

Readers on Writers 3 - Ken Leech by Karen Charman

I'd like to start by saying thank you to Peter for choosing Ken Leech as one of the writers for Readers on Writers 3. I've really enjoyed finding out more about him and reading bits of his books – and will definitely read more of his work when I have time.

I'm afraid I became so enthralled by his account of his student years in London, and the early years of his ministry as a priest, that most of my talk is going to focus on those years. Maybe next year, someone could talk on "*Ken Leech – part two*" or "*Ken Leech – the later years.*"

One thing that really appeals to me about Ken Leech and his work is his description of his ministry in inner London as involving "loitering," – 'loitering' on the streets; loitering in pubs, clubs, cafés; and loitering in gay bars – usually in his dog collar. I loved the idea of "loitering"; and it seemed to me a wonderful way of practising ministry. I must admit, though, to thinking, "Well, I love the idea, in principle; and it's a great way of taking our faith – and Gospel - out onto the streets, and connecting with people who wouldn't normally come to church – but", I thought, "I can't really see many priests or Readers having the time and freedom to exercise a "loitering ministry" nowadays – ministry must have been far less pressured and demanding in those days."

But, the more I **read** about Ken Leech, the more I discovered that – as well as his "loitering" ministry – a ministry of availability and open-ness to the gay community; and to other vulnerable groups – Leech fitted so many other worthwhile projects into his ministry.

He is variously described or listed as:

- a widely published author
- a well-known spiritual director
- an Anglican priest (retired)
- a community theologian and advocate of contextual theology
- a Christian Socialist in the Anglo-Catholic tradition
- a founder member of the Jubilee Group (a network of socialist Christians)

- former field officer of the Board of Social Responsibility, England
- former Director of the Runnymede Trust – “the UK’s leading independent race equality thinktank”ⁱ
- founder of the charity, Centrepoint – which became the UK’s leading national charity tackling youth homelessness; and
- “one of the church’s leading experts on drug culture and the social problems it creates”ⁱⁱ

Much of the biographical information for this talk was gleaned from Leech’s semi-autobiographical book *Care and Conflict*, in which he reflects on 25 years of ordained ministry in inner London. I also found some information on the internet – Wikipedia (of course); and an article in the Guardian from 2004, announcing his retirement, on his 65th birthday, after 40 years as a priest.

Ken Leech was born in 1939, in a poor working-class area of Manchester. He had no connection with the Church until his teens. In 1958, Leech moved from Manchester to London to read modern history at King’s College. As an undergraduate, he became familiar with the Docklands area and the East End – an area that had long been synonymous with poverty.

In the 50s, areas which had previously been socially mixed began to be occupied solely by the rich, creating new upper-class ghettos, and leading to a greater divide between rich and poor. Poorer communities became marginalized, leading to dissatisfaction, discontent and conflict. One of the earliest such communities – and most notorious – was in Cable Street, Stepney.

Leech went to **live** in Cable Street, as a student, in 1958. He lived there for three years – a time which was to shape, and have a profound effect on, his future ministry. Since the 1940s, Cable Street had been known as a black quarter - or ‘London’s Harlem’. It was the social centre of the London docks – an area infamous for its cafés, pubs and clubs. Leech spent much of his three years as an undergraduate frequenting these cafés and pubs.

Three East End priests had a crucial influence on Ken Leech at this time and on his future ministry:

- Father Neville, a Franciscan pastor
- Father Joe Williamson, priest of St Paul's, Dock Street; and
- Stanley Evans, priest of Holy Trinity, Dalston

Father Neville was a shy, contemplative man, who lived from 1944 to 1963 in an ex-brothel in Cable Street, which had been transformed into St Francis' Hospice. He "saw the work of prayer as central to the struggle with injustice and oppression, and his life and ministry was marked by prayerfulness and a commitment to the broken and the oppressed."ⁱⁱⁱ

Father Joe is described by Leech as, "the eccentric, extrovert, exhibitionist priest ... who campaigned for slum clearance and for the care of women caught in prostitution. .."^{iv}.

Stanley Evans, priest of Holy Trinity, Dalston, was "the most theologically and politically aware" of these three men who had such a formational influence on the young Leech. Evans believed in "the Kingdom of God as a community marked by equality and justice" with the Eucharist as "the expression of that community Prayer and politics for him were held together in the Eucharistic action."^v Evans was one of the first priests to pioneer the parish communion – where all who attended were welcome to receive communion.

Leech learned from Evans three lessons which stayed with him throughout his ministry:

- **First**, an insistence on the holiness of the common life and a belief in the dignity and **value** of the working class
- **Second**, Evans taught Leech to use his **intellect** to serve others and to strive for equality and justice for all
- **Third**, Evans had a strong commitment to the English pub as a place of comradeship and pleasure, a place where – quote – "the common life can be enjoyed and men and women can relax together."^{vi} -

Peter, please take note! Perhaps we could consider a change of venues for Readers on Writers 4 and explore 'Theologians in their local hostelry'!

And so, in these three men – Father Neville, Father Joe and Revd Stanley Evans – Ken Leech saw “a combination of contemplative prayer, pastoral compassion, political analysis and prophetic zeal”^{vii} – features which, Leech states, “are vital to any balanced Christian Ministry.”

A look at the titles and content of just two of Leech's many books indicates that contemplative prayer, pastoral compassion and care, politics and prophetic zeal formed a significant part of Leech's own ministry:

- *Soul Friend*, first published in 1977, is a must read for anyone interested in Christian Spirituality, Spiritual Direction or accompaniment
- *Care and Conflict – Leaves from a Pastoral Notebook* – explores the nature of 'street ministry' and the relationship between ministry and spiritual darkness – and offers a response to the issues of urban poverty; drug abuse; and racial conflict

84 Cable Street – where Leech lived as a student – was a microcosm of a whole new trend in pastoral care. Initially a Franciscan house of hospitality, it then became the first shelter for homeless alcoholics set up by the newly-formed Simon Community. The Simon Community offered warmth, food, clothing and the love of Christ to those who had hit rock-bottom and were deemed, by many, to have failed.

84 Cable Street, in its period as a Franciscan house and in its later period as a Simon Community, was guided by two important theological principals:

- “Firstly, that prayer and action must be held together; and
- Secondly, that any effective pastoral ministry must begin with diaconia – servanthood of a very humble and lowly kind.”^{viii}

Leech's student years in Cable Street – and the influence of the Simon Community and those three priests I mentioned earlier – were formative years. After reading modern history at King's College London, Leech went on to Trinity College, Oxford, to study theology and trained for ordained ministry at St Stephen's House, Oxford. He was ordained in 1965 (aged 25 or 26); and returned to London to serve his curacies in Inner London – first in Hoxton, then in St Anne's Soho from 1967. In Hoxton, Leech became heavily involved with “young delinquents” (his terminology), and with “the growing community of heroin addicts.”^{ix} This ministry continued after Leech moved to Soho for his second curacy; and expanded to incorporate his street ministry; ministry to the gay community; and his response to the growing problem of youth homelessness.

After his curacies, Leech spent three years teaching in Canterbury – combining this with some ministry in Canterbury prison and Dover Borstal. He then returned to the East End, in 1974 – to Bethnal Green – to serve as parish priest.

This was at a time when racial attacks were on the increase in Bethnal Green, culminating in the murder of Altab Ali in 1978 – just a few hundred yards from the Vicarage where Leech lived. Leech found himself parish priest of an area with one of the highest votes for the National Front in Britain. He was faced with the problem of how to handle racial violence and prejudice pastorally:

- how to support victims who were very suspicious of help offered by white people; and, even harder;
- how to minister pastorally to racists and to the perpetrators or supporters of racially-motivated violence

Leech states that, historically, the church in general – “and the Church of England in particular – has been much more comfortable with chaplaincy, “ambulance and casualty work” (“putting sticking plaster on wounds”) than it has with any **prophetic, critical** or **political** role. It has preferred to **comfort** the **afflicted** rather than to **afflict** the **comfortable** ...”^x

Leech was soon to change that. He began by writing letters which were published in two East End newspapers, urging “all anti-racists” to join him in occupying the site where the National Front gathered each Sunday morning. This occupation began with 50 people, but soon grew to thousands of like-minded people gathering each week, uniting Bangladeshis and whites in the struggle against fascism. Leech’s prophetic ministry confronting and combating racism was also apparent in his later work with the Runnymede Trust.

For Leech, pastoral care and prophetic zeal went hand in hand. Without prophetic vision – and a concern for social justice arising from specific contexts and local issues – “pastoral care”, according to Leech, “is likely to degenerate into ‘ambulance work’ – a style of ministry full of care and concern, [but] devoid of vision and challenge – a pastoral project without theology.”^{xi}

So, I’ve covered some of the highlights of the early years of Leech’s ministry – and I’m sure much more could be said about his ministry – and about his books – if time permitted.

But my allocated 15 minute slot is almost at an end. I’d like to just take a few minutes to summarise some of the key points Leech has highlighted for me:

- Firstly, the importance of somehow making time in our busy schedules for “loitering” – going out into our community to get to know our neighbours; to build relationships; to earn the trust and confidence of those who live in our parishes but don’t ordinarily come to church
- Secondly, the importance of understanding and reflecting upon the context of our parishes and neighbourhoods – the places where we exercise our ministries. To reflect upon the issues affecting our parishioners - or neighbours – and to understand and respond to the root causes of those issues

- Thirdly, the necessary link between prayer and action. Prayer and contemplation – spirituality – is not a **withdrawal** from the world. Prayer is entering **into** the **suffering** of the world, **interceding for** the world; and responding to the needs **of** the world, and of our neighbours. Prayer, contemplation and reflection should **precede, lead to** and follow **action**.

Through his ministry to drug-users and addicts, Leech recognised “the central place of intercessory prayer in all priestly ministry.” [I would change this to “in **all** ministry – ordained **or** lay.”]

Intercession is something that **we** - as Readers - can do for the church and the world, for individuals and for groups – **and** we can encourage and help our congregations to intercede too.

Leech writes, “The bringing of people and their needs, and holding them within the on-going stream of prayerful activity is, I’m sure, the most valuable thing that we can ever do for others.”

Alongside intercessory prayer, contemplative prayer equips and strengthens us for spiritual warfare. It helps us to draw close to God, and the closer we draw to God, the closer we will be drawn to others in their suffering and turmoil.

One final point – which is more of a question to Peter really:

‘*Care and Conflict*’ - in which Leech writes eloquently and movingly of his ministry on the streets and in the clubs of inner London in the 60s, 70s and 80s - is a great book; one which I would recommend to anyone who feels called to share in God’s mission — but this book was published 24 years ago! I expect the needs of the gay community and the issues of drug abuse and homelessness have changed greatly since then, and I wonder - Peter – if you can recommend any theologians or books that have **built** on Leech’s work; and offer a more contemporary account of the issues affecting these sections of our society today?

ⁱ runnymedetrust.org - homepage

ⁱⁱ theguardian.com, Wednesday 16 June 2004, article by Mark Gould, entitled *Community Spirit*

ⁱⁱⁱ Leech, *Care and Conflict*, DLT, London 1990 page 6

^{iv} *Ibid* page 7.

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- ^v Ibid page 7
 - ^{vi} Ibid page 8
 - ^{vii} Ibid page 8
 - ^{viii} Ibid page 9
 - ^{ix} ibid, page 9
 - ^x ibid, page 89
 - ^{xi} ibid, page 112