

Sunday 2 April 2006: Lent 6.30pm Sermon Series: Building Community

Building a Mobile Community

Readings: Matthew 25. 31-46; Extract from ‘Howards End’ by E M Forster

I am doing something this evening, which I have never done before; speak to you from a semi-prepared script, which I started writing a few weeks ago. So perhaps before I start properly you'll allow me to take the edge of my nervousness by reverting to what I often do when faced with an audience and ask you some questions:

How did you travel to church this evening?

Hands up who came by Tube? And by bus? By train? By car or taxi?

And hands up those people who cycled?

And finally those lucky people who were able to just walk?

Now, I'm sure even just by asking that question you will have immediately noted those people near you who have got here using the same form of transport and can now have a suitable exchange of views at the end of the service about the awfulness of the Northern line or the fact that the Number 24 buses always come in threes or indeed why do engineering works always occur on those weekends when you have volunteered to do something here at St Martins? Or perhaps if you are visiting us from another town or city, you can say how transport here compares with your experiences back home.

This is the area in which I have worked for nearly 10 years. Local transport. That is the rather boring business of how we travel around our city and rather on the edges of our theme this Lent - Building community. And yet ...

I am a researcher at the Transport Studies Group, University of Westminster, working in two areas: first, the business of travel planning, which in a sense an activity not unlike the questions I have just asked you writ larger – looking at how people to travel to and from a location (school, workplace, hospital, or even their own home) and working out ways they can do that efficiently without causing lots of pollution and congestion and stress. This often means promoting alternatives to the car, buses, trains, cycling or walking or perhaps car pooling/sharing. Whilst for many organisations, the primary objective can often be to resolve car parking chaos, the bigger aim is to contribute to reducing co2 emissions by cutting their employees use of the car.

The second area is examining the links between transport and the access that those on low incomes have to key facilities such as schools and colleges, work, healthcare and leisure facilities. This link is illustrated by numerous scenarios: the school leaver who is unable to take up a work based training programme because they live in the middle of a rural area with no regular bus service and their family doesn't own a car; the single parent on a outlying city estate where there are few local jobs unable to access a suitable part time job the other side of the city, because the bus services simply can't get them there in time for the 6am shift start.

To me both these areas of work have clear connections with “building a community” and a building a community on lots of levels. The travel planning process can be a bit like analysing how an organisation works. By going to talk to people about how they travel, its amazing the insight you get into it's culture – how employees see their bosses, how bosses feel the need to be seen to do something, but have no real intention to change their own

behaviour – or in the case of some organisations, the sort of creative buzz that can be present when everybody is encouraged to come up with solutions and nobody has special perks. Working out the best way for people to travel can then become a joint enterprise – a team building experience, a way to build that community.

One step up, travel planning can be a way for a business to begin to think about how its operations impact on the local community and for it to build a co-operative relationship with those who live and work around it.

But none of this is easy. As ever with building relationships, it takes a lot of listening, a lot of compromise seeking and an awful lot of encouragement and enthusiasm. And perhaps most importantly, the insistence that everybody has something positive to contribute.

In the case of transport for those on low incomes, I think the best way I can illustrate the building community dimension is to briefly tell you the story of Braunstone, an area south west of the centre of Leicester. Braunstone is divided into two parts by a park and since a few years ago was one of the poorest areas of Leicester, with high employment, below average educational achievements and health. Many families in the area had no access a car and there were no bus service linking the two halves of the area and very few linking it with the rest of the city. Surveys carried out with local people revealed how the lack of public transport was a severe hindrance to people getting work and getting to college. The local community association made a bid for some government money and as part of the preparation for that bid began to map out bus routes which could help get local people to local colleges, two nearby, but previously inaccessible retail parks, two hospitals and other leisure facilities.

They hired a bus specialist, who worked flat out and for a period without pay to set up two bus routes, to be managed by the community association. Fares would be set by them to be deliberately as low as possible for Braunstone residents and the routes were specifically designed to link with local schools, plus a new health and leisure centre which opened last year. But crucially, they were also designed to be for everybody on the route – not just Braunstone residents.

So those transport links became a key element of a whole programme of activities to revitalise Braunstone and to reconnect it with the rest of the city.

So if there is building community dimension to my work, what is the connection with those passages from Matthew 25 and Howards End?

In the passage we heard from Howards End, the mantra “only connect!” is being applied to the sphere of personal relationships and in particular that between Margaret and Henry. But I think it’s a mantra which we could do well to apply to all areas of our lives and the way we try to live in community with others. If I am honest, I love my work best when I am connecting people or ideas up. And I dislike it most when people are blindly following their own way or own discipline, without making connections with other people, or other concepts outside their immediate view. The two areas I have focused on this evening are ripe for “only connecting” and this what I try to do.

And surely, that is partly what Jesus is trying to teach us in the passage from Matthew? Our inability to connect actions done to others to what we do for Christ will be what leads to our downfall.

For me, the passage also points to the need to treat everybody justly. And perhaps enabling all in our community to access the services and opportunities that may be open to them is part of that just treatment. Equally, ensuring that the way we travel does not lead to problems which adversely impact other communities across the world has to be part of justly providing for strangers who are our brothers and sisters.

We are very fortunate to be part of what must be one of the most accessible churches in the UK. But perhaps the building project also gives us an opportunity to consider how people travel to St Martins.

Finally, a thought in preparation for next Sunday, Palm Sunday. How do you imagine Jesus would have triumphantly entered Jerusalem today? In a stretch limo? On horseback? I prefer the image of him serenely seated on a rather clapped out but trusty bicycle and being a man who wasn't worried about risks, I think he would have cycled without a helmet!