

difference.

Habits in a complex and divided world



Listen to others' stories and see how the world looks through their eyes

We believe that every person is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27), with a unique story. When we are curious enough to seek out that story, we affirm that person's innate, God-given value. In Jesus' remarkable encounter with the Samaritan woman (John 4), he engages her in conversation and elicits her story – despite the fact that he clearly knows her completely, as only God can. Demonstrating a true interest in who the other person is and how they've experienced the world, showing them they have been heard and honoured, can make it possible to begin treading trickier territory together.

Curiosity about the other also leads us to discover some of the limitations of our own story and perception. Much of Scripture attests to these limitations. *'No one really comprehends what happens on earth. Despite all human efforts to discover it, no one can ever grasp it. Even if a wise person claimed that he understood, he would not really comprehend it,'* says the writer of Ecclesiastes (8:17). It is a theme echoed by Job (11:7) the psalmist (139:6) and Paul (Romans 11:33). Curiosity demonstrates a humility that acknowledges that we don't have all the answers and that we are not infallible, without diminishing the value of our own story and convictions.

The theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about what happens when we cease to be curious: *'There is a kind of listening with half an ear that presumes already to know what the other person has to say. It is an impatient, inattentive listening that despises the brother and is only waiting for a chance to speak and thus get rid of the other person. This is no fulfilment of our obligation, and it is certain that here too our attitude towards our brother only reflects our relationship to God.'*¹ Curiosity about the other is intimately bound up with our curiosity towards God.

As we seek to expand our understanding of the other, we also need to be continually curious about who God is and what he is doing. In Exodus 3, Moses sees the mysterious burning bush and chose to turn towards it: *'Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up."'* (Exodus 3:3). This posture of curiosity is crucial as we seek to embody a reconciling way of life and discern where God might be calling us to bring renewal and restoration.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (Harper Collins, 1954), p.98.



Encounter others with authenticity and confidence

Our encounters with others are inseparable from our relationship with Jesus (Matthew 25:31-46). These encounters are often where we first notice complexity, division and difference, and they are the focus of so many of the teaching of Jesus, St Paul and other parts of Scripture, including Old Testament law. The priest and theologian Sam Wells, reflecting on the meaning of gospel-centred reconciliation, advises disciples: *'In all your sophistication and analysis and strategy-setting and social awareness, never forget the goal of all change: truthful and trusting face-to-face personal relations in which people discover who they are and the gift they are to one another, addressing the most painful realities in their lives and sharing their greatest joys.'*²

Being present in these encounters means making time for the other, dedicating our full attention to them, encountering them as they are. In the gospels, Jesus is so often doing just that – sharing unhurried time over food with the unlikeliest of people as both host and guest, venturing into unfamiliar territory, risking disapproval by associating with 'tax collectors and sinners'. Being fully present is most uncomfortable and necessary with those from whom we might instinctively walk away. It embodies our commitment to follow Jesus in breaking down dividing walls.

This breaking down of dividing walls is essential to how Paul understands the meaning of Christ's life and death and the meaning of our discipleship. *'For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility.'* (Ephesians 2:14-16)

Being present also means having the courage to bring our whole, unique selves to those encounters: being honest about both our vulnerabilities and insecurities and our convictions and strengths. This brave sharing of vulnerability is a quality Jesus displays (asking the Samaritan woman for a drink) and which he praises so often in others (the woman who washes his feet, his parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector).

This is the opposite of pretending that we are all the same or that our differences do not matter. It is about daring to find unexpected points of connection, building deep foundations of resilient trust, which can free us to express our uniqueness and difference with confidence and integrity.

² Sam Wells, *Walk Humbly* (Canterbury Press Norwich, 2019), p.87.



Find hope and opportunity in the places where we long to see change

When divisions seem intractable and we face repeated disappointment, it can be hard to find hope or envisage an alternative where healing, restoration and thriving relationships are possible. But God is the One who brings resurrection out of death, and who can work through our weakness.

In Revelation 21:5 we read: *'He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"* and Paul writes: *'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!'* (2 Corinthians 5:17). The habit of reimagining encourages us to be renewed by the Holy Spirit, caught up in God's work of reconciliation, and to allow God to stretch our understanding of what is possible.

This is precisely the role of the prophets throughout Scripture, as the priest, theologian and activist, René August, describes: *"The prophets are those who have had a long, hard look at the world. They have examined their context well and listened to the pain of those on the margins. They have seen the contradictions, injustices, idolatry, hypocrisy and hopelessness that surround them. They then give themselves to the work of remembering. As they remember their own stories and the stories of God at work among them, they remind themselves of the things God dreams about. They then go beyond dreaming to doing the work of 'imagining'. What would their world look like if God's dreams for their world came true? Based on their knowledge of who God is, they begin to tell new stories about their world. They do this in community, never alone."*³

To do this, we need to be deeply open *with* God about where we currently are. Reimagining depends upon total honesty with God, nourished by thanksgiving but also sincere lament when things are not as they should be – as we see in the example of the psalmists and Old Testament prophets. We also need to be open *to* God and what *He* is doing and is calling us to do. Not infrequently, this is a place of confusion and of surprises.

In the early days of the Church, Peter learnt this quite dramatically. Following his encounter with Cornelius, the Holy Spirit was given to everyone present, including the Gentiles. God was realising his reconciliation of all things in a completely unexpected way: *'The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles.'* (Acts 10:45). It was Peter's openness to God, who had spoken to him through a vision, that enabled him to embrace this new thing that God was doing.

As René August wrote, we often find that we need others to accompany us in the act of reimagining. Together, we can become more deeply rooted in hope. And we may find that God leads us to new places of courage and creativity, enabling us to tell a new story in our own lives, in our community and in the world.

³ René August, 'Seeking Peace: Pilgrimage through God's word in God's world with God's People' (Tearfund 2018), p.65.