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Listen intently and then get your hands dirty

Church Times, 23 September 2011

<http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2011/23-september/comment/listen-intently-and-then-get-your-hands-dirty>

THE charred ruins, the still-smouldering heaps, the uprights at crazy angles... I was looking at the photo of the burnt-out Carpetright shop in Tottenham, but was thinking of similar images of rainforest clearance. And, as the news reported that looting was spreading to other cities, I could not help but draw a parallel with our collective looting of the planet.

One of many explanations advanced for the looting is a disconnection from society and the local community. Most of us, however, are equally disconnected from our earthly home and our neighbour; we are unaware of how our food is produced, or the implications of our consumption. One looter was jailed for six months for stealing bottled water. To manufacture, transport, store, and dispose of a one-litre bottle of water, seven litres of water and one quarter of a litre of oil are looted. It is less pure than tap water, and yet more than two billion litres of bottled water was sold in the UK in 2010.

SUSTAINABILITY is touted as the solution to the environmental crisis caused by our looting and polluting, but the sustainability movement is itself in crisis. Take climate change. In summer 2009, a global poll found that most of the people questioned — including 77 per cent of the British who were asked — wanted their governments to do more about climate change.

One year later, *The Guardian* surveyed MPs' views on climate change. Of the 650 sitting in Westminster, only 11 per cent responded, and just two per cent of the Conservative MPs. Then, last month, another global poll suggested that, in the most polluting economies, concern about climate change has fallen sharply in the past two years. Minds and hearts have not yet been won. International climate talks are at an impasse, and, unsurprisingly, carbon emissions are still increasing.

Participating in the “clicktivist” campaigns run by Christian Aid and the organisations Avaaz and 38 Degrees — petitioning governments to sign up to climate targets, stop the Canadian tar-sands oil pipeline, or think again about the sell-off of national forests — is quick and easy.

Coming together with one united voice can be powerful, but the best way to encourage change is to demonstrate that it is possible. Many responses to the looting were just talk: hypothesising about causes, demonising, calls for reprisals, and promises of government reviews. We need to understand before we can act appropriately.

And yet we must not be trapped in analysis paralysis, afraid to take the first step until the final step has been planned in detail, believing that we are powerless. The most powerful responses to the looting were practical, made by the local communities themselves (see @riotcleanup on Twitter). They understood the need to demonstrate care for their neighbourhood and maintain morale.

FOR the past year, I have been living alongside the monks and nuns of Mucknell Abbey, a Church of England contemplative Benedictine community, formerly at Burford Priory. “Living alongside” entails living within the enclosure, and participating in the daily office and most of the community’s other activities.

Benedictines follow the Rule of life written by St Benedict in the sixth century; their vows are to stability, conversion of life, and obedience. Stability is usually interpreted as rootedness in God, the monastery, and the community; and conversion of life incorporates poverty and celibacy, and is broadly understood as orientation to God. As we persevere in opening ourselves to God, God will gently reconnect us.

Obedience — abandoning your own will, cheerfully and ungrudgingly, in order to follow the order of another — is, for me at least, the hardest of the vows to grasp; so I suspect that it is most worth the effort, and is the most relevant to today’s world. It comes from the Latin for “listen intently”: the onus is on both parties to listen to each other and to God, and to understand what is being asked.

THE Rule of St Benedict opens with the word “listen”, and this is the word to which the community at Mucknell continually returns. Be silent, listen, and pay attention to God and God’s word, to our weaknesses and how they drive us, to other members of the community, to our neighbours near and far, to the place where we live, and to the whole planet. Understand the effects that our attitudes and actions or failures to act could have on others.

The community moved to Mucknell in November 2010. Through listening, sustainability became a significant aim for the move: to live more lightly on the earth, in celebration of God’s creation, with generosity and hospitality. It is a work in progress, but the first steps have been taken, including the construction of sustainable buildings; the installation of a biomass boiler, solar panels, and rainwater harvesting; and the planting of coppice woodland and an orchard.

St Benedict was extremely pragmatic in his ordering of the life, recognising the value of balancing prayer, manual work, and study within the daily rhythm. Before I came alongside the community, I worked in analysis and consultancy; I was embedded in theory. At Mucknell, I have been living with the day-to-day practicalities of the renewables, getting my hands dirty in the kitchen garden, and learning about biodiversity in the grounds. I have become more connected with my food and shelter, and my environment.

With imagination, churches and congregations could replicate many of Mucknell’s actions. The Shrinking the Footprint campaign and A Rocha’s ecocongregation scheme have much practical advice on greening faith and lifestyles. Here is an opportunity to reconnect with each other — through churchyard work-parties to improve biodiversity, for example, or through bulk-buying of solar panels — and with God’s good creation.

So I suggest listening intently to discover what actions are appropriate, and then acting pragmatically. The best way to encourage change in others is to demonstrate that it is possible.