

The Return of the Local

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Well, brothers and sisters, we're having a good night together and the last thing we need is a long after dinner address, let alone a boring one. George Bernard Shaw was once asked by a priest at the church door how the sermon was, and Shaw answered 'you were brief'. The priest was miffed and said, 'well, at least I wasn't boring'. To which Shaw replied, 'but you were boring'.

So tonight, I thought I'd talk to you about one thing, and then sit down: in our increasingly global world, the local is making a surprise comeback. And that's good news for us, as Catholic-minded Anglicans, because we do the local exceptionally well. So for once, despite social changes that make it hard going for churches, here's a social change that's going our way, and will continue to do so.

David Goodhart, in a new book *The Road to Somewhere*, talks about the way global society has tried to make us 'anywhere people', but the new trend is to recover the 'somewhere'. We saw this change play out with Brexit, with the election of Donald Trump, and slightly

differently with the near-election coup of Jeremy Corbyn and UK Labour. These developments reflect an increasing disquiet that decades of neo-liberalism, or trickle-down economics, and of globalization more generally, have left an unacceptable legacy.

Why is it so? Well, global market capitalism is too controlling and homogenising, leaving little room for nation states to set their own agendas. Neo-liberalism is all about the bottom line, eager to send jobs offshore and to shut down unprofitable businesses. Too bad about local workforces and the communities they sustain, and too bad about those who depend on increasingly fragile livelihoods and local networks to survive. The new values of flexibility, agility and adaptability, which the global winners take for granted, really mean survival of the fittest, and many people are waking up to that.

In light of this disquiet we now see a reaction against neo-liberalism and globalization, with Trump's call for tariffs to protect American industry, with a strong push away from Europe towards a more isolated America and an increasingly Little Britain. As for Corbyn, his radical economic agenda appealed to many younger voters simply because it wasn't business as usual—the voice of G20 protest and the Occupy Wall Street Movement was also heard among those who supported Bernie Sanders in America and Jeremy Corbyn in England.

So despite today's wider struggle for the Western soul, there are signs that the local is making a comeback—*not at the expense of the global, but as a new way of being global, of accessing the global.*

So, for instance, the internet isn't only a global connector. It's also a powerful tool for galvanising local action and engagement, as the Arab Spring demonstrated. Even social media at its most banal, gossipy and superficial represents a desire to get back to human-scale themes and interactions: what's she wearing? who's she with? what did he say then? where are you? what are you doing? Many young people belong to a virtual village through social media, as a network of friends whose daily doings occupy one another's minds. This is instead of the big ideas and canonical narratives typical of literary culture and mainstream media. Instead, the line between news, entertainment and titillation is blurred—just like it was back in the village.

What's important here is that the local and the global, the somewhere and the anywhere, now belong together. I've just read a book by James Rebanks, about his traditional shepherd's life on a farm in the Lake District—a way of life that a Viking would recognize. Yet this old-school shepherd is an Oxford graduate, who goes on UNESCO trips to look at farming techniques around the world, and his farm has 30,000 followers on Twitter, who share in the daily news

of sheep grazing and lambing, of breeding to improve the herd, of sheep being shorn, and winning prizes at the local show. A large urban audience of 'anywhere people' clearly want whatever it is that such 'somewhere people' have.

Another example is BBCTV's highly popular program *Great Railway Journeys*, presented by former Tory cabinet minister Michael Portillo. He roams Britain, Europe and America by train. Along the way he revels in both high and low culture, visiting Glyndebourne for the opera while also joining-in the singing of sea shanties at a wharf-side Bristol pub. He seeks out many sites of local production, from innovative hi-tech industries to traditional cottage enterprises long associated with particular towns and regions. Colourful personalities, local histories and regional cuisines are all celebrated, while the focus on railways ties together tradition, modernity and economic progress.

Michael Portillo travels England and Europe venerating the time-honoured, the communal, the home-grown, the creative and the vocational, while also reminding America that it once cherished these same cultural values. Every bit the proud Englishman, he also reveals a wider European heritage. Portillo is unmistakably though unostentatiously Christian, too, suggesting that Catholic belonging might constitute a necessary supplement to his project.

And this brings me back to us, to our Church and our mission. The Universal Church has always existed only through its local Churches, the dioceses. Having a regional quality, a local flavour, is a very Catholic idea rooted in the logic of the incarnation, and of the sacraments. Putting it theologically, we might say that *the everywhere God is only ever met somewhere*, and that *the universal is only ever encountered through the particular*. Local Churches before modern times even had their own regional liturgies—you'd find a different mass being celebrated at Milan, at Salisbury, even at Rome. Only with the Council of Trent and the *Book of Common Prayer* did we get the new-fangled modern innovation of one-size-fits-all liturgy, displacing local traditions.

Now, what would Michael Portillo think if he ever did a series about *Great Australian Railway Journeys* and came to Newcastle? He'd celebrate the local history of coal mining and industry, of shipping across the seas and up the inland rivers, and he'd visit the Hunter to sample a drop at Tyrrell's winery. He'd remark on the great university you've built, on your beautiful cathedral set high above the city, and as a music lover he'd visit the world class Newcastle Conservatorium and listen to the famous Stuart and Sons piano. He'd delight to see the heart of Newcastle revived, and to walk along your beautiful harbour frontage. He'd remark on both the natural beauty

and the retirement potential of growing communities along the coast. And he'd call the whole thing a success—a city revelling in its local story, and in so doing making a global statement.

What of the local Church in Newcastle, in the Hunter, and up and down the coast? You're well placed to tap into the new cultural and economic buzz of this region. I know you've done a lot of soul-searching and even some grieving in light of a recent dark chapter in your ongoing story. But that shouldn't lead you to withdraw, to retreat inward, to circle the wagons. Surely this is the time to get on the front foot, to show that the Anglican Church is there for the young, for the old, for the community, for the local—that all us Australian Anglicans are learning our lessons, taking our medicine, cleaning up our act, and trying to do better. And we're not offering a remote ideology or a rarefied spirituality. What we offer is ourselves: a human face, a welcoming face, deeply abiding in the city, in the towns and in the villages—delighting in a global vision, and seeking its local expression.

Might the 'somewhere people', who feel that no-one's interested, or listening, take comfort that the Church is still here, both interested and listening? For youth at risk; for the aged in need of care; for indigenous communities; for retirees who gather at the men's shed, in cooperatives and community gardens; for the homeless needing

safe shelter, along with local businesses, schools, and community groups—for any and all of the above—there’s a new sense of what can and should be done locally, even though the global cannot and should not be wound back.

And what about one likely future, in which robots take more and more jobs until many people won’t be able to and probably won’t need to work for a living? I expect that Western countries will have to offer a universal living wage, funded by new economic prosperity off the back of all that automation and cost saving, so people can live decently. How different things would be then, in what’s being called a post-capitalist society, with freedom to engage in community projects, music and the arts, being creative, and just getting together to celebrate life. Can you see a whole new opportunity for the local Church to find a new lease of life in that future?

Those smaller parishes with local priests in mission are perhaps uniquely placed for this sort of engagement, not as outliers in the scheme of things but as increasingly likely to become the norm.

What our Church will need if we’re to embrace this future is the right attitude in our institutional life and leadership. We’ll need maximum scope for creativity, maximum support for effort, and maximum patience plus encouragement plus good analysis when bold new

projects don't work out. Behind all that we'll need a maximum faith in our everywhere God, who longs to meet us and transform us locally. The Catholic imagination, the incarnational imagination, the sacramental imagination, has always seen things this way. Anglican parishes, especially those in the Catholic tradition, have always been strong at celebrating the local, even if this hasn't always been seen as sexy enough or evangelistic enough. Now, however, as Western societies reassess neo-liberalism and globalization and rediscover the local, we find ourselves well placed as Catholic-minded Anglicans to play a part—even to take a lead.

Thankyou for listening ...