

THE OTHER SIDE OF LESSLIE NEWBIGIN

According to George Orwell the Isle of Jura was the most ungettable-at place on earth, a suitable location in which to turn 1948 into 1984. There he wrote his famous book which Lesslie used as a peg on which to question our so-called civilisation – ‘The Other Side of 1984’. I was on Jura last April and behind the pulpit in the parish church is a cross, placed there by the people of Jura in May 1995 to commemorate the restoration of peace in 1945. On a brass plaque are written these words: ‘In the presence of the Cross there are no innocent parties.’ Then in brackets are the two words ‘Lesslie Newbigin’ - there was Lesslie in the most ungettable-at place on earth – beginning in Jerusalem, in all Judaea and Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the earth – the Paps of Jura!

Geoffrey Wainwright writes: ‘...the best Christian theology takes place in the interplay between reflection and practice.’¹ Our aim today is to reflect on the practice, the other side of Lesslie Newbigin. I worked alongside him in India from 1966 till 1974 and again in Birmingham in the early nineties. So here are just a few anecdotes.

I first met Lesslie in 1961 at St Columba’s Church in Oxford when I was a student and he gave us a talk while visiting his daughter Margaret. I had no reason to think I would ever see him again. However, a few months later, a good friend of mine who went on to train as a priest at St Stephen’s College in Oxford, sent me quite literally on the back of an envelope, a quotation from Lesslie. It was his definition of a bishop. It read: ‘A bishop is a person who helps the Church to be what Congregationalists say the Church ought to be, but which without a bishop it usually isn’t.’ Years later in conversation with Lesslie I suggested that a congregation was essentially a body which enabled a bishop to be what a bishop ought to be but which without a congregation he, or she, definitely couldn’t be. He agreed and indeed for him the congregation was the real hermeneutic of the Gospel.² Lesslie’s understanding of a bishop was essentially as ‘a pastor, evangelist, teacher and leader of worship and not as an administrator.’³ Each month in Madras the city Presbyters met together for communion. Lesslie preached and celebrated and his sermons were published in 1974 by the C.L.S. under the title of the first sermon in the book: ‘The Good Shepherd’. I heard them all. Lesslie’s exposition of The Good Shepherd in St John’s Gospel 10:1-6 ends with his quoting that great saint, Quaker and friend of Mahatma Gandhi, Marjorie Sykes who said: ‘The Life of Christ was not written; it was lived.’ Lesslie added: ‘That is the secret of the true pastor – that the life of the Good Shepherd is being lived in him.’⁴ (or her!) Years later in 1990 at a conference in Swanwick, at dinner one evening, Robert Runcie was being felicitated on his 10 years as archbishop and 20 years as a bishop. Lesslie happened to be sitting beside him. By way of reply the Archbishop began by saying: ‘This is nothing. Here is Bishop Newbigin. How long have you been a bishop Lesslie?’ Lesslie replied modestly: ‘43 years.’!

In 1965 before going to India I was awarded a fellowship to study abroad. I wanted to study Hinduism. Lesslie advised against it saying that I would be better to study Marxism. Thus I went to Paris in 1966 to study under his friend André Dumas. He sang

¹ *Lesslie Newbigin A Theological Life* G. Wainwright O.U.P. 2000 Preface v

² *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* Lesslie Newbigin S.P.C.K. 1989 pp 222ff

³ *Unfinished Agenda* Lesslie Newbigin S.P.C.K. 1985 pp 92,101,105

⁴ *The Good Shepherd* Lesslie Newbigin C.L.S. Madras 1974 pg 6

Lesslie's praises saying: 'Ah, L'Eveque Newbigin - he is the only WCC English-speaking Staff Member who preaches in Geneva in French!' As a linguist Lesslie was superb and his Tamil was eloquent to a degree. Not only could he preach colloquially in remote villages but he conversed with the leaders of the Dravida Munetra Kazhagam (DMK), the Dravidian Forward Movement, and was a close friend of Cancheepuram Natarajan Annadurai, who was the government Chief Minister and founding father of the DMK. I remember being with Lesslie and Helen in the great Hindu temple at Kancheepuram when Lesslie began talking with a priest in Tamil. The priest turned to me and said that the bishop's Tamil was like fresh water flowing from a mountain spring. But Lesslie had realised that his Tamil was high Tamil and rather old fashioned as far as the DMK was concerned. Thus he had the help of a teacher 'to steer me, in daily lessons, into a more acceptable style.'⁵

At my ordination on 30th April 1967 Lesslie gave me this Bible in which, in what he referred to as his 'indecipherable scrawl', he wrote a text from 1 Thessalonians 5:24 'He who calls you is faithful'. It has stood me in good stead all these years. Also here is my copy of 'The Good Shepherd' signed by Lesslie in 1974, just before he left India for the last time, in which he wrote: 'For Murdoch with love and admiration.' Also my copy of 'Unfinished Agenda', released in 1985 at the United Reformed Church General Assembly in Southend, where I queued up in a long line to have it signed by Lesslie, who looked up and seeing it was me, wrote 'With love and gratitude for your share in the story'. He was a great encourager. Some of my Indian friends thought he was naïve because he trusted everybody. He put his faith in people whoever they were. Yet his discernment was real. I remember in a meeting where Rev Joseph John of Deenabandapuram, who was much admired by Lesslie, was present and Lesslie said: 'When negotiating with Joseph John you have to know which hat he is wearing.' He then chuckled and his shoulders moved up and down in that Lesslie sort of way. In 1968 he was asked by the Church of Scotland to attend the final Assembly of the United Church of Northern India (U.C.N.I.) prior to the formation of the Church of North India. Instead of going himself Lesslie sent me to Jullundur as he thought it would be a good experience for a young missionary, which it was. In those early days we were asked to sign his visitors' book and flicking through it, it read like a Who's Who of the theological and ecumenical world. J. H. Oldham, John Baillie, Visser t'Hooft, Karl Barth, C.H. Dodd, Owen Chadwick, D.T. Niles, Hendrik Kraemer, George MacLeod, Emil Brunner, Tom Torrance – he knew them all and hundreds more. He parodied them in some of his limericks:

Florovsky is speaking again.
His meaning is not at all plain.
But while Franklin C. Fry
Will never say die
It clearly gives Ernest A. Payne.⁶

As a student in Paris in 1966 I met a Catholic priest who was writing a thesis on Newbigin. He later changed it to a study on Roland Allen for whose style of mission Lesslie had a high regard.⁷ Years later at a large ecumenical gathering for clergy on

⁵ **Unfinished Agenda** Lesslie Newbigin S.P.C.K. 1985 pp 215-216

⁶ Ibid pg 154

⁷ Ibid pg 166

Merseyside, being chaired by Archbishop Derek Worlock, at which Lesslie was supposed to speak, the Archbishop clapped his hands to call us to order and announced that he was sorry but Lesslie hadn't arrived. However a hand waved half way up the auditorium and there was Lesslie who had slipped in and was deep in personal conversation with someone. Derek was very apologetic that he hadn't noticed him arrive but this was typical of Lesslie who was rather self-effacing. He then gave a brilliant Bible study on the subject of pastoral ministry. More recently when working in Milton Keynes I heard Mike Hill, then Bishop of Buckingham, begin a sermon in which he mentioned the book which had affected him most of all and he held it up. It was 'The Good Shepherd' by Lesslie Newbigin.

At the 1996 URC Assembly Lesslie left for a couple of days in order to be in Durham on 7th July which was the five-hundredth anniversary of the day a certain John Newbigin sought sanctuary in Durham Cathedral, after killing a man in a quarrel. To gain sanctuary the fugitive had to knock on the great knocker of the Cathedral door. Sanctuary was given for a number of days but was conditional on the fugitive leaving Sanctuary for the nearest port and so leaving the country for ever. John Newbigin was the furthest back that the Newbigin family were able to trace their ancestors! On his return to the Assembly I asked Lesslie what had happened. He explained that he had held on to the Sanctuary knocker whilst the considerable number of family members who had turned up held hands around the cathedral. It was a fun day with a serious intent and the Dean of Durham had asked Lesslie to preach in a service of worship. I asked him what he preached about. He said he took the Gospel reading for the day – Mark 10:46-52 – the story of blind Bartimaeus. He went on to say that he had preached about asylum seekers as Bartimaeus was crying out for mercy. 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me.' As it so happened the plight of 'asylum seekers' was a main issue at the Assembly that year.

Lesslie's secret, or in fact the open secret under-girding his life, was the reply which he gave when people asked him for his advice on prayer. His answer was: 'Buy an alarm clock.' But Lesslie was so focussed and so competent and so sure, not of his own righteousness, but of the righteousness of God and of the Bible, that he seemed to be on another level from the rest of us, which of course, in many ways he was. His prayers and Bible reading took place early in the morning and that was when I think, in his mind at least, he wrote several of his books. His letters were dictated before breakfast and signed on his return at the end of a busy day in meetings or out in the villages. If you sent him a letter you had a reply by return. Monica, his secretary, who was still there when we last visited in 2004, was extremely competent and moreover entirely discrete. But also I can see him now in the VIP lounge at Meenambakkam airport with his old typewriter on his lap banging away until he was called for his flight. He would ring me at 6 am or 11 pm and expected me to be available. Personally I did not mind this but rather admired his endless capacity for work. His madrigals sung in Kodai were terrific and I used to think there was no end to what he could do. His Geordie songs were an inspiration.

For Anne and me Lesslie was like a father and Helen like a mother. They were both very kind and supportive to us at all times. When my father died in Glasgow a day after our second child, Catriona, was born in the Kalyani hospital, when we had only been in Madras for a few months, their care for Anne and her new baby was all that one could desire. When we arrived back in Scotland in 1978 and were having a really rough time

at the hands of the local presbytery, Lesslie and Helen visited us each year and did their very best to encourage us. Lesslie was quite upset that we, who had been such a 'success' in Madras should be such a 'failure' in Scotland. He sent me a text from Romans 8:28 'We know that everything works for good for those who love God.' Even in the 1990's after they had moved to London and when I was unwell Lesslie was the person who rang to inquire after me the most.

He remained a father figure for us and we often wondered what we would do if he were to die - we would feel bereft. Thus one morning in late January 1998 we arrived early off a train in Kerala for breakfast with Sam Mathew the Bishop of Kottayam who told us that he had just had a fax from the Synod office in Madras to say that Lesslie had died. It was a huge moment in our lives. Sam went on to tell us about Lesslie. Sam had been Malayalam pastor in Madras and lived on the Kirk compound as our immediate neighbour. Because he was ill he failed to turn up to one of the city pastors' monthly meetings with the Bishop and did not send an apology. The next month he had a heavy cold and again did not send an apology. Later that day a phone call came from the Diocesan office asking why he had neither come nor sent an apology. He explained. Then the next morning his door-bell rang and there was Lesslie. He had come to see how Sam was and also to chide him, not for not sending an apology, but for not telling him that he was unwell as the bishop would have prayed for him! It was a good lesson for Sam which stood him in good stead later on as a bishop.

It was not that I always saw eye to eye with Lesslie. To my mind he was committed to social work but not to justice and peace in the radical way in which I understood it. As a pacifist I had many discussions with him about Hitler and the 1930's and what would have happened if we had not stopped him. When the 'community organisation' people came via Rev Sugirtharaj to Madras - Lesslie was very wary of their approach and I was the one who talked him into coming to Cheyyur village on the fateful occasion when he was actually struck by some people, where his car was blocked from leaving the place, and where the situation was turning very ugly until Fatima, who was a social worker friend of Sugi's, arrived and, as she was from that village, the people listened to her and let us go. Lesslie was annoyed quite understandably because he could speak perfect Tamil whereas the USA 'organiser' Dan Roche, whipped the people up into some sort of frenzy without being able to understand what they were saying.⁸ Lesslie was very wary of such radical social action. I remember in 1968 he was out of India and when he returned he told us that he had read Marcuse 3 times in the original.⁹ Rather like the present Pope the student riots of 1968 and the doctrines of such as Marcuse affected Lesslie's views on political action. He told me at some point after we were all back in the UK that he was actually putting leaflets through letter boxes in favour of Shirley Williams and David Owen's lot. I was deeply committed to Labour at that time and remained so until I resigned my membership over the invasion of Iraq. I was not impressed by the gang of four and wondered how Lesslie could be doing such a thing for the SDP. Yet, as I already mentioned, before we went to India and I had won a fellowship to study abroad and wanted to study Hinduism it was Lesslie who advised me that I would be better to study Marxism. After Paul Loeffler's visit to India in 1961 and the work of Harry Daniel in Bangalore Lesslie had in fact recruited Roy Newell and later myself, via the Church of Scotland, in 1966 to work in Industrial

⁸ Ibid pp 222-223

⁹ **One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Society** Herbert Marcuse Boston: Beacon 1964

Mission which later became Urban Industrial Mission and then Urban Industrial Rural Mission (UIRM) now called the Urban Rural Mission desk in the WCC. In preparation for this I worked with the *Mission Populaire* under Georges Velten in Paris and arrived in India in the midst of what was then called 'rapid social change'.

To unpack what all this meant would take a lecture in itself. Some of it is well covered in the book 'Tenants and Trustees' by Paul Wiebe¹⁰ and in chapter 17 of 'Unfinished Agenda' headed *Madras: Mission in Metropolis*.¹¹ Suffice it to say that whether we were building sanitation units, fighting floods and fires, visiting factories and working alongside Management and Trade Unions via the Christian Service to Industrial Society, employing 100 staff in the New Residents Welfare Trust, working with leprosy sufferers, or running courses at the Community Service Centre – in all of this Lesslie was deeply interested and supportive.

But there were other matters on which I disagreed with Lesslie. I was once at a gathering in England when the women wanted to go off together on their own to discuss the subject and Lesslie could not comprehend why they should want to or be allowed to do this. He saw it as divisive. I didn't. Because I did not want to speak against 'my bishop' I did not oppose his homophobic views in the URC General Assembly and this I regret. He made the mistake of quoting Desmond Tutu's oft-quoted words about Christians being opposed to getting involved in politics, by saying: 'I don't know which Bible they are reading' but Lesslie used this in his speech against those supporting gay people and of course he made himself a hostage to fortune as everybody knew that Desmond Tutu was in favour of gay people's rights. Like George MacLeod, his great friend, who *was* a pacifist, he was not into situational ethics. Anything 'sexy' or dubious was forbidden by George. Lesslie likewise felt he could not compromise in such matters. For example on one occasion he would not join Anne and me for dinner at our house in Birmingham because one of the other guests had separated from their spouse and was living with someone else. So Helen and he did not come, much to our regret. But I do not wish to venture into 'theology' except to say that Lesslie's integrity was such that he was *persona grata* with Holy Trinity Brompton on the one hand and with the World Council of Churches on the other.

I also remember a moment when Lesslie revealed his weaker side to me, sort of proving that he was human after all! About 6 months before he was finally to leave Madras he said: 'You know I am soon to leave and sometimes I feel tempted to give up on these slums and all this work.....' In fact when he left I took his place as Chair of the New Residents Welfare Trust for the next 4 years until we also left. Actually this admission of Lesslie's made me feel better about him - he too could get a bit depressed. Yet at the public meeting, arranged by the Government of Tamil Nadu a few hours before he and Helen left, I heard K.K. Shah, the Governor say that they did not want them to leave and, spying the UK Deputy High Commissioner in the audience, he asked him if he could persuade the British government to bar the Newbigin's re-entry to the U.K!¹²

¹⁰ **Tenants and Trustees** A Study of the Poor in Madras Paul D. Wiebe Macmillan India Limited 1981

¹¹ **Unfinished Agenda** Lesslie Newbigin S.P.C.K. 1985 pp 214 - 238

¹² **Ibid** pg 238

At the age of 60 Lesslie was still doing press-ups each morning and when he was in his 80's I could not keep up with him on the escalators in the London underground. The last time I heard him preach was at a Friends of the Church in India (FCI) Day meeting when he was asked to preach on John 17. He began his sermon by berating whoever had decided that in the Gospel reading only a few verses of John 17 had been read. He reminded us once again of one of his favourite themes - that the prayer for the disciples could not be detached from the prayer for the church and that being consecrated in the truth was a prerequisite of the unity and the love which would enable the world to believe. It was the whole Gospel for the whole world and not disjointed fragments of it.

As I stood in the church in Jura and read Lesslie's words written on the wall: 'In the presence of the Cross there are no innocent parties.' I remembered what he wrote prior to leaving Madras for the last time: 'I knew that my ministry had been marred by many serious faults – by moments of anger and bad temper, by a too dominating style of leadership and by failure to be as fully available for others as a bishop should be.'¹³ I also thought of the words of Marjorie Sykes: 'The Life of Christ was not written; it was lived.' and I gave thanks to God for the life of Lesslie Newbigin.

Murdoch MacKenzie
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¹³ Ibid pg 237