

Ken Leech
Priest, prophet and theologian

He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour"

Luke 4 18-19

The words of Jesus read from the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah by Jesus in Capernaum may seem to be making bold claims in this address which is a reflection on the life and ministry of Ken Leech. Spoken by Jesus and claimed for himself, they are also a description in many ways of all that Ken stood for and believed in.

Today we give thanks for his life and all that he meant to each one of us, it is important to note that we are few and represent the many whose life was also touched through contact with him both in this country and in the United States and other parts of the world.

Ken was a man of many parts, priest, theologian, activist and for many people a spiritual guide is in some ways a limited reflection of all the areas of life in which he played an important role for so many. In seeking to focus on just a few I will no doubt miss something of importance. Equally it must be said that Ken would probably not approve of anything that was not an exploration of scripture and theology.

In making this address I should point out that I knew Ken for nearly 40 years though we actually met on two occasions before we became friends. The first occasion is worth retelling because it reflects Ken's perspective on ministry and outreach.

Along with a fellow student we had been sent to the west End of London to offer our services to agencies working with addicts and young people who were believed to be in need of hearing the gospel. Ken met us and encouraged us to go back to South London and seek out those who needed ministry, adding to the number of people offering ministry in Soho was not going to be helpful.

I tell you the story because in giving us advice he was pointing out that the context we find ourselves in is the one in which we should offer ministry. Looking for 'hot spots' is not a good use of time. It reflects his own ministry which was contextual, much of it in the east end of London with a break in which he worked on issues of race and racism on a national level.

To understand Ken it is important to recognise that he was a priest who was rooted in the Anglo Catholic social tradition. He followed in the footsteps of priests like Stewart Headlam who had founded the Guild of St Matthew which was the first Christian socialist group in England.

The importance of the Eucharist or Mass cannot be underestimated in Ken's life, it was central to all that he did a place where all are welcome and a space where all humanity finds equal status. He may have been the president but in so doing he was representing the whole people of God gathered around him, priest and people together celebrating as one.

The Ken of the Mass was also the Ken who was a committed socialist, he was rooted in a vision in which socialism was about bringing into being a kingdom where God reigned and all humanity shared equal status. In every sense this would be an outworking of the words read by Jesus in Luke 4.

In seeking equality he was an activist against the fascists who were active in Bethnal Green in the 1970's and he was committed to supporting the work of Searchlight the anti-fascist charity up to the end of his life. In this as with so many issues he was prepared to put himself where others might fear to go. In the 1970's for instance he received death threats written in blood amongst other nasty activities. These of course did not stop him from continuing to speak out and to challenge anyone who held racist opinions.

Ken was also committed to breathing new life into the Church of England and was capable of producing theological ideas that challenged the status quo, among his many books are studies in contextual theology that encourage the local church to be active in its community. Not by starting from a churchy perspective but by listening to the community and working on the issues that mattered in partnership with local residents and voluntary groups.

He believed that the Church of England should be disestablished and that bishops had no place in the House of Lords. The Church of England could not be prophetic and truly critical of those in power if bishops remained a part of the governing institutions.

The fact that he was awarded a Lambeth Doctorate by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey is perhaps a reflection of prophets on occasion being recognised, though not necessarily listened to.

Ken was a theologian not of the ivory tower but of the streets where you hear what's been said by the ordinary woman and man. Like Jesus he went out and about and was able to share his insights with a parish group in an estate parish without leaving them wondering what he was talking about.

He was inspirational, for example following one of the sessions he led for me at Spurgeon's Baptist College on community and theological reflection, a student asked '*who was the guy who spoke for 90 minutes, he was cool*'. I must say that the word 'cool' seemed odd in the context but it was a natural reaction to ken's style of sharing his experience and theological wisdom.

In this way he tried to breathe new life into the structures, sadly his writing and teaching was appreciated by many but did not have any real impact on bringing new life into the Church.

Ken will of course be remembered by many for his teaching and writing on spirituality, 'Soul Friend' was first published in 1977 and remains a classic work on spiritual direction. In many ways it was his writing that triggered a renewal of spiritual direction which is now taken for granted across all parts of the Church and in a way that was not the case when it was published.

His reflections on the importance of theological reflection on our understanding of God is perhaps best summed up in 'True God' which is a substantial study of the experience of God in the Old and New Testaments. It explores the questions at every possible level and concludes by considering the Motherhood of God and the God of Justice. The book is a classic study in how scripture leads the reader constantly back to being rooted in understanding of the importance of the continuous exploration of spiritual theology that never loses sight that the call to be a follower of Jesus is rooted in prayer that points us back into the world with all its problems and joys that we share with the rest of humanity.

The book ends with a 13 point Postscript: Towards a Renewed Spirituality; a Manifesto the 13th paragraph is a perfect summary of all that Ken believed in and worked for:

"It will be a spirituality of justice and peace. It will seek to know and follow God in the pursuit of justice for all people, in the struggle against racism and other forms of domination, in the movement for world peace and for nuclear disarmament, and in the campaign against poverty and inequality. In the struggles for a more human world, a renewed spirituality will come to discern the face of God, the holy and just One, and share in the peace of God which passes all understanding." P422

These words published in 1985 stand the test of time and along with the rest of the Manifesto offer a challenge to the Church of today.

In this worship we celebrate and give thanks for all that Ken gave to the world and if we are true to his memory we will continue in the many struggles that were at the heart of his call to a prophetic ministry.

A friend of mine Phil Scheinder who knew Ken through his writings sent me a text when he heard of his death, Phil works on the fringes of society with individuals who are Hiv/positive. In the text to me reacting to the news of Ken's death he wrote "

"Sorry to hear that, he was one of the people left with any brain and a heart".

One individual's response who may well speak for many.

The last word properly belongs with St Paul in these words from Romans: (8:38)

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Ken now shares in the greater Kingdom of heaven with Jesus our saviour and liberator may he rest in peace and rise in glory.

Terry Drummond

Address at Requiem Mass for Ken Leech at St Chrysostom's Church, Manchester

October 14th 2015