

Editorial: Westernised Europeans and their Localities

Earlier this year I was giving a talk to a group of European leaders, most of whom were students or who had recently graduated. The subject matter was broadly that of evangelism. Part of the talk raised the question of what God might be up to in Europe and how we might co-operate with the work of the Holy Spirit.

One of the points in my presentation was the rediscovery of the local, of communities and of churches who were attempting to reconnect with their context or neighbourhood. The talk was well received and we entered into a fascinating debate informed by the highly perceptive insights of this well educated, articulate and committed audience.

Most contributions were observations that I've heard on any number of occasions but there was one comment that caught my attention in a very acute way. Someone from Vienna questioned the contention that there was any longer such a thing as community in the local. In other words, does neighbourhood really exist and can it do so in the context of a highly individualized world?

This was not a hostile or even a confronting question. It was a genuinely open-ended question, partly informed by conversations with his wife whose profession was city planning. These were questions that exercised their attention and active interest.

The context for he and his wife is city life in Vienna where most people live rather atomized lives in apartments. They might meet their neighbours in the street but would have little awareness that these people were actually their immediate neighbours. Apart from cafes there were no places in the locality where neighbours would actually meet, still less converse and there appear to them to be few opportunities to enter into a deeper encounter about existential questions. This is the isolating lifestyle of a lot of people living in a city. Their primary comprehension and embodiment in the city is isolation in the local.

To be frank the question both caught me unawares and intrigued me in equal measures. I have thought about it since. So how might I respond to that perceptive challenge?

First, it is almost certainly the case that this is the life that many people do lead, not just in city centre apartment lives but also in the suburbs, in small towns and even in villages. That is not a reality that arises out of necessity but it is a tendency that is reinforced by a number of trends that have been in existence for at least the last half century. A number of sociologists, notably Ulrich Beck, have written extensively on the factors that have led to this atomized life.

Second, this culture of isolation is strongly reinforced by the notion that happiness is deeply connected to the experience of freedom (as defined within a neo-liberal perspective) and that freedom cannot be achieved in the context of commitments to others (or that commitments to others are a secondary set of engagements based upon social contract). There is increasing evidence that the culture produced by this highly individualistic existence produces significant levels of anxiety and does not seem to lead to the happiness that many hoped for.

Third, the widespread dislocation experienced by a society, where few live in the place where they were born or were brought up and may move many times, either for employment or for reasons of preference or convenience, undermines any sense of belonging or connection to a particular place.

Fourth this may be the experience of more privileged people in the western world, but it would not describe the experience of those who do not have the privilege of mobility, through poverty in its many forms.

But maybe for the more affluent westerner, there is no such thing as place. Perhaps they, or we, many western Christians, are only left with spaces in which we may do our best to construct a life where relationships are maintained, without reference to our immediate context. But whether or not that is true, that still leaves open our potential response to such a reality. Ought we simply to be saying that we construct individual Christian lives that connect with others in ways that have no regard to neighbourhood, to context, to the place in which we live?

Or is it the potential gift of the church to help to recreate family, neighbourhood, community and the significance of place as a part of our mission to reconstruct a deeply fractured world? The gift of remaining, of stability, of forming deeply committed relationships in particular places, where incarnation in relation to mission is taken seriously may well turn out to be one of the prophetic actions that the church could explore as part of the wellspring of a new missionary order. Even in the midst of isolating, apartment living, city life, is it possible for the church to form communities where we know and are known, where we know our poorer neighbours, and where we exercise the discipline of remaining.