CONTEXT AND COMMUNITY - EDITORIAL

Over the last few days, I have been re-reading Lesslie Newbigin's book, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship*. The book has prompted a memory of Newbigin's lectures decades ago, when I heard these huge themes opened up for the first time. The ideas were startling then and have now become foundational to our understanding of mission. They are well worth renewed attention. In the first chapter of *Proper Confidence* Lesslie reminds his readers of the ancient tension between Greek and Hebrew thought and points to the genius of the gospel writers who sought to engage the ancient world in a dialogue about the foundation of our understanding of the world in which we live. He describes 'a new arche'[1] which suggests that the logos, a term taken from Greek philosophical thought, had taken on flesh and had become an historical and knowable reality, or incarnation, in the person of Jesus Christ. Lesslie goes on to describe how this dialogue laid the foundation for the huge Christian influence on the culture of the west.

As Lesslie advances his argument he begins to describe the breakdown of that influence, beginning with

the impact of Artistotelian philosophy on Thomas Aquinas and working through the philosophy of Descartes and the Enlightenment and finally to the collapse of any certitude about knowing anything in our present time. It is a fascinating account and it portrays with great skill a fundamental dislocation within western culture.

That dislocation on big scale has functioned in an intense relationship with all kinds of other dislocations that western peoples are experiencing. The collapse of western colonialism has undermined ruling certainties about culture and civilization and has been accompanied by a disorienting rise of competing claims to cultural superiority over western thought. There have been changes in global economics. In the west we have become consumers rather than producers. A largely industrial landscape has been replaced by a "knowledge" economy with consequences for relatively unskilled workers. An "underclass" has emerged, and experience of work has become a rarity in particular communities. We have witnessed the growth of car ownership and of subsequent high mobility amongst those who are employed. That development has helped to fuel the growth of suburbs, fed initially by rail and tramways. The car has extended the city into a world where the convenience of the city is merged with ideal of the countryside in the suburban garden.

All of these developments have taken place against the backdrop of a growth in individualism and a collapse in social institutions of many kinds – family, marriage, community, political parties, trade unions, churches, the Boy Scouts, in fact most voluntary community organizations.[2] These developments represent many dislocations which are experienced in ways that cause individuals to inhabit very private worlds of meaning, unrelated to larger stories.

Sometimes the dramatic impact of these many dislocations are encapsulated in particular events, illustrations and anecdotes. Lesslie gives just such an illustrations when he details how within the space of 20 years he moved from being part of the confident western ruling class – he was a sahib in India- to participating in a European/American culture whose youth were begging on the streets of Indian cities searching for enlightenment because of lives, '…which had become empty of meaning, of purpose, and of hope'.[3]

The contents of this edition of the *Journal of Missional Practice* engage in the consequences of these dislocations in a variety of ways and seek a response which is beyond an illusory, authoritarian certainty. Paul Sparks and Tim Soerens and Dwight Friesen write about the way in which the breakdown in communities has caused a particular kind of dislocation where we have become separated from the context in which we live. They believe that the church can create a new kind of parish which can turn mere spaces where we live into places that carry significance. They claim, 'The parish is beginning to subvert what may be the two most fragmenting forces of our day. The first can be called the "myth of the individual" and the second "living above place."'

For this trio of writers, radical individualism causes a disconnection at a personal level – we no longer know our neighbours or experience our interdependence. We live "above place". Global economics have divided consumer from producer and many cause and effect relationships are concealed. The

consequences of my choices do not need to be confronted in the place where I live.

For Lord Glasman this experience of dislocation calls first for *discernment*. In his article he gives a very specific historical example of the church seeking to protect the public square for the good of all. In the light of that history, he makes explicit the consequences of the dislocation of the church from its role in public life. He says,

> *Or you could put it the other way and say that the church has ceased to be an active guardian of the public square. We have forgotten that in the city, the nature of having a public space is the existence of a Cathedral. So we have to break a very strong polarity and assert that there can be no development of a new politics on the basis of an aggressive secularism. We need to assert the absolute integrity of faith and the integrity of Christianity, to have a voice and to broker the peace of the public square.*

In describing the dislocation of faith from public debate, Lord Glasman also begins to describe a way of entering a new space. He begins to describe the vital place of imagination in constructing a different set of engagements.

He notes:

> *It is good to remember that all politics, and all public life is fundamentally an imaginative act. I do not mean it is about a fantasy world. Imagination is a grasp of the real and manifests itself, I believe, in labouring work, the very hard work of making that realhappen. It starts with the possibility of a shared imaginative space. What I believe to be central, is that the Christian imagination and the Christian tradition will play a key role, because of all the traditions, it puts relationships, reciprocity and the idea of the human person at the centre. These values have been lost in our secular culture. But Catholic social thought has retained them and been an endless inspiration to me.*

Moving from our two key note contributions to the various articles, we see how the other two themes that Lord Glasman works with – *forming* and *joining*, become important as practical expressions which create alternatives to the various dislocations that we are currently experiencing.

Jamie Wilson deals with the theme of hospitality in a moving way, because in this case he is not in the familiar place of offering hospitality but receiving it from those with whom he is not familiar. As Jamie tells it, as he learns to receive hospitality from the stranger, he discovers that God is in fact the host. He is experiencing his own vulnerability and the generosity of others. In so doing he explains the crucial importance of never seeing hospitality as a tool, an evangelistic programme. That is to fatally undermine the creative possibility of the gift of table, of food, of conversation and of friendship, and the forming of a new imagination of God active in the places

where we live.

Matt Wilson describes his journey with the mission organization Eden and how he learnt about the reality and importance of proximity in mission. He describes two kinds of proximity – physical and relational, and in doing so echoes Maurice Glasman's words about joining. We are not just living amongst others, we are doing so in a committed set of relationships. That is how community is formed.

Emma Randall writes in a very practical way about what joining neighbourhood feels like. She describes the 'borderlands' or places of vulnerability where nothing is certain and much is to be discerned among diverse relationships.

The reflection/ pieces contain a series of stories which again all give practical examples of how discerning, forming, joining and imagining what connectedness, hospitality, welcome, and community might begin to look like without doing so in any proscriptive manner. These are legitimately stories, some written as reflections, one as a conversation, and one told in a video sequence.

Stories such as these are important because they all connect us with a bigger story, a journey of faith. That story, as Lesslie Newbigin reminds us, is still unfolding. So, we might have convictions on which our life rests but we do not have certainty that flows from ideas, from principles, from sets of laws governing the universe. We do experience dislocation. To quote Lesslie once more, 'But if we find ultimate truth in a story that has not yet been finished, we do not have that kind of certainty. The certainty we have rests on the faithfulness of the one whose story it is. We walk by faith.'[4]

I am grateful for that reminder. In seeking to grapple with the dislocated nature of our world, it is all too easy to seek an easy fundamentalism, either religious or secular, but the challenge ahead of us is too important for us to do that. It is not time to construct elaborate new frameworks and solutions either for the church or for the public square. But it is time to engage in bold new experiments to begin to imagine ways of living, of connecting. To experiment in this way is not to pretend that we yet have answers. This kind of experimentation is always provisional, always listening to the responses of others, careful to discern what God might be doing and saying, attentive to contributions from other walks of life.

In his last years of life, Lesslie Newbigin became very fond of the writings of Michael Polanyi – the Polish scientist. In particular he noted the observations of Polanyi that science, as with all disciplines, work within particular traditions and cannot function without them. The commitment to a particular tradition, and in the case of the Christian community, a living tradition with a commitment to a rhythm of life, lived with others is vital to the creation of a meaningful future.

[1]Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt and Certainty in Christian Discipleship*, (Eerdmans, 1995), 6. 'A new arche' could be said to be an overarching framework for interpreting reality.

[2]For a description of this development, see Ulrich Beck*, Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, (London: Sage, 1992.)

[3]Lesslie Newbigin, Op. cit., 34.

[4]Ibid., 14.

Martin Robinson

Martin is the Principal of Formission College. He is a church planter who is passionately committed to the exploration of what it means to be a missionary in post secular Europe. He is one of the lead editors of this journal.

Martin on Twitter

Martin on Amazon.UK