

The Christ of Fishergate Hill

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Introduction

About a decade ago I while still living in the London Borough of Newham I wrote and published an essay in contextual theology entitled The Christ of the Barking Road¹. After nearly ten years living in Preston, Lancashire it feels time to document another chapter in my urban pilgrimage. Once again it takes the form of a journey on foot a long another road, significantly perhaps an uphill one. Our route begins on the street where I now live, on the north bank of the River Ribble and climbs upwards to the city centre. It is a journey I make several times each week, either on foot, or on my bike (in low gear and with questionable legality as I use the contra-flow line marked “buses only”). Preston of course is not a great metropolitan global city like London. The ancient settlement of Priest – town which became the Coketown of Charles Dickens in *Hard Times*², is still seen as a mere town by older local residents, but (significantly for me at least) was officially designated a city the very week I arrived in April 2002. The civic leaders of Preston have aspirations that it will become the Third City of the North West, though in these new hard times such aspirations, built as they are on the massive expansion of retail space, and higher education provision may well be misplaced. Christianity is still deeply embedded here, as secularisation impacted late in a strongly Roman Catholic culture, and the 2001 census³ records high proportions of at least nominal Christians. Even the City Council’s logo is the Lamb of God, appropriate enough for the organisation who is expected to take away the bins of this world.

As a companion on my journey my first choice is as before Jesus the Messiah. However, I also want to walk up the hill with another local character, who used to walk obsessively up and down the hill most days of the week until he was imprisoned last year on a number of counts of indecent exposure. Les was homeless and always dishevelled, clothed in torn and dirty garments and always it seemed avoiding interaction with any other human being. Certainly he never engaged with any of the agencies of the Homeless Forum network who might have offered some help. One early morning when walking the dog through one of the fields on the other side of the river I came across him sleeping rough under a bush, but (after checking he was at least alive) was sent merrily on my way. I wouldn’t want to make the short journey presuming to see the street through Les’s eyes or to try to put into words how

¹ (Smith G. (2003), "[The Christ of the Barking Road](#)" in J.Vincent (ed) "Faithfulness in the City " published by Monad press, St. Deiniols Library, Hawarden, CH5 3DF) □

² To read the relevant text by Dickens go to <http://www.literaturecollection.com/a/dickens/hard-times/5/>

³ For the census counts on religion go to <http://neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/> and look up Key Statistics table 07

he might read the urban landscape. However, let him join us on the journey, if only as a brooding presence, reminding us that even if Fishergate Hill is a marginal street on the margins of the city, there are those who are even more radically marginalised, yet in topsy turvy world that is to come are the first to be invited to the Messianic feast.

A stroll up Fishergate Hill

At the bottom of Fishergate hill is the river Ribble often a trickle, sometime in spate as it drains the Pennines, tides flowing in twice each day and in our recent Arctic winters creaking with ice floes. In the New Jerusalem (Rev 21) the river flows through the city streets, in Preston it merely marks the boundary of the city with the country and the suburbs. Once heavily polluted, it is now an ecological treasure with redshank, herons, shelduck, kingfishers, mink and at least once a common seal among its residents. At the moment major construction works constrict the road as the storm drains are being replaced. With a complex system piping the city's runoff under the river across to a purification works in the marshes. A few years ago the city planners had visions for a barrage to dam the stream and create a sterile leisure park with waterfront apartments for the rich. I was part of a successful community campaign to Save the Ribble⁴, the flood plain is now a designated country park. I was almost the only Christian involved, the leaders were card carrying pagans and deep greens. Which is odd really given the OT emphasis on the care of the land and that as Romans 8;19 puts it "all creation's straining on tiptoe just to see the sons of God come into their own".

Along the river bank and stretching up the hillside towards the city is Broadgate, a village community in the city, firmly defined by the boundaries of river, railway and road. Diverse housing from Coronation Street terraces, to large Georgian and Edwardian villas, to 1930's semis and 1980's housing association maisonettes, bring together a very diverse population. There are old and young, singles and families, Muslim, Hindu and Christian, Chinese, Polish, and Indian, Scottish, Lancastrian and Yorkshire, alcoholic and usually sober. Social housing and private rented, owner occupied and big houses multiply occupied, some on sale for ages, a few boarded up and derelict, to let signs everywhere. Assertive community policing means high fear of crime, CCTV surveillance everywhere and ASBOs for hoodies, but actually crime is rare and most of the kids who hang out on the streets are harmless.

So we start our journey up Fishergate Hill with Les and with Jesus. It seems fitting that it is a countercultural journey, for the street is an arterial road, a one way highway out of the city. The only traffic going our way either uses the narrow contra-flow bus lane, or trudges along what Americans call the sidewalks. We begin at a small precinct of shops. The three of us starting the journey don't really bother with hairdressers, but there are two of them, and another one run just round the corner by our local ward councillor, and yet another two half way up the hill. There is a tiny newsagent / convenience store, a Chinese chippy and another pizza takeaway which keeps changing its branding, but in the last few years a betting shop, a post office and a pub which then became an Indian restaurant have all closed. There is also a pharmacy and a doctors' surgery. The NHS logo is prominent and important. Preston has some appalling bad health statistics with low life expectancy and infant mortality towards the

⁴ Save the Ribble Campaign <http://save-the-ribble.blogspot.com/>

wrong end of the national and regional league tables.⁵ There's a clinic with mental health services especially for the homeless in town, if only you could persuade the likes of Les to access it. I'm tempted to ask Jesus what he would do about the NHS, or whether he'd just use God's power to heal everyone ---- but then we know it doesn't work like that, don't we? It was at the foot of a hill that the disciples of Jesus failed to heal the boy possessed by a demon. (Mark 9;18) though Jesus himself soon managed to do it.

About a hundred metres further on we cross South Meadow Lane, with another recently closed pub, the Cricketers, and at the bottom of the street the Gujerat Centre, which is the largest Hindu temple in the North West and a well equipped and well used community centre and social enterprise. Interestingly many of the affluent younger generation of Hindus have given up on Broadgate and moved out to the suburbs of Fulwood and Penwortham, but at least they come back for weddings and Diwali celebrations. Across the road is another sign of our colonial past, the Empire Services Club. Usually these days they fly a Union Jack at half mast, though I'm not sure if it's for aged veterans or current casualties in Afghanistan. In any case Preston remains a military town with a large local barracks and an economy which largely depends on the high tech arms traders of BAE systems. It's not an easy place to be a militant pacifist, or an evangelical internationalist. A bit further up the street a floppy England flag is still draped out of a window nine months after the world cup fiasco; one never knows whether such symbols belong to a soccer fan still sleeping off a very long hangover or whether it's an overt racist statement, or just a sign of patriotism. I'd like to ask Jesus about living as one of the chosen people under military occupation in a racist society as he did, and how he almost got dragged into those assumptions and values in the incident with the Syro-Phoenecian woman (Mark 7,24-30). To be fair, in the end it he got it right with the Samaritans and was inclusive in his invitation to the feast of the kingdom.

Community cohesion is a live issue in Preston, though we pride ourselves in being multicultural and open, certainly nothing like the polarised parallel lives of segregated Muslim Pakistanis and white "Christians" in Pennine Lancashire. Recently the English Defence League bussed their bully boys into town for a demonstration, but failed to generate the riot they'd wanted, so had to make do with a small punch up among themselves. Maybe the prayer we organised and the conversations between the Faith Forum, the police and the Council helped. Along Fishergate Hill we can have fleeting interfaith encounters, as Mums bring their young children to the new madressa in an old commercial building each evening and pick them up a couple of hours later, or with the men and boys who attend the house mosque a hundred metres further on at the times of prayer. Muslim households are concentrated near the top of the hill, especially in Christian Road and across on north side of the main road in the Christchurch Street neighbourhood. There is a shop that sells colourful shalwar kamiz and saree silk and a closed down Asian convenience store, but it's hardly Newham's Green Street, or Manchester's "curry mile". There is some limited inter-faith work going on, and thanks to a Christian police officer the president of the mosque has visited the parish church for special occasions. Many local Christians have everyday neighbourly relationships with Muslims, Hindus and the Buddhists at their centre just down a street that runs off Fishergate Hill, while the church primary school is a good mixing place for children and parents of all backgrounds. It was on another hillside of course that Jesus

⁵ **Infant mortality rates** in Preston actually rose (against the national trend) in the period between 1998 and 2005 to stand at 8.6 per 1000 compared to the average for England of 5.1 (45 children from Preston under 1 year died in the three year period 2003-5)

proclaimed “Blessed are the shalom makers for they shall be called the children of God” (Matt. 5,9).

Globalisation involves more than the resettlement of people and the importing of mangoes to our corner shops. It is a whole economic structure of capital flows, investments, risky credit and the casino gambling of merchant bankers that sent the economy into a nosedive in 2008. We are only just beginning to feel the consequences as VAT goes up, public sector workers get made redundant and there are cuts in services and benefits. Preston is likely to suffer more than most as the city depends heavily on public sector employment and procurement so unemployment is bound to rise. Even on Fishergate Hill we are bound into the banking system. There is a modern office building that most people still think of as “The Halifax” though the sign on the gate now reads “Lloyds TSB”. There must have been some takeover recently that no one who lives nearby even noticed. I’ve never spoken to anyone who knows or seems to care what goes on in these offices. I’ve never heard a sermon in a local church, and rarely a prayer, about the justice and ethics of the banking system. Yet global capitalism and the credit crunch is in part administered right here amongst us. Not of course that the money markets made much difference to Les in his destitution. Nor that anyone these days seems to take what Jesus on that other hillside very seriously when he warned “Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Matt 6;24)

The rest of the street as we continue up the hill is a un-themed mixture of residences and businesses set in red brick terraces of large town houses, ancient and modern. There are two solicitors’ and a dentist all with a letter missing out of their business signs. It’s hard to judge whether it is just a result of age and gravity, or a well aimed vandal’s missile or street-child’s football. There are houses that have been turned into offices used by the Lancashire Youth Association, the Unison Trade Union, insurance brokers, and a chartered surveyors. There are two sandwich shops, a hotel, and a laundrette and yet another hairdressers. Near the top of the hill is an off license / convenience store. Off licenses abound in Preston for alcohol, despite the large number of closing pubs, is a major retail industry. It shows in the public drunkenness of Friday and Saturday nights in and outside the clubs and pubs of the city centre, which keep the police and the Street Pastor teams fully occupied. It shows even more in the recycling bins of local residents who don’t go out, and in the horrendous statistics for alcohol related deaths and hospital admissions which have Preston at the top of the national league. Ironically Preston was the town where Joseph Livesey, founder of the Temperance Movement drew up the first public pledge at a meeting on 1 September 1832.

Alcoholism and homelessness have a close association, though it’s not as simple as cause and effect. Other addictions, prison sentences and family breakdown are also involved. But on Fishergate Hill the homelessness industry is significantly present. Not that they ever came up with a solution for Les and his complex needs. There is a hostel for young homeless people linked to the Methodist church, hostel provision for offenders on bail or on license, a hostel for people with mental health issues, and somewhere in the neighbourhood a women’s refuge, and a house that used to be a Christian rehab centre. There have been various informal attempts by the homeless community to house themselves away from official interference in private sector and public sector housing, where there is often a generous sharing of sofas, high strength cider and sometimes needles. A boarded up former “crack house” next to the laundrette is a sign that sometimes the behaviour just got too anti-social for the authorities and mainstream local residents. There is also the newly refurbished Fishergate B&B now a reasonably respectable small hotel, but formerly known as “the Alma” and operating as a poorly managed doss house, offering shelter for over a dozen

highly vulnerable and high risk people. It was far from ideal but when it was closed down by police, with some genuine efforts to find better alternatives for most of the tenants, more than a few were evicted to fend for themselves “on the streets”. If it wasn’t for Christians and others in the Homeless Forum network, there would be very little concern, or help for homeless people in the city. Working together we have now been able to offer a drop in facility with food and friendship available every day of the week in different centres, and a service that ensures all rough sleepers who are willing to engage with official procedures will get some opportunity to get back into conventional housing. However, the task and often the people are difficult and successful and redemptive outcomes are rare. Jesus as a rabbi knew and understood the writings of the Law and the Prophets. I still want to ask him if it’s as simple as Isaiah makes out when he talks of fasting acceptable to God “Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter— when you see the naked, to clothe them” (Isaiah 58; ⁷.) Jesus seems to reinforce this in Matt 25; 37 when he is talking about eternal consequences. But is it really that straightforward? What do you do when people keep on refusing to engage with the people who might help. Or when their behaviour is known to be unstable and violent that it presents a high risk to the safety of yourself, your colleagues and your loved ones?

We are now nearing the top of the hill. On the right is the Railway and Preston Station.. connecting us in two and a quarter hours with London (or Glasgow) and in one with Manchester Airport, provided we can afford some incomprehensible fares. But across the road and even more obvious is the looming edifice of County Hall, the head quarters of Lancashire County Council. It represents a peculiar centre of power, where the City of Preston seems disempowered as a mere district local authority in a two tier system where the County Council controls the schools, the highways and the social services and the budgets that go with them. Of course larger budgets these days mean larger cuts and more redundancies and a regime that subcontracts services to cheap and willing providers which could include voluntary groups and faith communities. But it’s all a bit risky for churches and out of our comfort zone, it comes with strings attached and a burden of paperwork, and there is the danger of mission creep. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God” was what Jesus said on the hillside (Matt. 6;33). So I want to ask him whether delivering Council services should be the church’s priority, or should we perhaps spend more time seeking his justice (righteousness is the same root word), even if that means doing protest and politics. Indeed in his Christmas message the Bishop of Blackburn has called for "legitimate Christian protests" against government cuts.⁶ On the whole the Christians in Preston don’t do politics, just as politicians don’t “do God”. I only know of two or three elected Councillors who are regular church goers, and a few more Christians who belong to political parties. The most thoughtful and helpful local politicians happen to be Muslims. In a good week you’ll hear prayers for the government and the leaders of the nations. It’s a comfortable chaplaincy relationship for the most part symbolised in the architecture of County Hall, where you see built into the new office block the frontage of the former Christchurch parish church, which still functions as a Christian chapel in the midst of a local secular state that governs a diverse multi-faith community. On single issues Christians sometimes raise their voice, for example we were quite good at lobbying for Make Poverty History and in supporting Fair Trade. But we don’t have any theological resources or impetus to do politics, apart from an odd Catholic

⁶ 24 December 2010 Bishop of Blackburn wants protests over government cuts
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-lancashire-12073176>

youth worker (I don't think he'll mind the adjective!) who likes liberation theology. It makes it quite difficult to do contextual urban theology or to think in terms of liberation theology in Preston. There are probably less than half a dozen scattered people in the city who understand what we are going on about compared with East London, or even Manchester, Sheffield or Birmingham where there are theological communities and institutions, even church congregations that are well grounded in progressive Biblical thinking.⁷

We are now at the top of the hill. There is yet another hairdressers, a huge new one.. a betting shop and a pub.. and we are into the town centre....Ps 122 comes to mind

¹ I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD."

² Our feet are standing in your gates, Jerusalem.

And piercing the skyline we see the high square tower of the mid Victorian Fishergate Baptist Church. Sadly, despite three prayerful years of dreaming dreams, and having visions, redefining mission, seeking enterprise solutions and potential partnerships it was all too much, and the small mostly elderly congregation held its last act of worship in August 2010. The members scattered to other churches, the last minister moved away, and the building, in poor repair and unfit for most 21st century functions is on the market. It's not the first Victorian building in Preston that became a millstone round the neck of a church congregation, and it's unlikely to be the last. People don't go into the city on Sundays to worship yet still;

³ Jerusalem is built like a city that is closely compacted together.

⁴ That is where the tribes go up— the tribes of the LORD—

But the tribes come up to buy, seven days a week to a retail centre with its clone town shops. Day by day people come in to work, and most nights many come in to seek pleasure. Preston in not much more than a century has moved from being a productive, if consumptive Coke town to a "product to be consumed" Clone town. It's all a bit irrelevant to Les without a penny in his pocket but I wonder what Jesus, if he has made it up the hill with us, has to say to his people about all that..

The State of the Urban Church

"A town built on a hill cannot be hidden". (Matt 5) was another saying of Jesus as he stood on the hillside encouraging his followers to be salt and light in the world in which they lived. However as the church in the city centre struggles to survive, as it seems to be in the business of managing decline and closure. As long as it continues to work in Victorian buildings and operate on Victorian values, there is a real danger the light will be snuffed out across all the main denominations.

⁷ For an excellent critical summary of contemporary British urban theology see "Voices from the Borderland Re-imagining Cross-cultural Urban Theology in the Twenty-first Century" by Chris Shannahan (2010) London Equinox ISBN: PB 978 1 84553 704 3

To be fair we missed something at the beginning of our journey. Down in Broadgate, hidden away in the back streets there is a modern parish church which is trying to do some of the leavening, fermenting work of the yeast of the kingdom. It's probably as good as it gets anywhere in Preston. It's the only church in the neighbourhood and remarkably it's not empty on Sundays, and can pull in some people on other days of the week as well. It's a relatively thriving evangelical congregation, a community of committed Christians and seekers on a journey that is well mixed socially, in age profile, in gender and in ethnic background. They are warm and friendly to each other and excellent at rallying round to pray and offer practical help when anyone is in distress or need. The folk are reasonably well connected with and mostly respected by the local residential community. They've been doing some good stuff, a lunch club and a toddler group that have been running for decades, in outreach among children and youth, and among families in the parish, with some financial help from the Church Urban Fund. They have started a regular Messy Church session for family fun, food and fellowship, every few weeks on a Saturday afternoon, which attracts up to seventy people who are parents and young children from outside the congregation, including some from the Hindu community.

The local church remains more than a bit dependent on the contribution of middle class Christians, about half of whom come from outside the parish. And if you look at it objectively they are not making disciples of, or connecting with the students, the adults on benefit, or the Muslims, who live locally. The theology, and the style of church worship, despite some modern songs and power-point projection, remain traditional and conservative, with hymns (albeit mostly modern), prayers, Bible reading and being preached at by a vicar, twice each Sunday, followed (in the morning) by coffee in the hall. For those who are keen there are home Bible study groups midweek. The gospel message aimed at individuals is about grace and faith, about forgiveness of sins and vicarious atonement, and about how to go to heaven rather than to hell when you die. It works for some, and it may well be needed by all, but it tends to be a one dimensional faith and it struggles to engage with the issues and the people we found, as we walked with the Christ of Fishergate Hill.

I want in this paper to develop a reflection on the sort of Three Dimensional Christian Faith which can seriously engage with the contextual reality of Fishergate Hill. Sadly I feel I need to do this against the backdrop of a church across most denominations in Lancashire which doesn't fully recognize the need for a theology, missiology and ecclesiology which is adapted to the social context and local urban ecology. I know urban congregations who see themselves and their mission as little different from those in a rural setting in the 1950's and church leaders who have never grappled with the distinctive nature of UPA ministry (and may even be perplexed by the acronym). As a result some parts of the church spend an excessive amount of energy on internal issues, such as choosing a musical style for worship songs or the ordination of female bishops or gay clergy. Theological discussion tends to take place under what Shanahan following Gilroy calls the "camp mentality"⁸ When it comes to incarnated urban theology, or to what Chris Baker calls "third space theology"⁹ which engages with glocalisation and hybridity, my feeling is that most of the church in Preston doesn't really get it, or at best are just beginning to learn how to model mission on the God who became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood. (John 1;14 The Message translation).

⁸ P18 "Voices from the Borderland"

⁹ Baker C.R., *The Hybrid Church in the City. Third Space Thinking.*: Ashgate; Published: April 2007;

In my view too many Christians in Preston appear to be towards the right hand side of most of the following semantic differential scales in their understanding of the faith and practice of discipleship.

Public	v	private
global	v	parochial
international	v	national
community	v	individual
incarnational	v	dualistic /gnostic
earthy	v	religious
political	v	detached
productive disciple	v	spiritual consumer
looking to the age to come	v	looking back to tradition
kingdom of God	v	church and denomination
christian mission	v	institutional survival...
active learning	v	passively receiving teaching

Ecclesiology tends to follow the theological mindset. When it comes to models of the church, or metaphors for the church as institution we have not really come to terms with the socioeconomic changes that have shaped post industrial urban society in the age of globalisation and virtual communication. We have a scriptural heritage of pre-industrial metaphors, such as the ark of salvation, the shepherd and the flock, the pilgrim nomadic people of God, the colony of heaven. And maybe these are transparent and useful enough. But operationally churches often work under modernist metaphors, and occasionally under post-modern ones. For example some see themselves as the Christian Factory where everyone is urged to conform to the mass produced design according to Ford's principle, "Any customer can have a car painted any colour that he wants so long as it is black"¹⁰ Other churches position themselves as units within the retail mall, targeting a niche market, sometimes as branches of a major high street denominational brand, some as more independent traders. Some indeed may aspire to the Saviour Centre model, the mega church that provides everything to everybody, although successful examples are rare in Britain where religious people still seem to prefer the corner shop, or neighbourhood parish church. In a post-industrial, secularised society with multiple hairdressing salons the Service Industry model seems more at home. Version A is producing services in the form of liturgies which will take place even if only the priest is present, while version B gets stuck into pastoral care for the faithful and charitable community work providing services for those in need, without seriously expecting them to attend worship or come to faith. Nor should we forget the Power Station model where noise and sparks fly, and where needy people come for an encounter which will recharge their spiritual batteries and restore their broken bodies. There are also numerous and diverse experimental models, usually labelled now as "Fresh Expressions" though it is hard to find them in such a conservative place as Preston, and even they seem to have little to offer in the contextual reality of Fishergate Hill.

¹⁰ Henry Ford, Samuel Crowther (1922). *My Life and Work*. Doubleday. p. 72. ISBN 0405050887. <http://books.google.com/?id=4K82efXzn10C&pg=PA72&dq=%22My+Life+and+Work%22+%22it+is+black%22>.

The Hills of Hope

The story so far seems rather depressing so where can we turn for hope. Psalm 121 is appropriately titled “a song of ascents” and begins.

¹ I lift up my eyes to the mountains— where does my help come from?

And the answer is not from the hills themselves, which for the writers of the OT had associations with Canaanite pagan worship but.

² My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.

The help we need in developing a multidimensional (3D) faith and a church which actively and effectively engages with the messy multidimensional context of Fishergate Hill and similar places, can only come from God the creator and redeemer of the whole universe¹¹. A faith which breathes with abundant life and begins to breathe life into a lifeless society and asthmatic church needs to draw deeply on the word of god, in Scripture and in the Word made flesh in the Messiah. Just as the connections between the global economy and global network society reach down into the local setting and everyday life of Fishergate Hill we need to explore how the Big Story (grand narrative) which “begins with the tale of a garden, and ends with a city of gold” connects with our own Little Stories of everyday discipleship.¹² Our task is to discern in the light of these connections what God is doing in the world today and how we fit into the project to establish the rule of God throughout the universe.

Two things are necessary for progress in this hermeneutical task. Firstly we need a church that does not rely on a few “experts” who tell us what the Bible means, but a community of enquiry who dialogue together under God to explore and apply his word. Everyone involved will have a personal story or testimony, and personal questions arising from their experience, which need to be valued and worked with, though not privileged over the Big Story of God at work in history. It is clear also that we need to raise the overall level of Biblical literacy across the church as a whole. But more than that we need to encourage and equip congregations so that as Moses wished in Numbers 11; 29 “that all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!” Writing down contextual urban theology is always a problematic task. The very act of writing tends to add academic distance and detachment, make the language abstract and impenetrable and to remove the discussion away from the material reality of the local context, and from the community of grass roots disciples who collectively need to become the subjects and agents of liberation and salvation. Somewhere in Preston we need to gather a small group who will commit together to kick start the business of contextual theology that will speak good news to the poor. There are some connections here with the methodology of Liberation Theologies as developed in contexts of oppression in the global south, and with Shannahan’s recent (not quite convincing) attempt to map out a cross cultural theology based on liberative difference. The type of reflection that seems appropriate to me may look more like what he labels as

¹¹ What I am thinking of here is not far removed from the ideas expressed by Joe Hasler in “Crying out for a Polycentric Church: Christ centred and culturally focused congregations” ISBN 0-9545983-6-9 Available from and Published by: Church in Society 2– 3 Bedford Place, Maidstone, Kent ME16 1JB

¹² For much of this thinking about a Big Story Perspective on Scripture I am influenced by the writings of Tom (N.T.) Wright especially the books **Surprised by Hope** (London: SPCK 2007) and **Virtue Reborn** London: SPCK; 2010 as well as other more academic papers that can be found at <http://www.ntwrightpage.com/>

“reformist” urban theology. However in the Preston context it could be quite radical, broadly catholic, rooted in the Christian community, empowering action in the community, faithful to Scripture and not least, an interesting journey of discovery.

Secondly we need to clear our vision of the mists that obscure our understanding of Gods word. We need to exercise what liberation theologians have called hermeneutical suspicion. Most of the time, the modern church reads the Bible within the framework of popular culture, enlightenment world views, Christian traditions and systematic theologies. To misquote the Bible “If we claim to be without spin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” Many evangelicals for example can only read the Bible through the filters of Reformation theology centred on justification by faith, and stretch every text to fit that doctrine. More common still is the filter of individual autonomy that comes out of the Enlightenment emphasis on personal human rights, and popular psychology which makes individual emotional happiness the greatest good. As a result the usual framework is about what God can do for me, about how God has and is blessing me and about the emotional response I make in return. We need a bigger field of vision, we need to seek to understand and respond to the world with God’s eyes using the framework of His big story. And to do that it seems obvious we need God’s help, which he has promised when Jesus said (John 16:13) But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth.

Where then shall we begin to make some connections between God’s big story and the contextual story of Fishergate Hill? There are lots of hills and lots of uphill journeys in Scripture which may connect with the walk into Preston described earlier. Hills and mountains have an important place in the Bible though it is an ambivalent one. On the one hand “high places” are the centre of false worship, yet they are also a location where God comes close. Mount Moriah for Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 22), Mount Sinai (Exodus 19-20) and Pisgah (Deuteronomy 34) for Moses and Mount Carmel and Mount Horeb (Sinai) for Elijah (1 Kings 18-19) And in the new Testament Jesus regularly goes up hills to commune with his Father, to teach, and to be transfigured (where he meets Moses and Elijah) (Matt 17) (re-capitulating the story of Moses). There were also more uncomfortable hills where the devil took him to be tempted (Luke 4,5) and the hill in Galilee where “they drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff” (Luke 4.29). But interestingly if you read the gospels carefully there is no mention of a hill in the crucifixion stories... (a lovely example where western culture transmitted through Constantinian tradition and Victorian hymn writers has given us the image of a green hill far away... and an old rugged cross... that is hardly grounded in Scripture).¹³

There is one hill motif in Scripture which is especially appropriate for our attempts to make connections between the micro context of Fishergate Hill and the Big Story of the Bible. This is the eschatological hope invested in the Mountain of The Lord. There are numerous references an a strong linkage with the city of Jerusalem and its commanding elevation Mount Zion. It was here in the Temple that God made his “dwelling place” though it was recognised (2 Chron 6;18) that God could not be confined even by the highest heavens. It was here two that God’s anointed King (David and his heirs) ruled in justice and protected the oppressed. Yet the prophets recognised that the kings rarely matched this ideal for there were “rulers of Israel, who despise justice and distort all that is right; who build Zion with

¹³ For further information about the site(s) of Golgotha see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calvary#Biblical_references_and_etymology

bloodshed, and Jerusalem with wickedness. Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money.” (Micah 3 10-11). Therefore such passages came to (and still need to) be read eschatologically, with a future reference to God’s anointed (in Hebrew the Messiah).

The New Testament texts both gospels and epistles make the astounding claim the Jesus of Nazareth is the long awaited Messiah. They go further to assert that he is the perfect image of God, the Logos who was from eternity now made flesh, that he is Emmanuel God dwelling with us, the very Temple in which God in all his fullness now dwells. His ministry on earth is the inauguration of the rule of God, the life of the world that is yet to come in fullness. This claim looks shaky when Jesus is executed as a political rebel and religious blasphemer, but is vindicated when he rises from the dead, showing his triumph over all the rulers of this present age. On his return to his father in heaven he commissions his followers to continue his work, and to bring others in as citizens of his Kingdom, as a colony of heaven acknowledging him as Lord, and seeking to extend his rule throughout the earth. It is in his resurrection and his coming (in all its fullness) kingdom that our hope as Christians lies. It is not that our disembodied souls will (if we believe in him) be saved from damnation and go to heaven when we die, it is rather that at some future time our bodies will be made alive again to live and share in his rule in the new creation, in the new heavens and the new earth, the perfect city of God that he will bring to earth on his return.¹⁴

Let’s look then at the characteristic mountain of the Lord passages and apply them to Christian engagement with Fishergate Hill. A number of psalms are “songs of ascent” designed for use in preparation for worship on the Temple mount. Ps 24 on the basis that “¹ The earth is the LORD’s, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it;” asks “³ Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place?” and the reply is given “⁴ The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god.” Clearly true worship of the only true God together with holiness of life is demanded. Psalm 15 asks the same question and spells out as John Wesley put it true holiness is social holiness.

¹ LORD, who may dwell in your sacred tent?
Who may live on your holy mountain?

² The one whose walk is blameless,
who does what is righteous,
who speaks the truth from their heart;

³ whose tongue utters no slander,
who does no wrong to a neighbour,
and casts no slur on others;

⁴ who despises a vile person
but honours those who fear the LORD;

who keeps an oath even when it hurts,
and does not change their mind;

⁵ who lends money to the poor without interest;
who does not accept a bribe against the innocent.

¹⁴ NT Wright summarises this view of eschatology concisely in http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_BR_Farewell_Rapture.htm

**Whoever does these things
will never be shaken.**

The minimum implications for Christians walking today up Fishergate Hill are that we should be concerned as God is for the whole world and all who live within it, that we need to be people of integrity, concerned for justice and truth, loving the one true God and our neighbours, and generous to the poor. There is no place for dishonesty, bribery or the usury which underpins the capitalist system. Arguably our Muslim neighbours are closer to God's will for economics than most of us in their banking practices. At the very least there is an area here which could be fruitful for dialogue and working together on issues of local and global loan shark practices.

The other key passages on the Mountain of the Lord are in the first part of the book of Isaiah. Chapter 2 (with its parallel passage in Micah.4) speaks of an eschatological promise of worldwide peace, grounded in universal recognition that the God revealed to Israel is the one true god of the whole universe. Micah 4:1 / Isaiah 2

.² In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it.³ Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.⁴ He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plough shares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.⁵ Come, descendants of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the LORD.

Since the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah eschatology is at least in part realised, the life of the age to come is breaking into our lives, as Christians walking up Fishergate Hill we are called to live out the hope in this passage. First of all our expectation is that we should be a multicultural, international fellowship, and around us there are diverse peoples, some already believers in Christ, others waiting to hear and respond to the Good News which make such a church possible. The flip side of this is that we need as Christians to stand firmly against any racist or nationalistic interpretations of our faith. Specifically in recent months we have been challenged to reject firmly the invasion of Preston by the racist thugs of the English Defence League, who dress up their hatred of minorities and Muslims in particular in a rhetoric about England as a Christian nation. Thankfully some Christians did stand up to be counted on this issue and prayers seemed to have some effect at minimising the potential havoc during the demonstration in November 2010. However, in a climate where the danger of division and ethnic conflict may well increase, we need a stronger witness here in prayers, in our lifestyle and public preaching that such views are totally anti-Christian.

Isaiah's vision is that eventually war will be no more and that God will be active in conflict resolution. Jesus too spoke about the role of peacemakers as central to his kingdom. There is a role today for us as we walk up Fishergate Hill, in the local conflicts between the ethnic groups and faith communities, between young people who hang out on the streets and the frightened older people who always blame "those kids". But with the global connections we have traced, and the number of young people from deprived communities such as ours who in the absence of creative alternatives find employment in the armed forces, there is a place

for serious commitment to international peace making by Christians. Most churches regularly pray for peace in the world, but it can be rather tokenistic and diminished by counter messages when even the annual sadness of Remembrance Sunday has nationalistic and sometimes militaristic overtones. In a city such as Preston which has strong army connections and industry is centred on the arms trade there is a huge challenge to reconcile our participation in a state which resorts to international war, with our claim to worship and follow the Prince of Peace. In a fallen world the debates may not be one sided and will certainly be controversial, but they are debates in which local Christians must fully engage.

The second mountain passage in Isaiah 11 concentrates more on the character of the Messiah and his anointing in the Spirit of the Lord,

- ¹ A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
- ² The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—
- ³ and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;

The prophet goes on to speak of the just judgements of the Messiah and their relevance to the poor. It is clear that God's justice is not blind in its impartiality, but as the one who "comes to break oppression" there is a distinct "bias to the poor".

- ⁴ but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
- ⁵ Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

And the passage concludes with a promise of a renewed whole creation that is at harmony with itself and in worship of the creator.

- ⁶ The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.
- ⁷ The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
- ⁸ The infant will play near the cobra's den,
the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.
- ⁹ They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,

**for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.**

Paul it seems must have been familiar with this passage and draws on it in his magnificent description of the new creation, where the straining hope of the earth is linked with the manifestation of the people of the Messiah and the return of Christ at the end of the present age. (Romans 8;19ff.)

The implications for Christians on Fishergate Hill living in the light of this vision and in the Spirit of the Messiah, is that they too must be radically committed to a bias to the poor, and a solidarity alongside them in ways that are as yet rarely seen in the churches of Preston. Secondly if the whole creation is to be renewed we are called to have a concern for ecology in the present. There are plenty of local opportunities, whether as friends of Avenham and Miller Parks, campaigning to save the Ribble, working as volunteers for the Lancashire Wildlife Trust, or campaigning for sustainable transport, or simply riding our bikes instead of driving everywhere. These activities too are signs of the Kingdom of God.

The final mountain passage in Isaiah 25 brings us back again to our God who shelters the poor and oppressed.

**4 You have been a refuge for the poor,
a refuge for the needy in their distress,
a shelter from the storm
and a shade from the heat.
For the breath of the ruthless
is like a storm driving against a wall
5 and like the heat of the desert.**

Living in the light of this passage on Fishergate Hill challenges Christians and others to continue and improve the existing good work that goes on for and alongside the homeless and marginalised, the addicts and ex offenders, the women who flee domestic violence. If we fail them the prophet declares that God will not. But the passage continues with an emphasis on celebration and life.

**6 On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare
a feast of rich food for all peoples,
a banquet of aged wine— the best of meats and the finest of wines.
7 On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations; 8 he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces;
he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth.
The LORD has spoken.**

**9 In that day they will say, “Surely this is our God;
we trusted in him, and he saved us.
This is the LORD, we trusted in him;
let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.”**

On Fishergate Hill Christians and others are called to affirm and celebrate the life and hope that God has given us in the Messiah. There is of course a special and sacramental way of

doing this in the Eucharist, or the breaking of bread around the Lords Table, which happens week in week out in Christian congregations. At its best the open table and inclusive sharing at the feast is truly a foretaste of the heavenly banquet prepared for all the world. At its worst where hierarchical privilege and priest-craft, or religious regulations make the table fellowship exclusive, or where broken and imperfect relationships destroy communion there is only ritual without life.

Yet, because our hope is linked to the risen life of the messiah, because though we may share in his sufferings we now already in part, and fully in future share in the power of his resurrection there is abundant life to be had. This is also true when we trudge uphill along Fishergate Hill into the city, and when we are weighed down with the culture of a one dimensional Victorian church with its inaccessible buildings, and traditional assumptions and culturally bound theologies. In the Messiah a three dimensional faith is possible. Even for the people at the margins such as Les, there is hope¹⁵ in them there hills.

¹⁵ One of the best things to happen in the churches of Preston in recent years was the ecumenical community outreach activities in 2008 branded as Hope 08. It is good news that the Hope movement is about to start up again and may be particularly appropriate for Christian action focussed on Preston's Guild year 2012.