

4. Visions of the City

4.1 An 'Official' View of Culture and its Place within Urban Renewal

Paul Collard led the Newcastle-Gateshead bid for the European Capital of Culture 2008. He is now National Director of Creative Partnerships which builds relationships between schools, arts and the cultural sector to raise aspirations and skills amongst children preparing for a future in an economy increasingly driven by culture and rooted in creativity.

Paul Collard started his keynote address by referring to the year 1996, which was the Year of Visual Arts in Newcastle. In the 1980s, he had written a paper on the role of arts in regeneration, which stressed that arts-led regeneration would only work if it was deeply rooted and owned by local communities. In 1987 UDCs (Urban Development Corporations) were introduced as instruments of urban regeneration – a tier of market-dominated governance that disempowered local people. One of the outcomes of his earlier paper was to say to people in Newcastle in 1996, 'It's your year – you're going to do it'.

4.1.1 Angel of the North

Out of the programme of local communal gatherings during the early 1990s to discuss what might be an appropriate public arts programme, the vision for The Angel of the North emerged. This proved to be a controversial commission for Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council. The surface arguments were about costs and whether or not public money for arts projects would be better spent on hospitals and schools. However, in his opinion, the underlying argument was really about 'do we in the North East have the capacity to change in the twenty first century?' Local papers ran headlines such as 'Nazi but Nice' and 'Stop the Angel'. But despite the history of the area, local people stayed calm. The Angel of the North was built in a shipyard in Hartlepool and was driven through to Gateshead, cheered by thousands as it made its way to its final destination on a cold February night, because the people thought that change was possible.

Paul stressed that cultural regeneration should bring about changes to the spirit – if you forget that it's about the people you miss the point. Yes, there is the need for external manipulation of the environment in which people live, but it is the inside change that is significant.

4.1.2 Case Study – International Festival of New Haven, USA 1998

Paul was the Director of the New Haven Festival which ran from 1998 – 2002. The Festival had to demonstrate impact on the way that people thought about New Haven, especially in relation to issues of crime. It had to change people's impression against their instincts. This it did, but at the price of a caveat: successful economic regeneration has tended to perpetuate the false conception that things are better for all.

4.1.3 Richard Florida and the Creative Economy

Paul then went on to discuss the implications of American sociologist Richard Florida's thesis about the creative economy and the creative class. What is the creative economy? It is 'an economy based on creativity, innovation, intellectual property and uniqueness of place'. It seeks to create a close correlation between a sense of space, place and culture; e.g. art, digital media, sciences (technology and manufacturing) and the sectors that resource these innovations.

Richard Florida has described the link between a strong economy and the rise of the creative class and their impact on city environments. What Florida did was to look at creative cities and identify common factors. Typically creative cities have:

- better cultural infrastructure, theatres etc. more artists, musicians and writers
- better nightlife
- higher concentrations of gay people
- immigration
- ethnic diversity.

Florida suggests that creative people are a bit 'odd' – they don't like to be challenged, therefore they congregate in places where they will be tolerated in an atmosphere that makes people comfortable (e.g. early twentieth century Paris). Cities of the 'golden ages' appear to combine these elements; they were cities of High Culture (Athens, New York, Florence throughout the ages) - cosmopolitan, home to recent immigrations and creative outsider-groups, bases for creative and cultural industries, new expressions of art and technology, multi-media and a magnet for the immigration of talent.

4.1.4 Government and Education

However, the creative energy identified above has not always reached down to local communities. Paul was recently at a conference on the role of culture in education. In 1998, a similar conference he attended took it for granted that continuous learning was the key to community development. Continuous learning is the kind of learning that is most suited to the most difficult communities, because creativity is the most relevant resource that they have. However (at this most recent conference) the issue of creativity was not based at the heart of the education process. Why don't these two agendas come together?

Government used to be 'omnipresent' – it had a huge portfolio of diverse responsibilities. Now all that is left to its responsibility is health and education, both of which agendas have the most impact on the poorest communities. The current structure of education is rooted in the eighteenth century Rationalist and Enlightenment tradition, which was the same era as the nation state:

Curriculum 2005:

- English
- Maths
- History
- Geography
- Science
- Foreign Language
- Art and Design
- Music

1902

- English
- Maths
- History
- Geography
- Science
- Foreign Languages
- Drawing

1750

- English
- Maths
- Geography
- Science
- Latin

- Greek
- Drawing and Fortification

All the above represent a mindset based on testing and ‘filling you up’. We have pursued the same education strategy for 200 years, yet 60% of school leavers in this generation will do jobs that have not yet been invented within a more diverse and multicultural society. In Paul’s opinion, the immediate repercussion of this trend is we must learn other people’s languages: 90% learn French, but will this make us more tolerant and capable of adapting to diversity and tapping into the importance of creative learning for the development of strong local cultures?

4.2 Liverpool: The Lived Experience of Culture

Barbara Glasson and John Bradbury, both urban practitioners in the centre of Liverpool take a walk through the city centre and give a grassroots perspective on the impact of cultural change.

JOHN: Our interest is the people of the city as they are in the city centre. We are practitioners – ‘local theologians’, maybe one could put it. Our interest is not in culture *per se*, but rather in the lived experience of Liverpool, a place others have named as Capital of Culture, and its experiences of people, places and stories. Culture is not, believe it or not, a word that most Scousers might use, other than in the context of the term ‘Capital of Culture’. Our culture is not one in which we tend to talk about culture – so to speak. We are ordained Methodist and United Reformed Church ministers, who have been sent and called to work together in the city centre. The city centre is Barbara’s primary place of being. For me, my ministry roots itself both in the city centre, and within the inner-city. Barbara’s ministry expresses itself within the context of an emerging church that gathers around the baking of bread, an ecclesial community that draws to itself the range of people that the city centre itself attracts. I have joined this community more recently, as a wandering minister within the city centre with no congregation or building and in need of a home. My other home being a church with a building in the Edge Hill area, an area set for massive demolition and so-called regeneration, in which we wait to see whether or not the compulsory purchase order on our building will be enacted. Somewhat to my embarrassment, the home in which I live, is a little further out, as the inner-city just begins to give way to the suburbs, in a place where they build houses that meet manse requirements....

As we are wont to do, and particularly in preparation for this talk, Barbara and I have spent a considerable time wandering the streets of Liverpool, musing on the relationship between culture and the life of the city. It is the result of some of those musings we would like to share with you today as we invite you to join us in our wanderings around the city. As such, we have left aside some of our academic tendencies to draw neat conclusions, and rather wish to share impressions, and questions. As priestly ministers, not social workers or developers or anthropologists, we reflect theologically, and as we do so, we have taken two biblical texts that are close to our hearts, and seek to allow them to converse with us and enlighten our context.

Pier Head

BARBARA: Over the past 6 years of wandering and listening to the city I have been struck by the analogy between the city centre and a well. And the passage of scripture that resonates most with me as I muse on a life of wandering and encounter is the meeting of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well.

Why do I think of the city as a well? First, because I see the city centre as a place to which people come for what they need, for refreshment, for company, for new life. And a place from which they leave with expectation and trepidation. It is fluid – people come and go, it is not a place of capture, it is a place of movement. I am reminded of this as I stand at what Liverpool people call, 'The Pier Head'. To the outsider it is an empty expanse of land between the Liver buildings and the river estuary. But in the history of Liverpool it is the emotive point of arrivals and departures that has marked the history of immigration and emigration; from the slave ships arriving with human, textile and sugar cargoes to the Cunarders setting sail on world tours, the Pier Head has been a place of new lives beginning. A place of abject poverty as the hungry fled the potato blights of Ireland and a place of riches as the ship owners dispatched their cargoes. Our history is about migration. Diaspora in, and out again. The city is an organic thing. We meet the conjunction of people, place and story – and the Pier Head embodies something particular only to Liverpool's people, place and story.

Let me illustrate this in the life of my immediate family. My husband's grandparents arrived at the Pier Head from Ireland at the end of the last century to set up in trade in Mossley Hill. In turn David and his brother set sail as radio officers from the Canada Dock to take the Queen Mary on a world cruise, a banana boat up the coast of South America and a Shell oil tanker to and from the Middle East. My son, now 18, has just started his first job on the Dock Road, no longer in shipping but in a graphics firm that finds the buildings cheap to rent but accessible to the city centre. Along the road that used to carry the overhead railway, he flits to and from town on a road that still has no traffic lights.

So, for generations the Pier Head has been a landmark for those who arrive and leave Liverpool. And because our city is a semicircle with the other 'half' of a conventional city being across the water on Wirral, the city centre is peculiar in its proximity to the river and to the edge. This geography is a physical dimension to the life of the city – the ebb and flow of the river and the influx and outflow of the human population.

At the Pier Head we first see the dynamic of person, place and story by which we begin to understand the cultures of Liverpool. Just like in the story of the woman at the well, the physical environment shapes the places of encounter. The Jews and the Samaritans were literally mountains apart and yet, in the human ebb and flow, in their need for water, nourishment, survival, they found the well, as we find the city, the place to meet, talk, engage, learn and leave.

JOHN: 'The world in one city' the banners proclaim. The European Capital of Culture might project the image of the world in a city – but Liverpool is not, according to the urban theorists, a global city.¹ Rather, it is but a mere regional one. Perhaps it once was – controlling as it did one-third of the export trade and one fourth of the import trade of the whole of the UK and owning one seventh of all of the shipping in the world.² Liverpool finds itself, perhaps, lodged between the global, and the local. Liverpool 'culture' – and perhaps we might take the definition that Timothy Gorringer offers us³: 'the web of significance we spin for ourselves' is indeed caught between the global and the local – in, at times, a tense fashion, and at times an undifferentiable one.

¹ Ronaldo Munck, 'Introduction: The City, Globalisation and Social Transformation', in Ronaldo Munck, ed., *Reinventing the City: Liverpool in Comparative Perspective* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), p. 1

² John Belchem, *Merseypride: Essays in Liverpool Exceptionalism* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), p. 15

³ Timothy J Gorringer, *Furthering Humanity: A Theology of Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p. 1

The story of the tower of Babel offers us perhaps some sort of insight into this predicament. If we take the view that language and culture are essentially related, we begin to see a divine decision for a plurality of cultures. Language and culture become particularly enmeshed in Liverpool, where the Scouse accent betokens a sense of identity and belonging. Here at the Pier Head we see something of the origins of that – as Liverpool has been a classic melting pot – the Irish and Welsh inflections, capped with a slight transatlantic tone bring us what we know today as Scouse. John Belchem points out the relative late development of the accent, not until the late 1880's do phonetic studies point out the differences between the general South Lancashire speech and that of Liverpool.⁴ 'As an accent (and much more), Scouse is a recently invented tradition, a cultural response to the city's decline', Belchem states, drawing on various reasons for this, including the rise of the famous self-denigrating Scouse comedian.⁵

The Pier Head has seen the arrival of those who have made the Scouse accent what it is. It has also seen the arrival of those settled cultures that have ended up thrown together in Liverpool, having some of the oldest and best-established Black communities, Chinese Communities and Jewish communities. These folk, their art and architecture make great pictures on hoardings hiding the building sites – and are rich and fertile ground for the Culture Company to draw on..... images of the city's culture hiding the destruction and re-embodiment of the same. God's choice for diversity of language and culture Liverpool knows well. It might even be fair to say, that as a city, it has survived its constant life of change by drawing so heavily on those diverse cultures: be it Chinese, Irish Catholic, Welsh Presbyterian, Jewish or black African, most (well, perhaps not the Welsh!) have arrived through the docks we can still see. What place, though, does that diversity have in the new global order – seen in the new developments emerging across the city centre?

MetQuarter

BARBARA: The old post office in the middle of town has been a building site for at least the last ten years. In fact there are few people who can even remember it ever having been a post office. The successful City of Culture bid has caused a rush of redevelopment that is not really related to City of Culture status. It has signalled that the time is right for the developers who have held onto derelict property for years to make a move. Within the last year the MetQuarter has appeared on the site of the Old Post Office. The development has brought glitz and designer wear to an enclosed shopping precinct. John and I were particularly struck by some large, long red couches that flank the entrance to the Met Quarter. We wonder who dare sit on them!

Earlier in the week we have had long conversations with a member of the bread making community, Jack, who has been arrested – again – for dassing under the heat ventilation outlet of a Chinese restaurant. He had been chased away by the restaurant owner and became aggressive. His court appearance looms at the end of the week.

In the MetQuarter there is a war memorial. It is a monument to those named who have died in various wars and who were postal workers. In this no longer post office we find a memorial to no-longer postal workers, and a bed which is a designer statement whilst Jack has nowhere to sleep. We feel enraged.

In the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman there is both an acknowledgment of shared history and the story of exclusion. It is the well that offers a liminal space between the

⁴ Belchem, *Merseypride*, p.33

⁵ Belchem, *Merseypride*, p.33

Temple of the Jews and the Mountain of the Samaritans: the well of their common ancestor Jacob. Yet what we see in a MetQuarter is a privatisation of history and consequently the story becomes that of exclusion. Jack will never rest on the long leather couch. This area is policed by private security guards; even the city's history has been privatised, shut away behind automatic doors that close shut at 6pm.

This fracture between people, place and story as the consequence of a dominant narrative of re-generation is a corruption of the Gospel message in which encounter is encouraged within difference and a new and inclusive story can emerge. As in the story of the Samaritan woman at the well – both the story of the Jews and the story of the Samaritans is transformed by the Gospel spirit of grace and truth.

The excluded are those who are displaced from the story and the place – therefore they are displaced from the culture and I believe the gospel imperative for a new way of being is disfigured by the false temples of image and desire.

JOHN: God's decision is for particularity. Universality – in its human dimension is, for whatever reason, not God's decision: 'They are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.' Is it significant that it is the Old Post Office that has become the new designer brand shopping centre? One form of communication giving way to another? I want, I need, I have – the advertisement goes. 'Located in the heart of the city, offering you the very latest styles and coolest labels. The majority of brands available can ONLY be found exclusively in MetQuarter. The perfect place to shop, meet friends, relax and have fun.'⁶

And then there are the brands: Armani, Hugo Boss, Timberland..... names that in New York, or Paris, or London, or Tokyo will be named and recognised. There is in reality, no 'only found in the MetQuarter'. Has perhaps the human desire to seek one common language for the sake of achieving the impossible morphed into the globalised language of the brand? The carefully construed cross-cultural advert that speaks whatever its audience? Does Armani in a Scouse accent make much difference to Armani in Parisian? Is this, perhaps, a Babel of signs – a Babel of Names – a seeking of uniformity in the face of God's decision for the particular? Is this 'our' culture? If we are global citizens, then perhaps yes. And perhaps there is something of Liverpool here. 'The Future Supremacy of Liverpool', *Tit-Bits*, quoted in *The Liverpool Magazine*, May 1890 stated:

This vast city will be the greatest and richest ever known to the world ... London, compared to it, is out of the way ... London will be our historic city – the city of culture and fashion and intellect. But whoever lives long enough will find the great city on the banks of the Mersey will be the commercial city of the future.⁷

Is there something of Liverpool that is simply the global 'culture' and always has been? Does our situation, looking out onto the world, sending and receiving to the world, lead inexorably to a Babel of Brands?

We might not have been predicted to be the Cultural Capital of Europe, but here we are. And opposite the MetQuarter lies the Capital of Culture shop, the *08 place*. Where you can buy the labelled American Baseball cap – where screens pump out the images of the sleek – and in the back corner a set of stained-glass panels painted by local primary children depict scenes of Anfield, and football, and yellow submarines.

⁶ Found at: www.metquarter.com

⁷ Quoted in Belchem, *Merseypride*, p.4

We cannot simply write off this global trend. Liverpool was at this game long before most others, as we sent and received the designer goods of other times to and from the Empire. Liverpool's culture is to be, in its way, caught between a localism that mean six streets down the road is 'them' as far as my congregation in the inner-city are concerned, and the globalism of the MetQuater. We have to ask, however, whether the balance is to be tipped – has the global simply moved the local out? Most of my congregation have never been to the MetQuater. Certainly – they, like their minister, will never earn enough to shop there!

Paradise Street

BARBARA: The middle of town, the crossroads with McDonalds on one corner and a shoe shop on the other, is known as 'God's Meeting Place'. At the moment it is the meeting point of the developments that aim to swivel the orientation of the city through 90 degrees. Instead of the orientation by which all roads led to the commercial end of town and ultimately to the Pier Head, the orientation of the city centre will now be turned literally towards retail and tourism. The bus station has been moved to give easier access to the Albert Dock, a once forlorn piece of Victorian history and now an aspiring tourist attraction with the possibility to sample the cultures of 'The Slave Trade' and 'The Beatles Experience'. Liverpool city centre is now officially the largest building site in Europe. John and I climb the steps of the deserted Friends Meeting House and peer down into the foundations of a huge development that includes a fourteen screen cinema, a privately policed retail development and a roof level park. And we are led to ask, as Jews and Samaritans did centuries ago: Where and what do we worship? Who is included in the temple? What is cleanliness?

Some trainee guard dogs walk past us with the security guards who are training them to meet the public. It is a sign maybe that this supposed temple of retail will remain a place subject to a laws of exclusion. The non-acceptable, from skateboarders to drifters, will be shifted and the penniless will be confined to window shopping. Across the city we are aware of the squeeze put upon local people by redevelopment. The YMCA is moving out of town with the old building being used as a hostel for tourists during the City of Culture year. The new YMCA building on the edge of town had 160 objections to its planning application and the staff had to be escorted from the council meeting that discussed its application under police escort. The St John's Market, known for its bargains and as a gathering place for asylum seekers is under threat of closure and Bold Street shops have had their rents trebled in the last five years.

As nonconformists, John and I have already fallen victim to this economic squeeze. Our city centre buildings have closed. What is the 'narrative' that forms 'culture'? Is it a dominant story of success at the expense of the silenced or do we believe in what Philip Sheldrake refers to as a messy text where there is the possibility of an interweaving of stories, where the subversive and the dominant stories are able to converse as in the story of Jesus and the woman at the well?

JOHN: What possessed those building Babel? The desire to build up and reach the heavens, the desire to not be scattered. The desire for power. And the site of the Old Quaker Meeting House provides perhaps the best view of Paradise – the project which moves rapidly from hole in the ground to tower in the sky. Whose culture is this? Where does it come from? Is this Liverpool? Is this the more common folks' version of the MetQuater? One cannot but see the theological parallel - it is a kind of a secular version of Pelagianism. We will build ourselves to the heavens – we will build ourselves to Paradise. The multi-national, and the national, will call all shoppers to heaven – as Liverpool once again seeks its

status in retail rapture. Salvation through town-planning. Deliverance by regeneration (but not quite as Calvin knew it!).

And yet, whose space is this? Is this really Liverpool, we wonder? It is no longer ours, in reality, as the city Council leases the site to Grovesnor for 250 years – rather, a recent report by the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors states that:

while many in Liverpool have welcomed the injection of £750 million into the city, the development has also been accompanied by negative publicity from the start over plans to replace traditional rights of way with ‘public realm arrangements’ policed by private security guards known as ‘quartermasters’ or ‘sheriffs’. Begging, skateboarding and rollerblading will be banned, alcohol and food are only to be consumed in certain designated areas and any form of demonstration will require police permission. Consequently, alongside the negative publicity, organisations ranging from human rights group Liberty to the Open Spaces Society have voiced serious concern about the restrictions on public access and behaviour.⁸

Whose Babel is this? Whose place is this? Whose story is this? The global and the multinational tell the story, own the place and determine which people will be in it. Within the thought patterns we are inhabiting here – within the understanding of the Divine choice for particularity, this is not our space, story or people. This is not ‘our’ culture. This is not our web of meaning – and yet of course, it is. For we will shop. I shop, therefore I am! Just as the Housing Renewal Initiative Team cannot give me any demographic or social information about the massive housing initiative that threatens our church building in Edge Hill, “because our remit is only to renew the buildings” – so one fears this is the case city-wide – and in the city centre. Renewing the buildings is perhaps code for hoping those already there will move on somewhere else, so they won’t inconvenience ‘us’. Regeneration becomes the quest for the global over the local – a hegemonic culture that squeezes out the divine initiative for diversity, seeking once again, to build its way to paradise.

Quiggins

BARBARA: It is particularly poignant for me to wander around Quiggins. It is a fistful of kiosks selling everything from mobile phone leads to ancient runes. There has been an almighty struggle involving petitions and protests to stop the compulsory purchase order on the city centre warehouse that has owned it for 40 years or so. A place for geriatric hippies and Goths to gather in equal number. Quiggins has lost its fight for territory but is now re-housed in a large redbrick building on one side of Renshaw Street – the old Methodist Central Hall. Who has the power of regeneration? Who has the power of subversion?

I think of the displacement of people, place and story that this represents. The struggle of the Methodists to change along with the city centre. The demise of the building and the congregation that had fallen to about 14 in number at closure. The lifting of the covenants on the building to turn it first into a nightclub and casino and now into Quiggins. The disruption of the story of Quiggins, the brothers who had owned it as a flea market and then alternative shopping venue. The fight against compulsory purchase and now the construction of a virtual reality – the ‘new Quiggins’ painted with authentic scruffy paint in keeping with the old!

⁸ Anna Milton, *The Privatisation of Public Space*, (London: Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors, 2006), p.15

Anne Spalding writing in *Feminist Theology*⁹, points us to the understanding that ‘The ideal framework is a community in right relation, both satisfying the urge for community in forming and maintaining right relation and giving expression to right relation through working towards justice;’

Forming ‘right relation’ and ‘working toward justice’ are propelled into a sense of urgency in the processes of speedy redevelopment. The long term building of communities over time is transformed into either a quiet and resentful acquiescence to the dominant power structures or, in the case of Quiggins, a noisy revolt.

It is not just that Jesus spoke to an isolated woman at a well in a friendly but unremarkable encounter. The woman became motivated to tell everyone of the man who had told her everything she had ever done. True transformation will rally the crowd and is deeply political. The upheaval brought about by the enforced search for ‘Culture’ will unleash alternative expressions of power. Power intended to silence is not culture-enhancing but a means of plunging a community into what Leonie Sandercock describes as a ‘multiplicity of fear’.

Such enforcement of change is fear-ridden. It leads to resentment and anger. At worst it will lead to civil disobedience – how else can subversive voices be raised loud enough to be heard?

JOHN: And of course, Paradise swallows up that which is not heavenly. By whose definition though? The popular feeling that has been demonstrated concerning the future of Quiggins has been considerable. The posters pronounce the fact that this is indeed Liverpool’s culture. This warren of alternative shops and stalls – the grand pianos and odd pieces of furniture, the odder T-shirts with their provocative, humorous messages. There are no big-brands here. This is particular. This is of its place and time. And yet it is to be demolished, to make way for the privatisation of public space. The kids with their hoodies on, who stand making this place their own, will not be welcomed in Paradise. Not the privately policed paradise of Grovesnor, anyhow. Is this, perhaps, the voice of the many different, competing languages? Is there something of the preferential option for the poor that is so central to discussions of power and culture? Is this, perhaps, where a secular liberationist agenda speaks its name...as it moves temporarily to the Old Methodist Central Hall?

The particular languages of alternative cultures, and generations that I suspect I never belonged to – is there something there of God’s choice for the particular? Is there actually something of the incarnation here that the universalist concrete and glass of Paradise misses? Could we actually suggest that God’s decision for a multiplicity of languages and cultures in Babel was actually because ultimately it was not good for humanity to have so much power? Could one suggest that God realised that too much possibility in human hands was a risk that could not be taken? The power does not lie with this localised, popular appeal to the particular – rather to the globalised language of the brand. As the sociologists Steven and Malcolm Miles put it in the final sentence of their work on *Consuming Cities*:

Has the time come for a more self-consciously critical agenda that puts the needs of the future rather than the needs of the present at its heart? If not, perhaps we can feast while the city implodes, and see counter-culture in chewing gum, until voices other than those of affluence intervene to silence us.¹⁰

⁹ Anne Spalding, “Being Part of ‘Right Relation’”, *Feminist Theology* 22 (1999), pp.43–65

¹⁰ Steven Miles & Malcolm Miles, *Consuming Cities* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), p.184

I fear that is what we see. The silencing of Quggins to make way for the affluence of Paradise.

Bandstand

BARBARA: The disappearance of the podium came as a surprise. A landmark at the top of Church Street, it was a place of encounter, 'Meet you at the podium at 11' was a sure way to meet someone from the train without too much explanation. Populated by the voluble of every variety from the politically-driven to the musically manic, it has always been a place for free expression. One of the better 'pitches' for the Big Issue vendors as it marked the crossing of two paths as well as a place to hang around during a lunch break or shopping expedition. It is from the steps of the podium that the sight of the Good Friday walk of witness caused one man to literally spit abuse at the silent passing clergy.

An understanding of culture as 'the meeting point between people, place and story' is exemplified by a podium on which and around which unlikely people can meet, maybe the modern day equivalent of a well, a place of encounter, conversation and participation. Gorringe asks us, 'to what freedom do we aspire?' and in the middle of the destruction that is the reality of the city at the moment, the answer seems to be the irony that we desire 'the freedom of conformity'.

The encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well is not such an encounter. It is a meeting of risk, at a gathering point where there becomes a possible mix of the ordinary and the unacceptable, the empowered and the struggling, the religious and the outcast from religion. The subversive voices of the city rise to the surface in such risky places. Gorringe may encourage us into the middle class prerogative that 'education proceeds through encounter with the other' but the gospel pushes us deeper. It is not simply education but transformation that is possible in such an encounter with the dangerous and offensive other.

Alberto Magnaghi in his book *Urban Village*¹¹ sees this transformative process to be realised as the city opens up 'practical spaces for social action and imagination'. His vision for a diverse and locally sustainable city environment pushes us towards a reversal of this process of silencing and conformity. This transformative discourse requires space of connection and energy which reach out for what is suppressed, unheard, unarticulated: 'Cracking open the restrictive discourse of separation and disengaged, individualism creates space for the slow emergence of new speech.'¹²

The loss of places of encounter, for the stories that are subversive or counter-cultural, is a loss of the transformative possibility of the city exemplified for us so aptly in the strange encounter between a thirsty Jewish man and a struggling bucket-carrying Samaritan woman.

So we have come to ask questions about the silenced and the silencing. The way in which we meet – the importance of encounter between the dangerous and the offensive. And we begin to search for spaces for imagination in which true encounter can be engendered between diverse individuals and groups. We see diversity, not as an optional extra once the quest for individual satisfaction has been achieved, but rather the key to our community and our ecological survival.

¹¹ Alberto Magnaghi, translated by David Kerr, *The Urban Village: A Charter for Democracy and Local Self-sustainable Development* (London: Zed Books Ltd, 2005)

¹² Mary Grey, *The Wisdom of Fools: Seeking Revelation for Today* (London: SPCK, 1993)

JOHN: A bandstand is a public realm – a gathering place. A place for communication. A place where a deaf choir gathers, to communicate through sign to the city as it goes on by. The public square and an alien language collide as the local children sign in an alien language. That clash of communicative medium is perhaps the theme that runs through our reflection on Liverpool, culture and the Tower of Babel. Local culture, as opposed to culture more generally, is perhaps the union of people and place and story in such a way that a particular place and time bound web of significance can emerge. But just whose culture is it?

And so, these two non-conformist ministers, wander back up Bold Street towards the upper-rooms that have become home-from-home in the city centre to consider matters. What is our story that we bring as people in this place? Do we, as catholic Christians seek to universalise in the fashion of the global corporation and brand? Or do we represent something of the gathering of particulars that come to make a whole as the image of the body and the ecclesiology of the gathered community suggests? Do we not bring into the midst of this a story which is universal? Are we but mere representatives of the dying breed of cultural-colonisers of a by-gone era? Or are we perhaps called, sent and set-apart to bring another particular story of a particular person in a particular place and time, to add to a transformative mix of the people and stories, eclectic and contradictory as they are, in this place? What is 'our' culture – we are not born and bred of the place, we will pass on by and out sooner or later? Do we not seek to colonise culturally with the promise of the Christian gospel, or is that gospel, in its incarnational particularity, in God's choice for the multiplicity of languages and cultures, something empowering in the midst of Liverpool's historical and contemporary clash between the global and the local?

We pick up a copy of the Liverpool Echo. A man has been stabbed by his father, a child injured in a road accident. The symbol of the Capital of Culture, the Superlambanana is to be moved...possibly to Garston, while rows over the appointment of a new chief executive continue. There are jobs in park battles and adverts for TJ Hughes – the local long-established big bargain store on the page next to one for Lidl – the German bargain supermarket. There are no adverts for Armani here. Go a little further up this hill and you will come to Earle Road, where my congregation are. There, they read the Echo, but rarely venture to the city centre anymore. The inner-city becomes ever more distant from the realities of the city centre – the people pass through – and maybe drop in and see us. Maybe we chat with them passing by the MetQuater on their way to Poundland. Whose culture is this – what is this culture we've been chosen to celebrate? Who takes those decisions – the reality of the churches co-ordinating group for the Capital of Culture seems to be that no-one does? But life goes on.

And so we are left wondering – where the local and the universal collide what happens? When Quiggins meets Paradise – and the Echo meets the texts of scripture – will a divine pattern of choice for the particulars over the superimposed generalities really win? Will the encounter be transformative, as at the well? Whose culture is it? Who can ultimately say? But armed with peculiar tales of unlikely cities and towers, and women turning the world upside down – perhaps we have the beginnings of a lens through which the questions will become clearer.

Bold Street

BARBARA: Behind a non-descript door towards the top of Bold Street you will find a small group of people who have come to make bread. David the Big Issue vendor will ring the bell for you and after you have scaled four flights of stairs you will enter a room at the centre of

which is a large table. Around the table you may find a group of people busy pummelling dough and talking together. They are an unlikely bunch. Kit has learning difficulties and dances, Peter is lonely and in need of company, Dave has just popped out of a local solicitor's office in his lunch hour and Carole is a store chaplain. A conversation about 'Culture' with a capital 'C' is a million miles away from this diverse group of individuals as they convene in their common task of breadmaking. John and I believe that this meeting around a common task, a meeting of extreme diversity yet common humanity, is a counter-sign to a city where the agenda of Culture seeks to bring a monochrome narrative. We are learning that the task of living with deep and nuanced individuals, with a multiplicity of stories, and valuing and honouring this diversity as a gift, is a way to discover the depth and possibility of cultures that enrich city life.

And as these cultures meet in their diversity and struggle, we see a transformation, not only of individuals but of the city. Just as the woman at the well and the Jewish rabbi were to discover a greater depth through an encounter at the well – an encounter of spirit and of truth – so we see that this small thing has the possibility to bring a new way of being to a city that is being dealt the dominant propaganda of growth equalling success. We do believe in the possibility of transformation but sometimes it seems as if it is against all the odds. We are determined to resist short-termism and to look at ways of sustaining the vulnerable beyond 2008. We believe that cultures don't need to collide but can enhance and embolden our city – but it is a fragile and subversive story to tell in the light of the urban upheaval that digs away at the very foundations of our city.