

The Estate We're In

Bishop Laurie's notes for a Bible Study he offered to the National Estate Churches Network at their conferences in London and Leeds 2007

John 20: 19-25 (NJB)

In the evening of that same day, the first day of the week, the doors were closed in the room where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews. Jesus came and stood among them. He said to them, 'Peace be with you,' and after saying this, he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples were filled with joy at seeing the Lord, and he said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so am I sending you.' After saying this he breathed on them and said: 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone's sins, they are retained.'

Verse 19a: On the evening of that day, the first day of the week

John sets the scene, explaining how this event fits in to the passionate events which the disciples have been experiencing. It's important for us to tell the story of how our estate life fits into the history of deprivation and neglect. The Chinese proverb reminds us that 'unless we know where we've come from we won't know where we are bound.'

1950s: the horrific post-war situation of scarcity, poverty, crowding & decay.

1960-75: the 'answer' to these problems was Mass Housing projects all across Europe. But fast build meant no time for feedback and critique regarding the problems that were beginning to emerge with design and materials and the untried building technology. The sub-standard systems-built homes were disastrously replicated across swaths of cityscape. UK built within cities until Local Authorities no longer had space – so greenfield-sited estates blossomed at the peripheries of many cities.

Industrial circumstances then began to change. There was no longer a need for non-skilled mass workers. Industrial compression now moved from our towns and cities to the cheap labour and raw material markets of the Southern hemisphere.

1968: the explosion at Ronan Point symbolised the people's distrust of highrise living and as the demand slumped so did government building subsidies. Demand dropped so suddenly that adverts were posted for estate lets and nostalgic stories about the old communities were rife. The estates became "difficult to let" so managers adopted 'dumping' strategies on a needs basis.

Voids and rent-arrears were so badly managed that funders, seeing the disintegration, no longer invested in estates. So set in the vicious circle of bad management & sense of defeat. Left to badly-supported care-takers staffing the front line. So the 'answer' to social need became the burning-glass of urban break-down. (That is, estates act as a barometer of national and international social change even though they are so isolated and 'separated'. It is as if a weak seam of society ruptures when the pressures of the larger society build up.) In many minds the estates have therefore become synonymous with post-industrial migration, disintegrated communities, and political alienation. Rather than the New Jerusalem, the tenants asked for bread and were given a stone.

1980s - 1990s: Resurrection? - but still very fragile. As estates have been 'regenerated', so we find that whilst the geographical area improves, these resurrected estates have turned away the really poor - a sophisticated gentrification of the old estates. Where have the poor gone? Many would have seemed to have gone to poorer, less well-profiled estates.

Anne Power rightly remarks, the "political dynamics surrounding housing are conflictual."

Your congregation will know this story - the crucifixion of their communities - and perhaps have glimpsed resurrection too. The task is to hear the story, tell it, share it, collect it, analyse it, celebrate it - and all the time asking, "who benefited most?"

Verse 19b. The doors being shut where the disciples were for fear of the Jews

Fear: the French have experienced the outburst of violence in the estates surrounding their cities and speak of their estates as harbouring embers which are smouldering under the ashes, awaiting re-ignition. We know that our estates too harbour the concentration of a potentially explosive mix of alienated youth, unemployed, racial minorities and politically alienated

- the physical concentration of need.

When will our market-hardened society recognise that estate tenants are simply too poor to support services, so the estates will always be dependent? Expecting the estates to be self-sustaining is to sacrifice the vulnerable to the myths of neo-liberal capitalism.

So the fear escalates: Fear of violence or fear of the fear of violence. There is amongst some of our people, a tangible fear of being seen to be marginal - not fitting in - with the loss of identity that comes with that. Nothing to go out for in a degrading and dull environment. How can anyone manage when they are ashamed of the own area or home? 'Doors being Shut' - reminds me of that horrid notice - "No games allowed". As they say, "Shut happens"

Verse 19: Jesus came and stood among them

Politicians & others have had difficulty admitting the mistakes because in many respects the problem estates were their own invention. But the (national) politicians rarely live in the midst of the estates. We however do find ourselves "in the midst" and such Incarnation bestows knowledge -

- we know families are pressured in high-rise buildings.
- we see and experience lack of coordination of services - which providers don't see.
- we are often told the truth that social workers & officials don't get told.

It is for this reason that only those who live alongside can really be a true advocate.

What's more we are there from building to demolition. As we've already suggested, we, with our people, know the history. We are therefore aware that renewal takes 20 years minimum - but governments are elected at most every 5 years and therefore programmes can be constantly re-jigged with different priorities and time-frames by successive elected representatives wanting to make their mark - or save their bacon.

The second thing that being in the midst – Incarnation – bestows, is the intriguing urban mixture of energy and fear! This in turn can either create petrification or Solidarity – *koinonia* is more than happy fellowship!

Remember too (and I'm sure you all know it!) urban estate living can simply tire you out (remember Jesus in the back of the boat?)

Estate incarnation is a journey downwards for many clergy. Many were born in other environments, and we must acknowledge the great sacrifice that this entails for them. But the up-side is that from the estate perspective we have the benefits of seeing the truth and meeting Jesus – he is there constantly and tangibly during those profound estate moments.

Verse 19: and said, "Peace be with you"

This is of course Peace not as the world gives (Jn 14:27) This is the Kingdom 'Shalom': the gifts of steadfastness under pressure – serenity in adversity.

Shalom is the generator of inclusivity and that is why the Church is able to welcome different people from across the board at one table. Where else does that constantly happen? We have heard a lot recently about 'social capital' but that is a meagre capitalist interpretation of Shalom – the real meaning of it penetrates our eucharistic sharing, for in Christ there is neither slave nor free - it's the atmosphere of the Kingdom of God.

Verse 20: When he had said this he showed them his hands and his side.

The Stigmata open up the issues of Stigma and Identity. He shows the stigma (signs of the suffering) to prove who he is.

The estates were always very distinctive – they were often designed to be separate and housed distinctive communities from the neighbouring cities.

But instead of this estate identity retaining a sense of prestige this very distinctiveness has often become a liability. People outside it talk about 'the estate' in disparaging terms. All become tarred with the same brush. "They were Local Authority tenants from the slums! They were last in the post-code lottery of life."

The young, those who are still searching for an identity for themselves, are especially prone to suffer since many are caught between two or more cultures, and with the estate stigma hanging over them they may look anywhere for respect and reputation – be it the local Islamist sect or hoodie gang.

And to cap it all, government targeting of an estate designed to help it, just aggravates the stigma – "you live on a targeted estate, so you must be bad."

In the Bible passage, the Stigmata identify Jesus with all suffering and persecution – and so with our estates. Jesus takes the search for identity very seriously – "Who on earth do men say that I am?" (Mark 8) The crucifixion marks identify him (they point him out) and then they give him identity (solidarity) as the sufferer. Stigma always has this vicious circular effect.

Yet, stigmatisation can foster a proud resilience too. This energy can be utilised for change – and often creates local leaders. The “sacramental presence” of those who will not leave for the better area but are committed to the estate can foster the same pride and determination.

“his hands and his side” – these words remind us that we are in the arena of hands on sacramental presence, not pious sanctuary and escape from harsh reality. The doctrine of the Resurrection of the Body saves us from praying with our eyes closed. Spirituality is about physical commitment. Studies (and our experience) prove that it is physical human networking that really works for estates, not distant policies or even injections of cash from distant committees.

Verse 20: Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.

We do not rely only on a theology of Hope for we are People of the Promise!

Jn16:22 – “You will have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice.” And there are indeed things already to rejoice about in our estates – lots of things. We affirm the diversity, the exuberant young, the thoughtful elderly, the noisy kids, the resilient single mum, the alternative economy workman. And we certainly know how to party!

We’re glad too to have a Gospel faith which says we are no longer trapped – terms like the ‘underclass’ reinforce the notion of ‘no change’ but we don’t buy that. There have been lots of turn-arounds on our estates lately, and they must be affirmed – characters too who keep the show on the road, doing all the valuable networking and encouraging. Got a good local manager? Then throw him a party! Be careful however, for it requires discernment to know what to affirm and what to curse – ALMOs or ASBOs?

Verse 21: Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me even so I send you.”

Sending – In this verse we hear Jesus giving the Church its ‘Apostolic’ mandate as accredited envoys. He hands it all over to the locals.

Resident involvement is essential to good estate management. The importance of local initiative and networking cannot be over-estimated. It is no coincidence that PC Blakelock & Mrs Cynthia Jarrett were killed in Broadwater Farm uprising just at that time – for it was then that the local leaders were away in Jamaica on an exchange visit. And just like leadership, so also control needs to be local and dispersed rather than central and single.

The crucial importance of community involvement is Good News for us, because “Residents R Us!” although community networking is usually not appreciated until too late when it is no longer there. Our experience tells us that locally accountable management is integral to any estate resurrection – just as in St John’s account.

Verse 22. And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit”

Just as John gives us no eucharistic narrative but rather describes diaconal service, so also he offers us no ascension narrative, rather a recapitulation of Creation (Gen 2:7) Similarly, the New Adam is seen offering the new Kingdom or Shalom Identity to counter the stigma.

In the light of this new creation we are able to acknowledge the work of the Holy Spirit through its agents. For example:

- Physical renewal programmes and upgrading
- Management changes – local offices, dynamic leaders, responding to tenants' needs.
- Social regeneration of community networks and representation

Anne Power reminds us however, that: "Estate renewal is more like painting the Forth Bridge than running a life-boat station." It demands ongoing attention and cyclic programmes. We must remember from our estate history that the UK government did not expect ever to engage with Estates once built – they were 'the answer'. It was only the uprisings which prompted our politicians to become really galvanised to strong listening action. We therefore have the responsibility to make visible and audible the realities with the people are forced to live, or else there will be no pro-estate action. Likewise, what seems non-viable (local shops) must be re-created and enlivened.

- they need to have life breathed into them.

In passing it is worth reflecting on the fact that whereas the builders of our estates designed them and built them and maybe injected three-year funding into them when pressed, the God of Creation designs, builds and then sustains to eternity.

On our estates the atmosphere of failure can be the result of so many people with problems being densely confined – but the Holy Spirit inspires with a 'can do' Vision. (The resilience I spoke of earlier) But we cannot escape the fact that our estates are now being newly crammed with people from many sub-cultures – they are no longer so likely to be mono-cultural – and all this, without a positive unifying 'estate' culture, will inevitably lead to conflict. The Acts of the Apostles paints a picture of this gifting of the Spirit of Christ at Pentecost counters this Babel separation of cultures and communication. The Church has a duty to work for a sense of place and affirm the traditions of locality, mingling, partying and identity – which all assist proper community cohesion.

Verse 23: If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.

It is this spirit of mutuality and openness to the Other that allows community.

This is why forgiveness signals that we are no longer chained to the past, whoever's fault it was. The South African Truth Commission's work reminds us that forgiveness is the first step to cohesion.

Jesus here longs to see repentance. We must therefore forgive everybody the past but never let the guilty off the hook of the future. The Church is not here to be liked – it's here to act for the poor. If Mass Housing has thus far failed then we are required to warn the developers of the Future.

Verse 23: Retaining the sins

This weighty responsibility calls for gift of great discernment. Because the estates are too expensive to replace, we are called to eternal vigilance on behalf of poor.

- Most residents are still too far from employment & service centres.
- Successful estates are easy targets for cuts
- Poor estate-dwellers will never afford infrastructural costs so always dependency on more wealthy (always 'Brother's Keeper')
- Fluctuations in demographics will require flexibility and long-term commitment

We have noted many improvements in recent years on our estates, but most are due to the ongoing strength of UK economy. When the inevitable downturn occurs, my betting is that the estates will feel it first. Things may look better momentarily but in fact the sins are retained.

24-5: Now Thomas, one of the twelve called the Twin was not with them when Jesus came.... "Unless I see ... I will not believe."

The well-known narrative about 'doubting Thomas' follows our passage but we do well to make two comments upon it here.

1. It is good that Thomas did not swallow any of the disciples' hype. Nor must we. For example, the word on the block is that the estates changed from being places of great promise into degenerate localities because of the influx of Immigrants. But we see the same worsening of conditions at the same time in Ireland – which have remained all white – and we see that it was that poor conditions opened estates to poor immigrants. Thomas reminds us to be circumspect about the estate stories.

2.. Those who are not there don't believe it. Even the church does not believe the word from the estates. We must play our part in linking estates with the wider community. Be a voice – become mayor's chaplains; work with the schools; utilities police contacts; talk with LA officers & members. Let them know the truth of it! **"As the father sent his son, so he sends you."**

Postscript:

During recent years much has been learnt:

Short-term democratic terms of office make politicians long-term unreliable – embolden them!

Police must work with the community – keep them in view!

Black youngsters are easily marginalised – encourage black leaders!

Budgets are an essential tool in neighbourhood renewal – demand them!

Management staff morale is crucial – boost it!

Local leadership is volatile – support it!

Stigma can overwhelm – so celebrate the positive!

Market pressure will squeeze the estates out – so talk them up!

Estates are better but still not self-supporting – explain this abroad!

The Church is exceptionally well placed to do all these things because we are considered to be fools and insignificant – but the fool in the Royal Court knew how to use that power.

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Also see *Urban Ministry and the Kingdom of God* SPCK 2003