of a vengeful god that kills entire populations that displease him and requires constant sacrifice to be placated. The day was exhilarating and disorienting in equal measure.

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Hardin is open and clear about his own hermeneutic: he has been captivated by the work of the French anthropologist, literary theorist and occasional theologian Rene Girard. Girard sees the world through very particular lenses, the contours of which I can't outline sufficiently well here, except to say that Girard believes that the scapegoating mechanism, by which individuals and whole communities avoid the

real conflicts of life by blaming someone else, is at the centre of ritual sacrifice in human communities all over the world. Sacrifice is about dealing with our own anger and violence rather than any god's anger over sin, for example. Jesus came to show that only forgiveness can really overcome the problems that scapegoating tries to solve. So, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus become the lens through which we read and interpret the rest of Scripture.

Is this 'Christocentric hermeneutic' really something new? Well, yes and no. The

Is this 'Christocentric hermeneutic' really something new? Well, yes and no. The American Old Testament scholar Peter Enns is trying to hold onto the belief that all Scripture is inspired by God by suggesting that all the so-called 'texts of terror' (that is, texts that narrate slavery, assassination, beheading or other heinous acts) are there because God wants us to see where we've come from without trying to copy the mistakes of our ancestors. This chimes with Rabbi Esther Hugenholtz, another visitor to LCI, who is mystified by the way some Christians treat all stories from the Old Testament as normative for life today. 'We treat them as what they are, stories about your crazy drunk uncle. No one thinks you should emulate your crazy drunk uncle just because you're related.'

It's Jesus who is the Word of God, not the Bible. Perhaps if we start with the Jesus we can discover together in the scriptures, we can learn to handle scripture as he did, recognising that in him, something has definitely changed, and nothing can be seen in the same light again, not even the Bible!



Look at the stars.

See their beauty.

And in that beauty see...

LCI member, **Pete Gillions**, looks to the stars for wisdom in our understanding of theology.

As city dwellers, our view of the night sky is poor, obscured by light pollution. The dimmed stars that we do see are often obscured in another way. Our culture's thick spectacles of scientific understanding can also dim their glory. We know something of how the stars were created, are held in space and move in their gravitationally determined paths. So, thinking that we understand may mean that we often see little else.

But a trip to the countryside, leaving the city's bright lights behind, can help us see the stars more clearly. Taking a moment to absorb the magnificence of the night sky in all its glory may help us see other things more clearly, especially if we allow ourselves to wonder.

For thousands of years people have seen the night sky through different eyes. For the Aborigine people the stars in the night sky carried meaning. The Yolngu tribe saw them as the campfires of their ancestors as they journeyed on, the dimmer stars being the ones who had begun their journey in far off times. Other tribes saw comets as the smoke of a celestial campfire. One tribe even saw in the stars clues as to where hen eggs might be found nearby. But common to all Aborigine tribes was the understanding that the glory of the heavens was

intrinsically connected to the earth.

The psalmist also recognised that:

'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands' (Psalm 19).

Throughout all ages, people have scoured the night sky searching it for signs that might reveal the future. To the scientists of the ancient world astronomy and astrology were equally valid areas of research. For example, Ptolemy, who is still remembered for his method of projecting the curved surface of the earth into two dimensional maps, studied both these areas. We might regard such notions as fanciful. But each Christmas as we recall 'Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod' we also remember the visitors from the east who came to Jerusalem. The ones who asked:

'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose & have come to worship him' (Matthew 2).

An inconvenient challenge to our modern world view and tidy theology.

As Christians, we also discover the glory of God through Hebrew history and, of course, the person of Jesus. The gospel record of his life, his example and teaching, his death and resurrection, speak to us vividly. The letters to the early churches address the thorny issue of how faith should be lived out. These are key sources of our theological understanding, our doctrines and creedal statements, but perhaps a little caution is needed.

As we look into the night sky we imaginatively associate clusters of bright stars into recognisable shapes (asterisms). The Plough, pictured at the top of this article, is perhaps the easiest to recognise. But, in truth, the Plough does not exist as such. It is simply a construction we have made from seven stars. The stars each exist independently, varying hugely in distance from the earth and in their relative size. However, from our standpoint on earth, they appear equal in brightness and size. Joining the dots to produce a plough is a helpful way for us to recognise and identify them. It is a helpful construction but must be seen as just that a construction, something we have devised. What exists is simply the stars, not the imaginative connection we make between them.

In a similar way, can we see our theological understanding, our doctrines and creedal statements as helpful constructions? As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote in his book Not in God's Name there is a rabbinical saying "that there are 'seventy faces' of scripture.... [and] living traditions constantly reinterpret their canonical texts" (page 218). In this way, how far do we regard biblical texts, creeds and doctrines as open to (re)interpretation?

Realising that the glory of the stars are diminished by the profusion of electric lights in our city does not mean that they cannot still draw us to wonder; to wonder about our God given world; to wonder about our own understanding of faith, the particular way we join up the dots; and to wonder at the mysterious pull of a gracious God that draws us into the loving orbit of The Father, The Son and the Holy Spirit.

Further, we may be drawn to wonder at what we, as those still following the Morning Star, should be doing in daily life and thought.

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An Advent Reflection on a Mother's Pain

Author David Rhodes tells a story that bridges the centuries.

The scene is familiar. A young woman is giving birth to a child. She and her people live in a land ruled by oppression and fear. A foreign invader has overrun their country. Everywhere there is injustice and suffering. But, despite that, this is a time of rejoicing. The baby born this day is healthy and it is a boy.

Many will rejoice that he was born. He is destined to be great in the land. He will give his life seeking freedom for those in captivity and bringing good news to the poor. He will be a person of true compassion, expressed in a powerful sharing in the suffering of the people.

The mother does not know this as she holds him in her arms. Like all mothers before her, she wonders what the future will bring for her child. She does not know yet that he will be a sign that many will reject, and that a sword will enter her own heart also.

Who is this baby boy? We might be talking about the Christ-child or that strange figure, John the Baptist. But the child born on 18th December nearly seventy years ago is neither, although he will bring to his own world a passion for justice and a love of humanity found in both these people.

The child's name is Stephen Biko. He was born into South Africa disfigured by the evil of apartheid, a beautiful country where greed had consigned the black population to slavery. Apartheid was a system of racial segregation created to legitimise cheap labour and to create fabulous wealth for the powerful white minority.

An intelligent boy, Steve Biko grew up in a poor family. Thanks to the hard work and dedication of his mother, Alice, he was able to go to college to study to be a doctor. But the family's hopes for his success in medicine were to be dashed. As the political situation worsened in the early seventies, Biko abandoned his medical studies to join the non-violent Black Consciousness movement in South Africa.

The story of his life is as turbulent as the story of the nation into which he was born. He became a key national figure in the struggle for justice and played a vital part in helping his own people to rediscover their traditions and values. He opposed the idea that all concessions must be handed down as an act of charity by the reluctant whites, like crumbs from the rich man's table. The black person was a noble part of creation, independently of any reference to white culture.

Although he was part of a non-violent movement, Biko inevitably fell foul of the white power elite and on 7th September 1977 he was arrested by the South African police. In police custody he was tortured and subjected to severe beatings. As a result he suffered massive head injuries.

Three days later he was put in the back of a police Land Rover and driven, naked, for 700 miles from Port Elizabeth to Pretoria. Twenty-four hours later, on 12th September 1977, he died from his injuries. He was 30 years old.

Steve Biko was not a saint but he was almost certainly a martyr: a witness giving his life for the possibility of hope in the bloody tragedy of his nation.

In his struggle for truth and humanity he developed a deep faith in God, but a profound hostility to what he saw as the cold and cruel religion of the immigrant colonial church. He rejected the distorted image of the Christ person presented by the white European culture, and yet in his own life lived out the love of God. A close friend, the holy and wise monk Aelred Stubbs, a man not given to sentimentality, said on one occasion that life in Biko's company was like the Kingdom of God.

Biko's life was dedicated, not to violence, but to truth and justice. He demanded recognition of the truth that the black person was a full and complete human being, and justice required that truth be lived out. He rejected the Western image of a passive God who allows injustice to go unchallenged; instead he believed in a God passionately concerned about the lives of the poor and oppressed.

When reflecting on Steve Biko's birth in poverty, his life of care and compassion for the oppressed, his humour and vitality as a human being, and his death at the hands of the police, I cannot help being struck by some important similarities with the story of Christ. It is important to learn from his life and it can also inspire us to think where we can see the Christ light shining against injustice in Leeds today.

This article was adapted from the chapter 'A Mother's Pain' in The Advent Adventure by David Rhodes, published by Triangle in 1998



What might you learn about the meaning of Christmas #2016?

LCI director, Helen Reid, challenges us to hear children's voices this Christmas.

Anne Richards, an advisor for mission theology in the Church of England, has written a great book on 'Children in the Bible'. It was shortlisted for the Michael Ramsey Prize. It didn't win, but it gets my vote for a book that makes you think again about God and children in the light of considered reflection on biblical texts.

In one key chapter, Anne Richards argues that God commissions children, and children speak prophetic words to their families, communities and wider society. God calls them as children, not to be precocious children aping adults but with their own age-related integrity. Too often in churches we love to hear from children because they are young and well meaning. We must remember, though, that they are commissioned by God and bring their own perspective – and that is why they are called.

Children's vocation is possible because God is with them...

God called Jeremiah when 'only a boy'. Although he feels unprepared, the point is that God is with him as he seeks to live out his call, and supports him in the tasks set before him when he struggles. This call narrative offers a partnership between prophetic vocation and God. It is not unfair to commission children and nor is it asking too much. There is a strong biblical precedent for it.

Children say things we find it hard to hear...

Consider the child Samuel called to service by God in the temple. He is given a hard message to pass on to his priestly mentor. Samuel has to tell Eli that because Eli has failed to stop his sons from breaking temple laws, they will be punished. How hard it must have been for Samuel. Eli already knows that he is allowing wrong things to happen. As a priest, he knows that God sees all things and that

he will be judged; but it is a child who is called to speak words of truth to him so that he cannot ignore them any longer.

Perhaps there are echoes of this role in the voices of children who speak out about abuse that they or others have suffered. They speak out knowing that a person who has power over them will be challenged. They speak out to ask for protection; they also speak prophetic words to the community. They call us to keep all children safe, to not overlook unsafe practices, and to not fail to see abuse because an individual has an important role in the community. They have a commission to seek their own salvation and the welfare of the community.

God's commission has to be seen in context...

David uses his child-like skills to defeat Goliath. If he had been given adult tools of war, such as armour or a sword, he would not have succeeded. As a shepherd boy, he already had all he needed to fulfil God's calling. God does not expect children to be capable of adult behaviour. In fact, God calls children because they are children. Children can blindside us and surprise us. If we impose adult rules, we can crush their calling and make them grow up too soon. We must trust them to be children and also find ways to build a kingdom fit for children where their prophetic voices are heard.

So if you are attending a nativity play, listening to children at a Gift Service, or as part of a project like Kidz Klub, be ready to hear what is really being said...

This article draws on Children in the Bible by Anne Richards and published by SPCK; and a discussion with the Leeds North and East Circuit Preachers Study Group.

#MyAdventChallenge?

During Advent we will be challenging young people to share a picture and thought through Twitter, Facebook or Instagram each day about what Christmas means to them.

Each day will have a theme. Some of these will be taken from the nativity story, some will be about how Christmas is celebrated, and some will be about the meaning of Christmas. Each day those taking part will take a picture and share it, tagging it with the hashtag #myadventchallenge and a short comment about what this aspect of Christmas means to them. Each day we will pick the funniest, the most creative or the most thought provoking picture as the Advent Challenge picture of the day.

As young people share their pictures and thoughts they will put together their own social media advent calendar and be enabled to think about and communicate their beliefs and traditions, while also learning about the beliefs and traditions of those around them.

This will also be a great opportunity for schools, church and youth groups to explore Christmas, how it is celebrated and what it means to different people.

Launch of the Leeds Christians in Education Network, October 2016

Report by Sam Purfield

When I found out about Leeds Christians in Education, I was excited about the prospect of meeting other Christians in my field of work. I had never heard of Revd. Kate Bottley before but was looking forward to meeting her and learning more about her.

Kate was brilliant! She was down to earth and a refreshing change from how church leaders are generally stereotyped. I appreciated her honesty and vulnerability about her family and how she chooses

to live her life. It was lovely to see how free she was in her faith. It encouraged me to seek God more deeply as her relationship with Jesus was an inspiration.

There's a link for a YouTube clip of Kate's presentation on the LCI blog site. If you are involved in education in Leeds, join us on 12th January for a meal and discussion at LCI. For more details, please email events@leedschurchinstitute.org



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