

CITYtheology

MAGAZINE OF LEEDS CHURCH INSTITUTE

THE GAP
BETWEEN
JUSTICE AND
MERCY

MIXED
FEELINGS

TURNING KEY
MOMENTS
INTO
MOVEMENTS
FOR CHANGE

WE WANT A
LIFE LIKE
YOURS

SUMMER 2024
ISSUE 39

Welcome to CITYTheology

Welcome to the Summer issue of CITYtheology magazine! This is my first issue as editor, and it's perhaps no surprise that a theme of activism runs through these four articles.

My background is campaigning, learning to put my faith into action inspired by saints and theologians. I joined LCI last year because of its strong history following the call of the Gospels to stand up with and for the marginalised.

As Christians, it isn't just the issues we campaign on that matter, but the way we choose to 'do activism'. Alison Webster's perspective offers a fresh and uniquely spiritual approach to social justice.

This summer is a particularly tumultuous one for politics in the UK, and it's never been more important to stand alongside those who are oppressed by systems of injustice.

I hope you enjoy this issue of CITYtheology, and find new ways of living out your faith in solidarity with others.





The articles in this edition:

- ✦ **Turning Key Moments Into Movements For Change:** How can the Church effect real racial justice in society?
- ✦ **The Gap Between Justice and Mercy:** Can Community Organising be a Spiritual Practice?
- ✦ **Mixed Feelings:** How can Christians approach celebrating Pride?
- ✦ **We Want a Life Like Yours:** What is Disability Pride Month?

Emma Temple

Editor



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Turning Key Moments Into Movements For Change:

The ongoing challenge of the Church to effect real racial justice in society.



RICHARD REDDIE LOOKS BACK TO OUR CHURCHES AGAINST RACISM EVENT, AND AHEAD TO THE HOOK LECTURE 2024, AT WHY THE CHURCH SHOULD BE PROACTIVE NOT REACTIVE TO MOMENTS OF PUBLIC TRAGEDY AS WE PROPHETICALLY CHALLENGE RACISM.

Next year (2025) marks the 30th anniversary of Racial Justice Sunday (RJS) in Britain and Ireland, which was established in 1995 following the racist killing of Stephen Lawrence in Eltham, south London on 22 April 1993. RJS is very much about addressing the racism that exists in Church and society, and utilises a twin-track methodology that sees the Church seeking to

'get its own house in order', while working with other groups to resolve the various deficits in society.

Equally, 2025 marks the fifth anniversary of the (racist) police-related killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, USA in May 2020. This tragedy, which sent shockwaves across the Atlantic and further afield, was deemed a 'Kairos' moment; a time that was pregnant for



decision and change.

Both anniversaries were key moments that forced both the Church/society to examine the attitudes, behaviours, systems and structures that encouraged and propagated racism and inequality. With regard to Stephen Lawrence/RJS, it witnessed churches and parachurch organisations establishing racial justice roles or departments, and the writing of reports. Equally, for George Floyd, churches and parachurches were initially flummoxed as to how best to respond to the tragedy. When they found their bearings, one witnessed a copious number of apologies (for racism), and a plethora of newly established commissions, programmes and reports, all into addressing racism.

Next year's anniversaries are very significant because as milestones, they should be opportunities for Christians, the Church and parachurch agencies to assess the progress that has been made over that expanse of time, especially any advancements since the killing of George Floyd in May 2020. (We know that a lot of 'action' happened

in the aftermath of Floyd's murder; it is vital to have a detailed breakdown of the outcomes and achievements of these activities.) Equally, these 2025 anniversaries should also be an opportunity to consider what further steps should be taken in the work to make our churches/society more equitable.

As I pointed out at the Churches Against Racism gathering in Leeds in April of this year, what these anniversaries have in common is the sense that they were 'reactive'; they were very much a response to specific tragedies, events that reflected a wider, more invasive problem impacting church/society.

I would argue that part of the problem with the reactive approach is that it sees an initial flurry of activity, which invariably peters out as the issue, for a variety of reasons, falls from the agenda.

(Moreover, the implementation of certain responsive activities can result in a 'tick box' methodology, after which some believe the job is done!)

I would also argue that we need to move from a reactive to a proactive modus operandi which ensures that racial justice is always on the agenda, and that there is an accompanying plan to strategically tackle racism and injustice. As I also pointed out at the Churches Against Racism meeting, this methodology begins with a vision; a vision of what one would like the Church/society to look like. In the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible, Habakkuk 2:2 says: 'Then the LORD replied: "Write down the vision and make it plain...". However, I would be the first to point out that any 'vision' must be grounded in reality.

In my work at Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, I am responsible for coordinating the resources to mark Racial Justice Sunday, which, as I mentioned just now, encourages churches to address racism in Church/society. Often, we unwisely delineate between

'Church' and 'society', as if they are wholly unconnected entities, when in reality the Church is an integral part of the community/society. This connection is paramount because there are churches, such as Black-led, Black Majority Churches or homogeneous Asian congregations, which experience little or no racism due to their leadership and congregational composition. Yet despite this, those who form part of these congregations undoubtedly experience the racism that exists in society, and this reality should see them joining with the historic or 'mainstream' churches in tackling discrimination.

I firmly believe that the Church, with its message of hope, mercy and justice, can and should be at the heart of the prophetic work to transform society - to make it fairer and compassionate.

Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jnr

would describe this as the 'Beloved Community' which is built on truth, justice, peace, love and dignity – virtues which clearly chime with those found within our faith.

However, the sad truth is that as we mark the 30th anniversary of RJS, we do not live in an equal society, especially if we explore public policy issues.

Within our criminal justice system, Black people invariably receive custodial sentences for the same crimes that their white counterparts receive non-penal ones. A consequence of this bias is that more Black young men go to prison than university.

In terms of their interactions with the police, Black (young) males are also disproportionately subjected to 'stop and search', and young Black females subjected to 'strip search' practices.

Equally, Black adults are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed, and when working, earn less than their white peers in comparable roles. Similarly, from a public health perspective, they are disproportionately overrepresented in the mental health system, and more likely to be medicated rather than receive 'talking therapies'. Additionally, Black women are four times more likely to die in childbirth, and less likely to receive adequate pain relief while giving birth.

Listen to our Leeds Lives interview with Gloria Hanley, sharing her experience as a Black midwife in Leeds



And as we noted during the COVID-19 pandemic, Black and Asian folks experienced poorer health-related outcomes due to them living in poorer housing, and carrying out (low paid)

frontline roles (often without the appropriate PPE), which exposed them to the virus.

It is not solely those who are born or choose to live in this country that experience this disadvantage and discrimination, but also those who are fleeing various forms of persecution. The global refugee crisis has resulted in certain British and Irish politicians, journalists and commentators promulgating a hostile narrative toward those seeking sanctuary on these shores. In parts of these lands, hostels and hotels accommodating asylum seekers have witnessed protests that have turned violent. And there is little doubt that those with an opportunistic, bigoted agenda, have scapegoated some of the most vulnerable people in this country for the cost-of-living crisis, a shortage of affordable housing and a lack of real investment in communities.

If we truly believe that racial justice is everyone's business, then it must be the business of the Church to be part of a 'movement for change' that engages in the work to address these inequalities, attitudes and behaviours.

When it comes to asylum seekers and refugees, we need to counter the hostility and replace it with hospitality, as we heard from Revd Dr Inderjit Bhogal at the Hook Lecture last year. The Christian scriptures have so much to say about sanctuary and welcome, and it behoves the Church to take several leaves out of the 'Good Book', and speak prophetically of the need for mercy, compassion and justice.

When it comes to racism and inequality, we need to have an agenda for change that sees the Church speaking truth to power on all aspects of discrimination and bigotry. Far too often the Church appears to be 'scared' to challenge and correct wrong behaviours and attitudes – preferring the way of accommodation to confrontation.

I mentioned that the Church needs to be part of a

movement, which connotes that it does not have to do this alone. There are a number of parachurch groups and Christian organisations whose work tackles racism, and churches can join with them in this wider movement for change. This group would also include the plethora of secular organisations that are doing sterling work in this area, but in need of the Church's wisdom, energy and ideas.

Finally, history has shown us

that when we stand together, the right type of change can occur.

Therefore, it is my hope that these anniversaries – key moments – become movements engendering real change in society (which includes the Church).

You can hear Richard Reddie speak at the Hook Lecture this year, Wednesday 23rd October at Leeds Minster



The Gap Between Mercy and Justice:

Community Organising as a Spiritual Practice.

BY ALISON WEBSTER, MISSION THEOLOGIAN IN RESIDENCE FOR CITIZENS UK



When I first encountered Community Organising, I treated it primarily as a way of 'getting things done'. I was working in the Mission Department of Oxford Diocese as Social Justice Adviser, and I was hungry for an effective methodology that would enable Anglicans to better engage with their communities, but also to be part of wider campaigns and activities to make the world a better place. As our diocesan slogan had it, to 'make a bigger difference in the world'. I had spent twenty years trying to do this, without much obvious success!

When I returned from my Citizens UK six-day training, I

was inspired and excited. I felt like I had discovered a 'missing link' in Christian social action – something that could fill gaps. Firstly, the disjuncture between the 'helper' and the 'helped'.

My many years with churches made me acutely aware that they like to 'do good' and, on the whole, they like to be in charge of HOW they do good, and of the good that they do.

The old philanthropic model is alive and well in most parishes as the foundational model for being active in the community. At best, you consult with people about their 'needs', and then you do your best, through a variety of projects, to 'meet those needs'. The resources and the initiative remain firmly within the church's hands.

Secondly, most of the social justice activity undertaken by churches falls into the category of 'mitigation' – supporting those who are hungry or have no home; those who find themselves in debt or in prison, or lonely. The great advantage of these activities is that they are usually undertaken ecumenically, strengthening bonds within the Christian community. But the 'gap' is between mercy and justice.

When cost of living crises bite, there is an unavoidable structural question to be asked. Why do people have no food? What is the cause of the housing crisis?

Many Christians involved in food banks, for instance, hear the stories of those who cannot afford to feed their families, and are challenged with the question, 'how is this activity of feeding people addressing the systemic causes of food poverty?' It is an uncomfortable question, and I know it keeps people awake at night.

And that's where campaigning activities come in. Something of a minority sport in churches, compared with mitigation, but Christians who campaign are a remarkably resilient, tenacious, knowledgeable and passionate bunch, throwing themselves enthusiastically into a range of campaigns – at local, national, or international level, to right injustices such as domestic and international poverty; the climate emergency; war and violence; migration injustices, domestic abuse, disability rights, etc. All of these campaigns are of immense importance, but it seems very hard to succeed in achieving any actual changes that make a tangible difference at local level. What's missing is a mechanism. Writing letters to

MPs; supporting NGOs in their policy-making and lobbying are all vital, but 'wins' are few and far between.

The levers of power seem opaque and complicated – only to be negotiated by professionals – the experts with time, skills, and a sophisticated grasp of realpolitik.

My own context involved the more immediate challenge of ecclesiastical politics, as my paymasters (the diocesan powers-that-be) kept demanding to know what difference these passionate, campaigning individuals were making to *their parishes*? The answer was often: not much.

They might be indulgently tolerated, as individual rebels with a cause, but the parish *as parish* had no need of them and no use for them. The predominant way of 'being church' remained unaffected by those 'speaking truth to power'.

All of which serves to highlight another disconnect – between activism and the spiritual life. The normative discipleship model in our churches tends to pit 'activists' against 'contemplatives'. Worship is the 'real' purpose of the church, social action is a possible but non-compulsory outworking. The Bible teaches us certain things, and it's a one-way street to putting those things into practice. There is very little practical theology going on at parish level; no context for people to develop in their discipleship in dialogue with their social



action; still less, their action for justice. Action for justice is apparently both self-evidently necessary ('The Bible tells us so'); but also curiously optional; and its potential as a vehicle for spiritual growth remains largely unexplored.

Going Further with Organising

Community Organising seems to me to have the potential to address all these gaps: renewing church life by dissolving the difference between 'helper' and 'helped'; equipping us with a hermeneutic of suspicion around systems of power and the causes of injustice; introducing experiences of action that wins real change – local actions, whose affect can be felt directly; and integrating theological reflection, balancing contemplation and

action and deepening discipleship.

However, as my familiarity with Community Organising has grown, I have come to see it as much more than a way of 'getting things done' and fixing theological disconnections. I now speak of it more as a 'way of being in the world' - as a spiritual practice.

The fact that Organising has a clear methodology, with necessary steps and a cycle of action and evaluation makes it a powerful form of 'practical theology' or even a 'rule of



life'. And if those involved in Community Organising through their churches embrace it as such, the potential for enhanced discipleship and spiritual growth is immense – as many have discovered.

Conclusion

The famous definition of mission is 'discerning God at work in the world and joining in'. In my experience, connecting with the world outside of church is

something Christians struggle with – lacking confidence and a way to go about it. Community Organising offers the opportunity to develop that confidence. From learning how to meet others in 1-2-1s, to bearing witness to people's stories in accountability assemblies – if we embrace organising as people of faith, we embrace a spiritual practice that can transform us from the inside out, as individual disciples and as Christian communities.

You can read more about the method of Community Organising in the full extended article here





Mixed Feelings

ALISTAIR CHEETHAM, LCI'S FINANCE & COMPLIANCE OFFICER, EXAMINES THE DIFFICULT PATH FOR LGBTQIA+ CHRISTIANS SUPPORTING PRIDE MONTH.

June is LGBTQIA+ Pride month, when you can't fail to notice rainbow flags flying, pride events starting, which in Leeds culminates with the Pride Parade on 21st July, and even the logos of some famous companies adopting the rainbow colours. Each year, as I spot the rainbows appear I reflect on how Christians should view Pride.

Pride is an important positive statement in the world today. It's a benchmark of how far we've come in the past fifty years, whilst demonstrating how far we still have to travel for inclusivity to be engrained into society and in faith communities.

However, I remember a couple of years ago a friend asked me how I felt about LGBTQIA+ Pride. It was a question I'd not thought about for some time. After much deliberation I found my response was 'partying while some of the invited are still suffering.'

The reality is obviously more complex. I have lots of mixed feelings about Pride. Pride is partly about remembering the terrible ways that LGBTQIA+ people have been, and still are, treated. It is an opportunity to celebrate the positive changes that have come in the last half century and to campaign for further changes where they are still needed. No one should be made to feel ashamed, like a lesser person or receive abuse because of who they are attracted to or because of their own sense of gender. Every LGBTQIA+ person is made in the image of God and is loved by God, and as Christians we should be at the front and centre affirming this, campaigning against any word or deed which denies it. This is perfectly compatible with, even required by, every Christian ethic and teaching.



I am happy that, for many, Pride is a public celebration of embracing internal desires and feelings as identity and finding fullness of life by expressing them. But at the same time I feel deep sorrow that so many of the LGBTQIA+ community have been told lies about where true love can be found and about who they really are – not least by the church.

Additionally, there can almost be a separation of those who identify as lesbian, gay and bisexual, and those who identify as transgender. In making Pride solely a party, one marginalised group leaves another group in the margins, making them vulnerable and open to attack, as indeed is the case for many transgender people today. Human sexuality is intrinsically linked to gender.

Gender forms a defining aspect of a person's identity. It is a major component of who we are, affecting our perspective, our emotional needs, our ability to empathise, our instincts.

When it comes to sexuality, the Bible says nothing about orientation. Equally, people's biology isn't as binary as we are led to believe. Indeed, Scripture speaks of eunuchs, people who lived as neither male nor female. What we can also see in the creation story is that, while God created day and night, that doesn't mean there is nothing in between.

Dawn and dusk are expressions of creation that don't fall neatly into the categories of day and night. So when Genesis tells us that God created "man and woman", it doesn't mean that we are limited to the two.

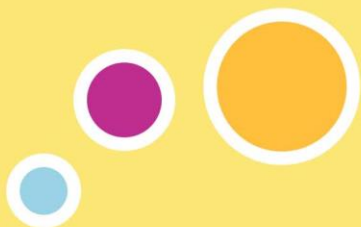


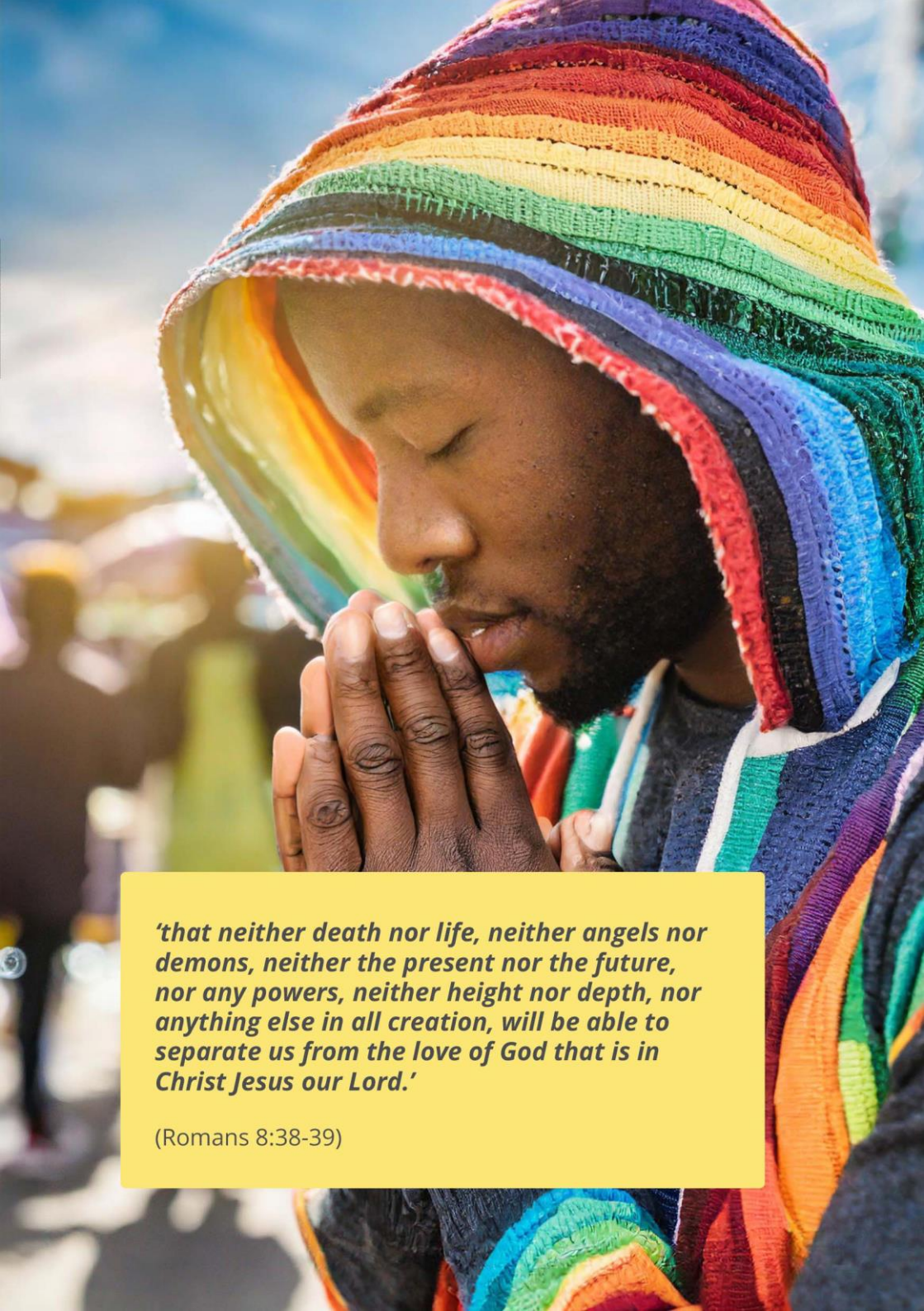
In our communities, there are nonbinary, genderfluid, transgender, and other multi-faceted expressions of the non-gendered image of God within creation. All are made in God's image, all receive God's love and are entitled to respect, love and freedom of persecution from all of God's children.

Some Christians respond to Pride with disgust, frustration or even anger, feeling the need to make it clear that they had the rainbow first. They bemoan the 'celebration of sin,' yet say nothing about other year-round celebrations of other behaviours some might consider 'sinful' in our culture. We seem to forget that had it not been for the work of God in our hearts, we could still be believing the lies told over many years.

Some Christians can easily overlook the fact that they have often been part of the problem which led to the need for Pride in the first place. Our response, as Christians, should therefore not be to complain about what others are doing but to repent and apologise for what we have done. Historically, and still often today, we have not loved the LGBTQIA+ community in the way Jesus has called us to love all people.

And so now, when I see rainbow flags or supermarket logos which have 'gone rainbow' on social media, I am going to allow my heart to be moved, and I will pray for fellow LGBT+ people to know...





'that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

(Romans 8:38-39)



We Want a Life Like Yours

FAITH AT THE MARGINS LEAD PAUL COLEMAN REFLECTS ON DISABILITY PRIDE MONTH, AND INTRODUCES A POEM BY LEEDS POET SEAN COPPINGER.

Disability Pride Month takes place every July to celebrate the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. It has since become an international movement and was first celebrated in the UK in 2017.

The aim is to increase visibility of disability and to promote equality and inclusion for people with disabilities around the world. In 2024, the theme is “we want a life like yours.” This is very similar to the theme for LCI’s work around disability, looking at

moving ‘From Inclusion to Belonging’, based on work by theologian Professor John Swinton which seeks to move us beyond inclusion to discover what it means for people with disabilities to belong to a church or community.

This poem was written by Sean Coppinger of Harehills Lane Baptist Church, part of the group who are exploring disability theology and planning this year’s retreat for Disabled Christians in Leeds.

The background image shows a rustic interior. On the left, a dark, heavily textured wall, possibly made of mud or plaster, is visible. A thick, natural wooden beam runs diagonally across the upper part of the frame. On the right, a set of wooden stairs made of thick, weathered planks leads upwards. The lighting is warm and directional, coming from the right, which casts shadows and highlights the textures of the wall and wood.

Wanting

I want a life like yours.

**Where picnics don't need toilet maps
or nature walks need special ramps,
where access to the light and air
do not need plans for special care.**

**Where there's no need to ring ahead
and we can change our minds instead,
to visit old decrepit bars
with narrow doors and dodgy stairs.**

I want a life like yours.

**A day without the chronic pain,
the counting carbs, the mental drain,
the masking, hiding who I am,
the normalising social scam.**

**To be accepted, not be judged,
belong, be loved and not begrudged.
Be all I know that I can be
and live, with you, in victory.**

I want a life like yours.

**To see the colour of the sky,
to cry and never wonder why,
to feel for words where words are found,
to walk on rough, uneven ground.**

**To hear the breeze blow in the trees,
the song of birds, the buzz of bees,
the sound of traffic passing by,
my lover's breath, the newborn cry.**

A lit candle sits on a wooden surface, casting a warm glow. The candle is partially melted, with wax dripping down its sides. The background is softly blurred, showing hints of green foliage. A dark, semi-transparent text box is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing white text.

I want a life like yours.

**Though Jesus is my crutch, my hope,
my falling pad, my safety rope,
I long to be spontaneous,
and rid our world of “them” and “us”.**

**To feel part of the human race,
to stretch and grow with time and space,
without the need for counting spoons,
I want a life like yours.**

Sean Coppinger 27/05/2024

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