BUILDING A BETTER WORLD

SALVATION AND HIGH STREETS

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I have just finished an interview with BBC Radio Oxfordshire Breakfast Show about the apparent decline of our local high street.

I always aim to strike a positive message but today’s interview was tough as those speaking before me were especially negative referring to derelict buildings and dying town centres. As someone working on the renewal of our town centre it took a lot of my energy to remain calm and speak positively. It reminded me again why my work is challenging. It places me in contact with so many people, structures and sometimes barriers. I constantly need to make a path through these structures and barriers whilst at the same time bringing others along. My work goes to the core of society as it impacts people and places. I see myself working with others to build a better world facilitating positive change and revival within our town centres.

I’ve been working in the property business for 25 years but it’s only in the past few that I have seen myself partnering in something with deeper significance. My Christian experience has been broad and positive but until recently I couldn’t readily connect my day job with my faith. I could see the role of Christian ethics in the workplace but I couldn’t see how my work connected with God’s mission. How was the message of salvation of relevance to the world of commercial real estate? If God was calling us to share this salvation story then I needed to find the vision and then the language to make it relevant to those I worked with and the projects I worked on. To begin with I didn’t like using the word salvation and less the phrase, being saved, something of a problem when reflecting on the mission of God.

I started the pioneer training with CMS in 2011 and I recall the moment on day one that I said I couldn’t use the word ‘saved’ when talking of my own Christian experience. I explained then that I found the word associated with being saved from this place to be transported at some point in the future to be in heaven, a place very separate from earth. I went on to ask the group if we could find less or even no religious words for our conversations together in order to find words more fitting to the vernacular of those we met in our daily lives. Given we were all beginning a pioneering work outside of the church confines I felt this would be a helpful challenge to set ourselves.

Here I am a few years later and I see the work I am involved in as part of a bigger story of salvation. What changed?

My explorations led me to discover the writing of Anna Minton. Minton is a reader at the School of Architecture, University of East London and writes for the Guardian Media Group. She wrote a report1 published by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors outlining some troubling trends emerging in British towns and cities for outside public spaces to become exclusively private, each managed in such a way to restrict use and access. The detail of this report whilst interesting and relevant was of less significance. The report’s headline was my ‘eureka’ moment: What kind of world are we building?

I found the question really helpful. It linked my work in the property world with my desire to partner with God and with others for making a better place. Significantly the question set an agenda for how I placed my time and energies thereafter. I made a positive change in my work load to enable me to take on work for councils working to improve their high streets, because this was building a better world.

In 2013 with my colleague Iain we opened our first pop up shop, called Flashop, in an Oxfordshire market town suffering from an above average number of empty units. This pop up went on over its first six months to host over 20 different businesses and enterprises many of which then took on a more permanent arrangement in another shop in the same town. The town’s people referred to our work as revival as it facilitated the opening of what had been long term empty shops. The council were delighted with this initiative and based their bid to the Department of Communities and Local Government to be ‘Great British High Street’ around it.

The decision to be part of this pop up project was a significant step. We took a risk with the rental commitment to the landlord but it worked, encouraging me to keep on building positively and to do it again in other towns as part of a wider town centre renewal agenda.

My reflections led me to conclude God is particularly interested in the land and how we shape it. Walter Brueggemann2 regards the land as a defining theme of

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1 Anna Minton “What kind of world are we building?: The privatisation of public space” Report published by RICS in 2006. http://media.wix.com/ugd/e87dab_c893a52a18624acdb94472869d942a09.pdf
2 Walter Brueggemann, Reverberations of Faith. (Westinster, 2002), 120.
Old Testament tradition. Much of the Old Testament narrative, see especially Gen. 12 and 15 and Deut. 1–30, identifies this relationship between God, the people and the land, a relationship Brueggemann goes on to emphasise in more detail within his other works. My conclusion was the relationship with the land wasn’t an optional extra for the Israelites or a special interest for those with a ‘green’ agenda - it was key to their relationship with God.

It’s key as it connects with the picture of a renewed earth in Rev. 21 and underscores my difficulty with the sentiment within the phrase ‘I am saved’. Howard Snyder and Joel Scandrett in their book Salvation Means Creation Healed express similar concerns “we aim (in this book) to overcome impoverished views of salvation that focus mainly on inner spiritual experience, eternity in heaven, or even narrowly on church health and growth”.

God’s mission of salvation is for the building of a better world in the here and now as we partner with him towards the renewal of the earth. Brian McLaren proposes a definition of mission as “to be and make disciples of Jesus Christ in authentic community for the good of the world”. McLaren added the italics to make the same point that “Christians are not the end users of the gospel...it’s not all about me (and my salvation)... but instead we are invited to be part of a missional community to join (Jesus) in his mission of saving the world.”

I have recently started working in a very large town on the M4 corridor with 70 empty town centre shops. Whilst the town is busy its people regularly refer to the blight the clusters of these empties create for particular parts of its town centre. Partnering with God to bring about positive use, encouraging creativity and bringing life is very much part of my work. Revival and change is the name of my game. Could this possibly be part of God’s salvation story?

Snyder and Scandrett helpfully connect salvation with the healing of creation - “The great concern of the church is salvation and, biblically speaking, salvation ultimately means creation healed.”

Healing the world now - this is good news and to work with God helps give spiritual significance to the building a better world narrative. Snyder and Scandrett quote Joel Green when he says “people are not saved in isolation from the world around them... and the metaphor of healing serves as an invitation to the people of God, not only to be recipients of Gods good gifts of salvation, but also to be agents of healing, to be a community of compassion and restoration”.

For my work to be regarded as an “agent of healing” would be a real privilege. I am not the one to conclude whether it is or not, I shall leave that for others to reflect upon, but I now have the vision and language to enable me to connect my business world with the unfolding story of salvation. Working at the core of society, at that interplay of people and their place, is a tough task but ultimately I know the work is God’s not mine. Yes of course we join in, but God’s the author, the initiator, the pioneer and we follow.

My hope going forward is that the church community can support our work in the different towns in which my colleagues and I work. Together we can make a huge difference and it would be really exciting for local communities to share the vision of building a better world within their local place.

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3 Walter Brueggemann, The Land - Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith (Fortress 2002), 5.
4 Howard A. Snyder with Joel Scandrett, Salvation Means Creation Healed. The Ecology of Sin and Grace: Overcoming the Divorce between Earth and Heaven (Oregon: Cascade, 2011), xiv
5 Brian McLaren, A Generous Orthodoxy (El Cajon CA: Zondervan, 2004), 118.
6 McLaren, A Generous Orthodoxy, 119.
7 Snyder, Salvation Means Creation Healed, xiv
8 Snyder, Salvation Means Creation Healed, xiv, quoting Joel Green, Salvation understanding Biblical Themes (St Louis: Chalice, 2003), 52–53
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