

One of the first questions anyone new to an area will be asked is 'where are you from?' It's certainly a question I've been asked many times since I was first put in a black dress and shoved to the front some eighteen or so years ago. If I say, 'London' for some reason, this does not seem to satisfy. 'No', comes the response, 'where are you from originally?' So I explain that I was born and raised in Leeds. And then something strange happens, something I'm never prepared for. People almost always say, 'Oh yes. I like Leeds. Very nice place'. Pardon? The first time I heard Leeds eulogised I assumed that I must be talking to Essex's last eccentric person. But no, several years later, relocated to Surrey, this is still a typical response. Now I know that most of Essex is rarely described as a beauty spot, and Surrey is mostly Croydon and its environs but *surely* they're not so bad that Leeds is seen as somewhere *nice*? Are we talking about the same Leeds, here? Large, depressing city in West Yorkshire, home of Europe's largest council estate, the place where mindless drunken violence occurs not just at 2 am on a Saturday morning like everywhere else but 24 hours a day, every day, Yorkshire's first entry in the nation's top 50 'Worst Towns' poll? It appears we are. No the city's admirers assure me, Leeds has changed. It's not like that anymore.

Well, a few years ago I had the opportunity to test these preposterous assertions out and for the first time in 30 or so years returned to where I was born. Well, yes, it was no longer the 1970s. There were more Starbucks than last time and fewer fish and chip shops. There were one or two Christian bookshops, and even a Harvey Nichols, blink and you'll miss it small, but still there. Even the café where I used to go for tea and chip buttie, still open, had had a facelift sometime in the early 90s though it was still doing a roaring trade in that Northern speciality brown sludge chipped mug tea. The part of me that likes to fondly remember life in shoebox in middle of t'road, was rather disappointed that there wasn't a flat cap to be seen (this was before they became fashionable again), nobody seemed to be taking their ferret for a walk and not all of the town was saturated with the smell of cooking lard. Things it seems, do change. Apart from the tea. Things do change. Not enough that you'd want to go back and live there, but change they do,

In this Easter season we are celebrating the resurrection life, the new life in Christ. Suddenly all the readings at Mass are from the NT. We hear again about the early life of the church, we replay the home video of the first steps of the church chickling freshly hatched from the Easter egg. Everything is new and fresh and early. There is a strong tendency for some Christians to look back to this period, this flatcaps and ferrets period, the Acts of the Apostles age, as a golden age. Because it is recorded in

the Bible, it is seen as the age when the Church was as she should be, pure and unadulterated, free of Papist accretions and mediæval superstitions which have subsequently attached themselves barnacle-like to the underside of the good ship church. And, so this line of argument goes, we should get back to basics, back to NT purity, back to the beginning.

Well, this is impossible. We can never go back. That was then and this is now. A baby cannot go back into the womb, a chick cannot crawl back into the egg.

But not only is it impossible to go back, it is absurd. Change is part of the natural order of things. To suggest that the Church in Jerusalem in 33 AD is the 'true' Church is akin to saying that the 'true' Father Andrew is the newborn infant who appeared in a Leeds maternity ward all those years ago, and that to be authentic he must never grow or change. Now a newborn infant cannot do much, her first steps are faltering and usually result in a painful and embarrassing fall. She will learn bad habits as she grows and matures. But take away the bad habits - of which she has many- and she will still not be the babe in arms again.

Of course, at all stages of his life Andrew will be in some sense the same person, whether newborn, teenager, thirtysomething, retired. While there will be change something remains the same, the accent probably, knowing my luck. Crucially, no stage of this journey, from newborn onwards is more 'authentic', more 'truly' Andrew than any other.

We cannot declare that a baby must not grow up, and so with Christianity. The New Testament does not tell us what the church *should* be like, but what it *was* like.

Our reading from Acts this morning is a case in point. It's a passage that must send cold shivers down the spines of many who hanker for the early church, or at least would if they paid it the same amount of attention as they do to St Paul's homophobic moment. It's certainly tested the ingenuity and inventiveness of 'Bible-based' Christians through the years. *'no one claimed for his own use anything that he had, as everything they owned was held in common'*. If anybody owned anything, they sold it and pooled the proceeds.

Despite obsessively clinging onto some things, Christians are quite happy to have dropped this peculiarity of the early Church. It is mostly seen- correctly- as a probing peck of the newly hatched chick, a youthful experiment.

If we no longer have all things in common, if we no longer sell our possessions and give the proceeds to the Bishop, should we heartily join in with an age and a society where we are defined by what we buy, what we own, what we consume? Well, 'All things in common' may have been abandoned, but the principle that undergirded the practice has not changed. The core remains the same.

The first Christians were not some sort of primitive communists; but they understood very well the potential dangers of wealth. They understood that the more you have money in your vision, the less you see God. They understood that to say 'mine' can be to say 'not yours'. They understood the absurdity of saying 'mine' when all possessions, everything we think we own, belongs in fact not to us, but to God. They would have understood very well- though for very different reasons- P J Proudhon's statement 'all property is theft'. They had actually heard Jesus say 'Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven'. They had seen Jesus, risen from the dead, and suddenly the fine clothes, the fields, the gold, the silver didn't really matter anymore.

But for us, how very, very difficult. How very difficult it is to let go of the idea of our possessions. How very difficult to stop grasping for those glittering baubles, those bright feathers that line our nests. How very, very difficult.

Here's the up side. Sometimes, Jesus' teaching shows us our destination and tells us 'get going'. In one sense, that's pretty much what baptism is about. Jesus sends us on our way not always expecting us to instantly arrive. There are steps we can take on the road.

If we cannot give away everything, and the vast majority cannot, then we can start to try to orientate ourselves to value those things for which the world accords no monetary value but whose true worth is infinitely richer. You cannot purchase baptism; credit cards are not accepted at the confessional, the body and blood of Christ is not for sale: these things are always free and always offered freely; and yet you will find nothing, nothing of greater value than these.

The very first Christians held their worldly goods in common; each time we gather around the font, each time we meet around this table to celebrate Eucharist, we are sharing much, much more. What matter stocks and bonds, mortgages and ISAs, when we have the unchanging gifts of the heavenly kingdom? What matter cars and computers, streaming and smartphones when we can receive, right now the goods of the world without end?

Like Leeds, like any great City, the Church, the City of God, will grow and change. For the Church, particular practices will come, will grow and some will go. This city is lit by the pure untameable ever-new dynamism of the resurrection life. But the bricks of which she is built, the gifts she lavishes freely on her inhabitants, the pillars which strengthen and support her, remain the same. Because she is built on the one and the same, the surest, foundation Jesus.