



DISCOVERING EVESHAM

I visited Evesham in 2009 for the Northumbria Community Easter Workshop. Easter Workshop is an annual event, but normally centred on the Community's mother house in Northumberland. But this year I, with around fifty other Community people, dined in church halls, stayed with strangers, met council leaders and received the hospitality of the town. However I did not understand the significance of all that I experienced until I had the opportunity to talk it through with Sarah Pillar some years later. This is an account of our conversation.

Sarah is a leader in the Northumbria Community, a new monastic movement dispersed around the world, which takes inspiration from the Celtic Christian history of Europe. Roy Searle and his son Joshua have recently written about the missional significance of Community practices.¹ In my conversation with Sarah we begin with her move from London to Evesham, and her discovery that God had been at work in the place before her, before her church, in all the long years of Evesham's history.

Life in Evesham must have been very different to life in London?

Yes. We'd been working at an inner city school- part of a really innovative church plant- looking for ways to connect with people in all their cultures. We had all sorts of cultures: Urdu speaking, Pakistani people, Indonesian. The make up of the school was such that you'd have only two or three white children in each class. And we were aiming at that cultural mix. When Ed [Sarah's husband and a Baptist minister] had the opportunity to move to Evesham, we came to a very white traditional town in the centre of England that hadn't really been touched by other cultures in any way.

That must have been quite a culture shock for you?

It was! I think that's part of why I began walking around thinking 'well what is the identity here?' Our

daughter was a baby and I was spending a lot of time walking the streets, pushing the pram, desperately trying to get Zoe to sleep. I remember one Wednesday walking down the streets and hearing the bell ringers practice from the bell tower at Evesham. I hadn't really had an experience of Anglican churches because I come from a nonconformist tradition, so that was a beginning. This is really the start of the story.

So what happened?

It was almost at the crossing, I can show you where. The question came to me 'Why have we only got a bell tower in Evesham? Why haven't we got a big church, why haven't we got an abbey like Tewksbury and Pershore and Malvern?' Why have we just got this structure? And what are the bell ringers ringing for and what are they calling for?' From that point on began my research as to what the culture, the influence, was here. I'd recently heard Roy Searle from the Northumbria Community speak about contemplative life. He spoke about seeking Christ and the history of the nation- and even though I'd studied church history at Theology College, it had all been about Tertullian and others- it hadn't been very English. So I began to unearth not just the story of Evesham but also, with the help of the Northumbria Community, our English heritage.



Presumably the story of Evesham Abbey started to unfold?

There was an article written about it in a local glossy magazine. I had already been into the Almonry Museum in town and seen this beautiful model of what the Abbey used to be and this picture was being developed in my mind. Trevor, another leader in the Northumbria Community encouraged me. He said 'just take a few footsteps- see if you can speak to the woman who wrote the article.' So all sorts of little interweaving connections came from rediscovering the significance of the Abbey. People were beginning to write about it and draw pictures of what the Abbey looked like. I met with one of these writers, a woman called Maureen, this woman who said she was up all night reading the chronicles of Evesham Abbey. She wasn't a woman who gave an impression of having faith but just couldn't put down these stories. We really connected over the Abbey. And I was also interested in what community looks like now- how a monastic community may work and how we connect as churches. So blagging my way into the Almonry Museum, there I was getting the old books out and sitting and researching, a tiny little spark of just what does it mean for us to follow Jesus *here* began to grow.

This must have connected with your discovery of the Northumbria Community, and our Celtic history?

Yes. I think I was desperate for some kind of Celtic credentials for Evesham. Why was I part of the Northumbria Community and living in Evesham? That was a big question for us both. Sitting here in this beautiful manse and wondering why were we called here? Then blow me down, I stumbled upon a

connection from the 11th century. Aldwin, prior of Winchcombe nearby, and two Evesham monks had been called to travel north to refound the monasteries of Northumbria.^[3] It was a kindling into flame for me and that's the phrase used about Aldwin too- that he was inflamed with a passion to visit the monasteries of the north. Our town loves its bell tower, and remembers its Abbey, but this is a story of transition, and this is a story of God's calling, and the monks' experience of meeting Jesus.

So this monk, Aldwin of Winchcombe, became a model for you- you felt you were following in his footsteps?

Yes- there's Aldwin, who was inspired by stories of the past,^[4] clearing the brambles off the monastery floor and re-thatching the place, and then many were drawn to Christ. And centuries later I have stumbled upon these histories and been inspired. I'm looking at the foundations of Evesham Abbey and they're covered with bramble. I'm thinking: it's the same story, of seeking God, authentic vocation, and through that people are drawn to Christ. Suddenly my hope of authentically being myself in Evesham is a possibility, and there's potential of this history inspiring the people around me.

Is that what happened?

I did a timeline of the impact of the story. The leaders of the Baptist church were the first. Ed felt that the story of the Abbey monastery could be sustaining for the Baptist church: values of hospitality and inclusivity and seeking God as the one thing necessary. He invited Martin Robinson to come to fan these ideas into flame. It was encouraging inviting people to lift their eyes up. You can see the Abbey tower is almost two times again the height of the bell tower that remains. We were slowly able to give people a vision of what the town was and, with a prophetic imagination, what it is to God. It would have been the third or fourth most important abbey of its time. 'Really really? That's who we are? We didn't know.'

Did the story impact people outside the Baptist church?

Yes. Quite early on I'd observed the impact of the Abbey history for people like Maureen. I started to wonder if the Northumbria Community could have a role. After all 3 monks from Evesham had restored the Northumbrian monasteries and *their* founding stories. In my mind it was well conceived for the Northumbria Community to come to our town and give us *our* story back. Then I began to get very excited when I realised that an anniversary of the founding of the abbey was approaching, the 1300 year anniversary!

Did others in Evesham share your excitement about this anniversary?

The place one would anticipate to be most connected is the parish church next door to the bell tower, who maintain it beautifully, and keep the carillon bells going, which for me had become a call to prayer. I did speak to the vicar at the time and I was directed to the church warden. He was quite serious. 'Yes we have begun thinking about how we might celebrate this.' But underneath there was a sense of 'There, there, you strange Baptist lady who's slightly freaky. There's a process of being Anglican and it's very British and I'll get in touch with you.'

Then we heard that the vicar was moving on and at that point I began praying for the new vicar, who turned out to be Andrew, the man I now know and love as a friend, that the new man would catch the story.

So it was quite a moment when you first told him then?

Ed went over to introduce himself to the new vicar and invited him to lunch and, oh I was so excited, so excited, and he comes into the kitchen and some other clergy were there. I just couldn't wait. 'Andrew it's lovely to meet you. My name's Sarah. By the way....'

And he went with it?

He trusted in me. And as he left after lunch I remember saying to Ed : 'If he does nothing else, I'm not sure what the technical term is, but I am undone. I have put my load down; I have put my burden down.' But Andrew took it and was inspired by it. He allowed me then to tell the story to many others.

Who? Who did you tell your story too? Did they listen?

Oh we got involved with the plans for the Evesham river festival. The market town planners wanted to make an event of the 1300 year anniversary and invited us to their meetings. And we talked to teachers. But the biggest snapshot of impact would be the Northumbria Community *Easter Workshop*- in 2009. The Community arrived 'in force', hugely swelled the numbers at Easter events and got people's attention. The story brought together different communities, and over that Easter weekend made one community. The Northumbria Community was invited to speak to various groups.

Yes I can remember the Northumbria Community helping town's people put together their timeline?

We had an event in the town, in the parish church, to talk about our history. That gave a voice to people who'd been hurt by changes in Evesham's market garden businesses.^[5] The person who facilitated that, Catherine Askew, was quite intentional in pointing to the Stations of the Cross. They were very visible as it was Good Friday and that story meshed its way into the Evesham story. She invited honesty about signs of grace and times of pain, you know, engaging with people's brokenness.

People still talk about when two women stood up and spoke. One woman worked on the railways when the market gardens were at their height, she used to see thirty to forty trains leaving Evesham with fresh produce every day. And that railway line is no more, it was literally ripped up and all we have is a cutting for it. And another woman shared the painful changes that she had seen. Generations of her family had depended upon their land and in her lifetime they were selling that land and their family home! They were having to find another way to put bread on the table. You could tell it was deeply painful for her. Catherine captured them up on the timeline at the front. But right at the beginning of her timeline were the origins of Evesham in a vision and an Abbey.^[6] Presenting this long history gave

everyone a sense of pilgrimage- individually and corporately. In the middle of it all was the living example of the Northumbria Community- an intentional monastic community- which created lots of questions.

This must all have had an impact on the confidence of the town churches?



Yes and that's ongoing. Ed and Andrew are continuing to use this history to help people connect with the value of our heritage- and its vulnerability. Andrew picked up afterwards on the importance of the grieving too, that the grieving for what was lost must come before the new can be embraced. He saw it positively, as a key part of a transition his congregation was experiencing. He hoped they would see that things could change again and maybe the broken could be rebuilt.

Some of the town's evangelical churches have been less willing to get involved. But recently I've heard of a new senior Salvation Army officer who's been praying, and she's stumbled across the story of the Abbey, and two years after the main event she's now going 'This is huge. I've been praying about it and I've had a vision of the Abbey, what the Abbey looks like.' And I'm quite relieved it's not me! Through her it's now impacting the very evangelical churches. They've been swept along by the story now.

So searching out the identity of this place helped you to get a better sense of your own identity?

As a non-conformist I'd felt I was an appendix on the book of Acts and that 2000 years of church history had never happened. Then suddenly I'm allowed to be a 'brummy' of Birmingham. It matters that I'm a Christian in England, in a land which used to be called Mercia. That seems to have an influence in placing our story in postmodern society now. The place matters. That's incarnational theology. We live in a time and a place just as Christ did and does.

The Baptist church is located in Cowl Street. That was one of the jigsaw pieces for me: 'Why is it called Cowl Street?' It's because the monks would put their cowls on to walk along this road from their Abbey cloister to the vegetable gardens. These gardens are just where an ex-council estate has been built, where we as a Baptist church have been living and working, supporting families. Now that work is overlaid with the history of the monks and their work around the Abbey grounds.

So right back to where we started, when leaving London I knew that the way to connect was through people's cultures. Coming here it's given back to me my own culture. So therefore if you transplanted me back into London I would have a different way of being authentically a white middle class woman. I don't pretend to be culture-less anymore. I can welcome you into my culture now. And I'm free to listen to your story too. Which is different to when we were in London. We didn't know our story then.

Personal Postscript by Sarah Pillar:

'In years to come we want to make some panels of transitional times in Evesham's story in a way that brings God's question into our history.'

Andrew Spurr, vicar of the parish church, reflecting three months after the Easter events of 2009

My hope is that we can continue to hold a place where the better known stories of the abbey and the rarely voiced yet compelling stories of our lives, with their honest times of pain and lament, can be written together in a way which inspires other generations that will follow us. Evesham remains a place of incarnation, of Christ being present with us, he who is unafraid of each human emotion. The broken ruins of the abbey mean there'll always be a paradoxical twist to the phrase 'Behold the place I have chosen'. Yet here is the very encouragement for the churches in town: we can be at our best hospitably when we are honest about our own vulnerability and brokenness. And in that light, I find it heartening that the churches of Evesham now have a healthier respect for each others' gifting than maybe 10 years ago. Latterly our gifts are seen to be for the good of this area and we don't have to replicate one another.

The principle behind the timeline exercise on Good Friday 2009 remains a good one: allowing the 'visitor' to reflect back to the town *'this is how I see your heart, your life experience, in its whole context'* and with that insight, we are **given our story back**. That may be why the Three Monks Story is so affecting: they responded to what they had heard God had done in places far off in the past, they travelled and as 'visitors' in a time of desolation and identity-crisis, gave the people of the north their forgotten stories back. They repaired the broken altars and then set to work rebuilding the houses and communities around them. We have been given part of our story back and appear to be finding ways to begin rebuilding and shaping this community of Evesham today.

We always have before us the opportunity to reframe our personal stories or the evolving story in a particular time/season we corporately live through. In this place, Evesham, we have the redemptive story that this will always be 'the place of God's choosing', where God is with us. Place and story become interdependent here, for each one needs the other to give a tangible experience. My clearest way to express it is to use an older word: *'tryst'*. God has given to us here in Evesham *a loving tryst*: a place and a time to meet with him, particularly meeting him in our need. It echoes Jesus' promise about where two or three are gathering and he being right there in the thick of it with them. Evesham's story of this tryst with God may potentially become inspirational for others to seek God in the very particular places where they live and serve.

My prayer is that others who don't yet know Jesus might see signposts here in Evesham to the Healing tryst; the Restorative tryst;

the Forgiving tryst; the Loving tryst

and truly meet Him.

(Photographer: Dave McNicholls.)

^[1]Joshua T Searle and Roy Searle. "Monastic practices and the mission Dei: towards a socially-transformative understanding of missional practice from the perspective of the Northumbria Community," *J Missional Practice*, Autumn 2013.

www.themissionalnetwork.com/index.php/joshua-t-searle-and-roy-searle

^[2]These are all English Midlands towns that are dominated by a historic abbey.

^[3]Following the Norman Conquest and the destruction of crops, land and homes in the North of England (the harrowing of the North) three monks from Evesham, Aldwin, Reinfrid and Elfwy, begin their *peregrinatio*, pilgrimage and penance, travelling North together in their small community. Within 20 years they and their disciples had re-established monastic communities in Jarrow (1074), Tynemouth (c. 1077), Whitby-Hackness (1079/1095), Wearmouth (1078/9), Lastingham (1079/80), York (1086), Durham (1093) and Lindisfarne (1093).

^[4]400 years earlier these monasteries had been planted within the Celtic Christian tradition. They had long fallen into ruin, but their stories had been preserved by Bede, and had caught the imagination of Aldwin of Winchcombe.

^[5]These small scale producers of fruit and vegetables were not able to compete as the sector became commercialized in the late 20th century. Generations of school children were no longer able to follow their fathers into the orchards. Many family businesses were challenged to diversify or face unemployment.

^[6]In the early eighth century, following a vision of Mary given first to Eof (Eof's home - Evesham) and upon the words, 'Behold the place I have chosen', Evesham Abbey is built and consecrated.



Sarah Pillar

Sarah Pillar serves within the leadership network of the Northumbria Community. She is married to Edward, who is a Baptist Minister, and they have been in ministry together in Evesham for 19 years. Prior to this they served in an inner city area of social, multicultural and economic diversity in south east London. Sarah and Edward have two children. Sarah has a BD from Spurgeon's College.