

Ever since the Covid pandemic I have been part of a group of neighbours cultivating a small plot of land in our street. We grow fruit and vegetables, have a small wildflower meadow (wildflower 'patch' might be more accurate, something you can walk round in less than a minute is probably not a meadow!), and a community composting area. The inspiration for this humble little project came as lockdowns ceased and people began to return to something like their normal lives. It seemed to many of us that we had discovered community and solidarity during that time in ways we had not experienced before and that this was something worth keeping. But how? In some small way the community garden became a place where the flame of that local, neighbourhood solidarity was kept alive.

No doubt for most, if not all of us, 2020 is not a time we would want to return to. As the Covid inquiry hearings continue we also become more deeply aware of the pain of that time and lasting consequences it had on so many people. Yet what we glimpsed, briefly but powerfully, in those days was something of a world lost, a world of local connections, of local support, care and attention to one another and the neighbourhoods we share. Many of us saw that, and saw that it was good.

What had brought that world to our attention again? A crisis, yes. A need to care for one another until the crisis was averted. Absolutely. But, more deeply, this world of solidarity flowered again in the space created by a pause in the march of modernity; as planes were grounded, stock markets stilled and shops were closed. The noise of global capitalism ceased, and in the silence the local found its voice.

In his most recent book Paul Kingsnorth calls the system of modernity, 'the Machine'. The logic of the Machine is: the aim of endless economic growth; the Creation (including humanity) as fuel for economic growth; science, technology and corporate agency as the means of advance. Furthermore, the growth and efficiency of this global logic happens through the colonisation of the local. In order to smooth the passage of the Machine across the globe the local, with its traditions, its crafts, its myths, its stories, cultures and local ties, must be uprooted.

Maybe, just maybe, however there are signs of a disillusionment with the Machine. Perhaps moments like the Covid pandemic revealed the Machine for the spiritual desert that it is. The Quiet Revival report alerts us to a movement of young people wandering into places of worship looking for meaning. Those swimming in the limitless fluidity of modernity are looking for something formed, something real, to cling to. Religion, tradition, communities of faithful people still trying to work out how to live lives of faithful obedience to Christ in a place, are islands of refuge in the wild seas created by the Machine.

The witness of the church in these times then must be to help people become rooted again – rooted in God, rooted in one another, rooted in place – these three together, and in dynamic with one another. This however will require our local churches to also discover what it means to be rooted again. Machine thinking has influenced our own. The imperative to grow the church, for the sake of the church, turns the local into a resource for our techniques and technologies (read projects and programmes), with all the accompanying metrics and management that takes so much of our attention away from the real business of being in relationship with our communities.

That managerialism has been a theme in the conversation regarding the transition from one Archbishop of Canterbury to another is therefore significant. The degree to which managerialism, strategies, targets, outputs and the rest has crept into our culture suggests a deeper colonisation with the Machine than many of us feel theological at ease with. Have we lost our roots? Not only

with the gift of the local, but with our trust in a God whose work of salvation always begins in the unlikely and the particular.

In my research evaluating the work of Pioneering Parishes (PP) I saw local churches inspired to become rooted again. PP helps parishes to rediscover the roots of their life in community, enabling parish priests and their churches to extend the care of souls into all the parish. PP is inspired not by the latest model or programme from elsewhere, but by the encouragement to send out roots into the community, to become entangled again in the soil of their parish, and to listen and to shape their life around what they hear. In one parish such a disposition has renewed the congregation from near closure to a vibrant worshipping community embodying the rhythms and seasons of its locality – and yes, growing numerically too.

Shifts in missional imagination are hard to quantify. And much of what then takes place will not register neatly on a spreadsheet. This is the stuff of solidarity, of relationship, of the Kingdom, of love. This is the sort of thing that grows when the Machine, and its thinking, is dethroned. The sort of thing for which the church is the taste and sign of.

Of course, when we think of things rooted we might also think of the wheat and the tares (Matt 13.24-30). Seeing weeds amongst the wheat the servants ask if they might uproot the weeds. But no, the two must grow together otherwise uprooting one will uproot the other. We live entangled in the roots of modernity. Yet we must seek to demonstrate the Kingdom distinctively in the sight of the world. Twenty years ago Wendell Berry argued that ‘the next division of the world will be between people who wish to live as creatures and people who wish to live as machines’. Fundamentally we must live as creatures, for whom the world is gift, and our communities the soil of our lives, not the resource for our ambitions. We must be rooted in God, in one another, and in place, and demonstrate to the world that to be rooted is to be human.

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