

Walton Month of Hope
A Faithful Presence
25th January 2016

I am not going to talk directly about the book. In some ways it is a product of T4CG. But in some ways it is also a testament of my own faith and tonight I want to paint in a bit of the background of how I came to the views expressed in it. It will take the form of a few snippets of learning experiences at various stages on my journey so far.

Snippet number 1: I was in my mid-teens when Trevor Huddleston published *Naught for Your Comfort*. Reading it and hearing him speak profoundly affected the development of my faith. It is the story of his work in the shanty towns of South Africa and his fight against the racism that was not only built into the structures of South African society but was upheld by at least some sections of the Church. He said:

‘Young Africa stands waiting, and his eyes are vigilant eyes. We have baptised him into the fellowship of Christ’s Church . . . We have taught him to say “Our Father” with us. We have placed upon his lips the Body of Christ and told him that it is a pledge and a proof of our communion with one another.’

And yet, Huddleston asked, when looking around their streets and their city, was there any reflection of that fellowship? And the answer at that time of course was no. What captured and stuck with me was the implication of all this beyond the context of South Africa. Trevor Huddleston was expounding a deeper truth about the social nature of our faith; the necessity of our relationship with God affecting not just our personal relationships but also our (small p) politics: the relationships we have that are embedded in our social and economic structures.

Snippet number 2: My first job after university was as a neighbourhood worker in Harold Hill, a housing estate near Romford that reminded me very much of Speke. This was in the mid-1960s. (No prize at the end for guessing my age) I lived and worshipped on the estate. My time there made me think about the significance of

place – not just the physical features but the way that places shape the stories of those that live and work in them and the way that they implicitly pose questions about what human community amounts to. I began to realise that, on the one hand, our places will intimately affect how we understand the gospel and that, on the other, forming our places should be a central task of our discipleship.

Snippet number 3: When I returned to Liverpool, someone I got to know was Margaret Simey, whom some of you will remember from her time as a County Councillor and as Chair of the Merseyside Police Authority and her battles with the then Chief Constable. Well into her nineties she could be seen striding round the city, tall and slender, ramrod straight and with a natural elegance. One of the many admirable things about her was that she remained angry about injustice all her life. She was not herself a church member, but when in the 1980s I asked her and Don May who had been Minister at the Methodist Centre on Princes Avenue to write about life in Granby in the 1960s, it was she who drew out some of the significance of the church's role. It was from her that I took the title of the book. She said '[T]he Church represented an enduring, faithful presence . . . so that the flux and uncertainty all around could be more bravely confronted . . . In effect', she said, 'the churches stood for an alternative way of life to that of the individualism and materialism which threatened our survival as a human society. Their efforts were often as futile as our own but I am convinced that merely to exist amongst us on those terms was a positive contribution . . . of greater importance than we, or perhaps they, realised.'

Snippet number 4: Some of you will remember *Faith in the City*, a landmark Church of England report produced in 1985 by a Commission set up by the then Archbishop of Canterbury to:

- look at the Church's life and mission in Urban Priority Areas,
- reflect on the challenge God might be making to Church and nation and
- make recommendations to appropriate bodies.

The Commission spent two years taking evidence and visiting different communities listening to local people. Their report raised questions about the impact of public

policies on urban priority areas but it also drew attention to aspects of church life that were seen as a recipe for alienation between the Church of England and people living in UPAs. The dual focus was important. 'Only when the church is serious about setting its own house in order can it call on the state to do justly and love mercy.'

After its publication, the Merseyside Church leaders asked a small ecumenical group to follow up locally the chapters on issues like urban policy, poverty and unemployment, housing, health, social care, education and law and order. What became evident was how much the report spoke to the concerns of many outside the churches – such as teachers or officers in housing or social service departments – who found it helped them to raise and ponder fundamental questions about their own professional spheres. It taught me that we shouldn't be too reticent or apologetic about the role of public theology. The task of theology in any age is to achieve the right tension between the biblical message and current ways of thinking, the universal and the particular. Beyond being an articulation of our faith, theology needs to read the signs of our times and enable a critique of current trends and policies. We can all be involved in this. And we are likely to find that this deeper reading of our times is likely to resonate with people who don't necessarily share our faith but who do share many of our values and concerns.

Snippet number 5: In the early 2000s, a survey conducted in North West England demonstrated the social and economic role of the churches. Its purpose was to explore the contribution made by faith communities to civil society in the region. It went to more than 2,300 faith communities across eight faith groups. The findings showed projects covering homelessness, racism, drug and alcohol abuse, health, skills development, art and music and environmental improvements and so on and that faith communities have thousands of volunteers active in community activities. Notably, there was a remarkable concentration of projects in the more disadvantaged areas. The survey quantified the activities and reach of faith groups in a way that provided compelling evidence of their contribution to other partners, such as health or local authorities.

If we did the survey again today, I suspect we would find that this work had expanded still further at least in some activities such as foodbanks, debt counselling

and housing justice because as benefits are cut, wages remain low and there is greater pressure on public services, people of faith – with others - respond to the very evident needs on their doorsteps. Not only that, but they start to ask the necessary awkward questions, for example, why do we tolerate food poverty in a wealthy country in the 21st century.

And we don't stick to our own little groups or denominations when we do this – which brings me to ecumenism:

Snippet number 6: I have long been involved in local ecumenical activity partly on committees, where there is a danger of just being a talking shop. I firmly believe that we still need to confront our differences and seek for unity. But we also need to draw strength from our common calling to live out our faith within the community. As Colin Marsh, the Ecumenical Officer in Birmingham puts it, it is in working together that 'you discover a unity that is practical and present in the here and now. It is a more realised unity.'

Snippet number 7: I mentioned earlier about the importance of listening in the preparation of *Faith in the City*. I've been a member of the ecumenical organisation CAP (Church Action on Poverty) since the mid-1980s. CAP was set up first to raise awareness about poverty in this country, second to explore poverty issues both practically and theologically; and third to acknowledge that politics is a proper sphere of involvement for Christians because public policies determine so much about the kind of society we have and the life chances of individuals. What became more and more central to the thinking in CAP was that speaking on behalf of those in poverty was not enough and often wholly inappropriate. After it is those who can speak from experience who are the real experts. What is needed for the rest of us is, yes to support and create opportunities for debate and influence but actually to move over, get out of the way so that they can bring insights born of first-hand knowledge.

In his book *No Future Without Forgiveness*, about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, Desmond Tutu distinguished between what he called 'forensic factual truth', 'social truth' and 'personal truth'. The forensic is the verifiable and countable – in our context an analysis of deprivation boiled down to trends and

statistics. Necessary of course, but not as telling as his other two categories. Social truth is 'the truth of experience that is established through interaction, discussion and debate'. But the most powerful of all is the personal truth – what he calls the 'truth of wounded memories'. It is only through having an arena in which this sort of truth can be heard that the divisions in society can be healed. It was this principle that led to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission but it applies more widely. I remember a CAP conference here in Liverpool when a group of delegates from Meadowell in North Tyneside spoke out. They wrote afterwards, "We came away feeling that in some way Meadowell had left a mark on Liverpool – that we had been given an opportunity to make an impression.". They felt released, unburdened by the experience – and others were struck and inspired by what they heard. A statistical report would be unlikely to convey such a powerful message.

Snippet number 8: My day job for twenty years up to retirement was evaluating urban regeneration schemes and neighbourhood renewal, looking at how organisations work, how communities organise and trying to assess the impact of different sorts of policy measures on people's lives. About twelve years ago I went on a study tour to China. Even whilst there, I wondered how much we were really comprehending, how far language was a bridge or a barrier, whether we sufficiently shared their world view to be able to understand properly what was being said or shown to us. Did our different assumptions, culture, background and experience prevent this? In a place where there was so much to amaze and mystify, these questions were very obvious, but it struck me that they were not essentially different from ones that face us more routinely when we are trying to appraise situations and understand other people and their actions and motivations. The visit made me question the way I reach conclusions and make judgements even – or especially - in more familiar surroundings.

You quickly learn in evaluation that there is no such thing as 'telling it as it is' either in what people say to you or how you construct your analysis. Being a detached observer requires putting multiple stories side by side and testing them against each other. However, there are always choices, conscious or not, about what you see and what you say. You are bound to empathise more with some people or perspectives than others. So, you need to know yourself and judge where you stand in relation to

the people and information you are dealing with. You need to be aware of your own natural leanings and prejudices and take into account how they might distort your views and affect your judgements. This was a professional issue for me, but I'm sure it also applies more generally in life.

In Liverpool, we have a long history of bad experiences with the media focusing on the downside. Whether purveyed through ancient tired jokes, soap operas or so-called sharp reporting in the quality press, it has often added up to the same thing in the end, a picture of somewhere alien that you would not want to invest in, move to, or bring up your children. Some of the tales recounted may contain some truth but are only half the story, or they may build upon stereotypes or perpetuate an image long out of date. Even on the 'inside' there is a danger of imparting slanted or partial stories. When we are seeking grant funding, for example, the temptation is to play up our neediness and play down our strengths. So we always have to ask: Which story do we tell? Who owns the story and who is doing the telling?

The present climate of austerity is an appropriate moment for revisiting our vision of what is a good city: what our city is and what it might be. Reaching that vision – a vision of the common good – means testing our policies and actions against the familiar 'social justice' questions: Who wins? Who loses? Who decides? The American academic, Richard Sennett, tells how St Isidore of Seville (around fourteen hundred years ago) traced the word 'city' to its different sources. One root is *urbs*, the stones of the city, laid for practical purposes like shelter and commerce. The other root is *civitas*, about the emotions, rituals and convictions that take shape in a city. The connections between these have to be remade in every age and in every sort of city. What these connections are now, and what they should be are questions at the heart of many of the issues we face. You can find them in ideas about 'community cohesion', 'liveable cities', 'sustainable communities'. They underlie dilemmas about how we revitalise flagging democratic structures.

The point of being a Christian is not to escape from our circumstances, whatever they may be, but to find God in them. The question that frames my book is: what does it mean for Christians and the Church to 'do justly and love mercy'? At one level the title of the book provides the answer: we have to be a faithful presence, as

individuals and as churches. But of course this still leaves open the challenge for each of us to determine precisely what that means for ourselves and our communities. Over to you.