

Adrian Alker, St Mark's, Broomhill, Sheffield

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As floods of biblical proportions devastated low-lying areas of Sheffield in the summer, parish priest Adrian Alker had every reason to be thankful his house was on a hill. More precisely, on Broomhill, in the area west of the city once famously described by John Betjeman as “the prettiest suburb in England.”

His biggest immediate worry on the day we met was the progress of the building work on the stone-built, Victorian vicarage, the necessary outcome of the quinquennial inspection. The main effect here of the torrential rain was to have delayed the start of repairs. Now they were underway, Kevin the builder was knocking gleefully on the window to show us what looked like bits of roof falling off. It could be a long job.

The proud boast of Broomhill, where he has been vicar for nearly 20 years, is that there are more graduates per square mile than anywhere else in England.

“There was a saying when I first came that you had to have two degrees to worship at St Mark's. I felt ‘two degrees under’ since I hoped to come to a church which attracted people from all backgrounds. So despite the fact that I, like many clergy sported a couple of degrees, I did in some ways ‘vulgarise’ the church. That means of course that we have a much greater social mix than ever before’.

St Mark's itself, a stunning, Modernist design by George Pace, was rebuilt in the early '60s on the site of the old neo-Gothic one which was hit by an incendiary bomb during the Blitz of December 1940. It looks to me like one of the few buildings in post-war Sheffield that the architects got right: the devastation wrought by the Luftwaffe having

been compounded by the so-called planners of the late 20th Century, at least in the centre.

So Adrian's patch on the western edge of this friendliest of Yorkshire cities is beginning to feel like a suburban idyll; a bit of a sinecure, even. A place in which you could minister to the intelligentsia and the proletariat with ease, content with the daily round of worship and social outreach, and a bit of community work thrown in. And so you could – if you weren't Adrian Alker, whose outward calm masks a passionate commitment to his church, at home and worldwide.

He's under no illusion that Christianity generally, and the Anglican Church in particular, are in crisis – of schism on the one hand, and secular indifference on the other – and no-one is more committed to its renewal than he is: not for its own sake, but because he believes that at its best it can be now, as it has been in the past, a model and driving force for community living. The parish, a small, self-contained unit that people can identify with when the world's problems seem so massively overwhelming, is at the heart of the community, nowhere more so than at St Mark's. The floods which killed at least three people and made hundreds homeless in South Yorkshire, may have left Broomhill and its environs relatively unscathed, but as soon as the scale of the emergency became clear St Mark's was on the case.

Displaced families were housed in nearby student accommodation (a result of the link St Mark's maintains with the universities and other institutions), others were invited to the lunch which is a regular feature after the Sunday service. Some may even stay to worship when the crisis is over, but that's not the object of the exercise: the church on the hill was there when people needed it, no strings attached.

With attendance of up to 200 at the Sunday communion at St Mark's, and a total congregation of around 400, his own church has certainly bucked the national downward

trend of the past two decades: though in a parish of 5000 resident souls and another 8000 students, he is under no illusion that this represents a major revival.

Adrian Alker comes across as a determined, if sometimes frustrated, advocate of the parish system, believing as he does that to pursue a progressive agenda theologically – which he does, heart and soul – you have to win people over: and that’s a job for the long haul. And, as he points out, the long haul is not what the Church of England is about these days

“It seems to me that theology is essentially contextual: that what we experience in our common life – the challenges and hopes and ideals we forge together in the community of a parish and a parish church – is where the heart of Christianity will be found. But parochial work isn’t honoured as it used to be, for example in the way clergy are appointed and deployed. If you stay for a number of years you’re regarded as a bit strange, because you haven’t moved on or ‘got promotion’ And I sometimes wonder the way the church seems to be going that if bishops had spent many more years in parishes we might just be more credible as an institution to the world we serve?

It may seem an obvious point for a vicar whose been in the same place for nearly 20 years to make, but you can’t deny its logic, and it doesn’t sound like a personal whinge for there is no doubt that a priest of Adrian’s energy and intellect could easily have moved on.

To stay at Broomhill was a choice, partly determined by wanting to provide stability and security for a nephew and niece bereaved at a young age, but also because, like many priests before him, he believes in the long haul work of a parish priest, gaining trust, making deep rooted relationships, accepting community roles.

“Unless you put roots down and give a commitment to people, you don’t get those kind of fruits that you’re looking for”. In Adrian’s case this seems so – in December he is to receive an honorary degree from the University of Sheffield for his contribution to the life of the city.

Change and development in Christian praxis is precisely what he seeks: instead of the all-or-nothing certainty of the biblically conservative evangelicals, Adrian is in the dangerous business of pursuing a much more fluid, so-called liberal theological agenda. “So-called” because that is precisely what he, personally, doesn’t call it. He rejects the ‘I’ word, despite respecting its time-honoured place in the history of Christian ideas.

“Liberal has become an easy, pejorative term that opponents will use. They say ‘Oh, you’re a woolly liberal, and the opposite of that of course is ‘And I’m a Bible-believing Christian’ which is a tautology. How can you not be Bible-believing if you’re a Christian? The problem with liberalism is that although it has a proud history, it carries too much baggage now, and it’s come to imply an easy acceptance of anything, a kind of tolerance which hasn’t got much integrity to it. We know that isn’t the case, but it’s an easy weapon for opponents.”

So he uses instead ‘progressive’ or ‘radical’ – literally getting to the roots of what Christianity is all about – aware that even these words have their own problems (“radical Islam”, for example, has gained its own currency in recent years). But you’ve got to use something to describe what you’re about, and words are all we have.

In 2003, he established St Mark’s Centre for Radical Christianity, taking its inspiration from the Jesus Seminar in the US, bringing to Sheffield theologians like Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, and Jack Spong, and with them a host of people who want to hear their radical take on the Bible, Jesus, the nature of God, and the implications of all that for the way we live our lives

“So often liberal, or radical, Christians, define themselves negatively: we say we’re not Anglo-Catholics, or we’re not evangelicals, or we’re not charismatics. But If you’re just defining what you’re not, people who come are not going to be fed by that. So we started to look at what we are and to ask what are our convictions as a church. We found there was a real need to define ourselves in a positive way.

“Primarily the task has to be theological, because from the theology flows everything – the liturgy, pastoral work, children’s work, all flow from that. It’s about trying to understand the nature of God, and getting to grips with the historical Jesus. It’s Crossan who says if you get your historical Jesus correct you’re more likely to get your Christianity correct.”

“The fact is, we’re all in this vale of soul-making together. The role of the parish priest is not to save people from their sins, but to share in the adventure of life with them. We are called to walk alongside people, grow together, recognise the face of evil, but also to see the face of compassion. So much of our energy is dissipated by arguing among ourselves. What does that say to a troubled world? If we purport to be the body of Christ, and if we have a common goal of serving and bringing in the kingdom, whatever our disagreements are, that should be one of the uniting factors.”

This familiar, biblical language of the Kingdom provides the framework for expressing his philosophy of a liberal, radical Christianity. But it’s much more than an intellectual exercise, something to occupy the winter nights in the cosy living rooms of the Broomhill intelligentsia. For Adrian, the radical Christian agenda is simply explained, requiring no convoluted journey through labyrinthine paths of knowledge and understanding, but a straightforward route, from God to action.

“By chance of birth and location we have inherited a Hebrew/ Christian understanding of God which has served Western Europe for over 2,000 years. I don’t want to reject that traditional inheritance: I want to honour it and to use it. But not blindly, and not in a way,

in this global village, which ignores the vast majority of people who come to different understandings of God and religion, through their own faith. So one of the aspects of our journey in faith is to say 'This is an adventure, about discovering what we mean when we use this little word, God'.

"Our starting point may be in the Hebrew/ Christian tradition, but that doesn't have to limit our exploration of the sacred, or the 'more', or the 'beyond', or however we want to phrase it. Then alongside this comes a much more specific programme, which – if we call ourselves Christian – has to tie us in to the person of Jesus.

"That leads us to look at the programme Jesus came to enunciate, and here we find we're led to yet another adventure: to discover more and more about the historical Jesus, and to discover more and more what it means to be part of his programme of bringing in the Kingdom of God. And this has huge political, economic and social implications. This 'Jesus quest' then becomes much more 'programme-filled.' As a Church, you have to get to ask how do you serve this community in ways which take their inspiration from the programme of Jesus? And this is the binding factor in your core programme of outreach and compassion and support.

"These three – the God quest, the Jesus quest, and the implications in practical terms – are for me the building blocks of a radical, progressive, Christianity. The Church community ultimately is saying we want to make this world as if God ruled it, not the multi nationals, not the superpowers. This world has to reflect the values and priorities of the Kingdom of God, which means you are immediately thrust into the communal, political, economic and social life of a parish, a city, of the planet earth."

That the theology is no mere intellectual exercise is evidenced by the activities and commitment of the worshipping community at St Mark's. Involvement in issues of climate change – more prosaically, at parish level, issues of waste management, for example – making international connections, writing protest letters about controversial stuff like the

gay adoptions row, or women bishops, or Third World debt, or setting up a soup kitchen for the homeless – his congregation is good at all this. It's also good at giving: not only 10% of its net income, after taking account of the parish quota, goes to overseas and local charities, but much more besides through special collections, supporting other churches etc.

When we meet, Adrian has just completed some work on behalf of the Progressive Christianity Network, visiting the leading figures in many of the liberal/progressive churches and organisations nationally, and it's been something of a revelation. Our perception, he says, is that there is no interest in liberalism, always seen as somehow loose and ill-defined, from a nation that demands certainty and strong leadership, but that has not been his experience.

“Out there are all kinds of organisations small and large all with different agendas, different aims and objectives and yet they all represent a kind of vision for the church and a kind of vision for Christianity which actually has a coherence. They represent a significant number of people who're yearning for the church to be different from what it is. Yearning from the grassroots upwards, I would say.

“So much of what we hear and see in the media is very much top-down: leaders making statements, or even lobby and pressure groups making statements, and I think that more and more we ought to listen to the grassroots. If we did that my conviction is that we would discover a church that is far more open, far more inclusive, far more wishing to be the church of the nation, far more in touch with the complexities of life than sometimes the church seems to be when it's portrayed through the media.

“Because of its dissensions over various issues, people think of the church as being driven by arguments over gay priests, or the place of women. And important though these issues are, if you're perceived as worrying only about who can or can't be a priest,

it looks very churchy and very introspective. We can lose something of the sense of the Church of England as a broad church, a church which is empathetic to the needs of all kinds of people. People who know their local church, who've experienced it either through worship, or social action or whatever, are very positive about it. But those who're outside the church have a very different feel for what it's all about."

We break for lunch, and on the television news Nicholas Witchell is reporting agitatedly from outside Buckingham Palace. Is it the fall of the monarchy? No – it's bits of masonry falling off the front porch.

"We're in good company, then" says Adrian, as Kevin taps on the window to bid us a cheery goodbye.

Adrian waves back. "Kevin says his only experience of religion is Spiritualism. See? We're all on a journey. None of us has all the answers."

End

Visit St Marks and their Centre for Radical Christianity on www.stmarksbroomhill.co.uk and www.stmarkscrc.co.uk

* see also John Betjamen's poem 'An Edwardian Sunday, Broomhill, Sheffield'