

# On the ine

## **A Longer Read: Accompaniment, Community and Nature**

*A review of a book by our Chaplain to Gypsies and Travellers, Jonathan Herbert. Sharen Green writes:*

He started his journey as an accompanier at 8 years old, sitting on the vicarage doorstep with vagrants as they ate bread and butter and drank tea.

It wasn't till decades later that Jonathan Herbert formulated his ideas on accompaniment – a truly powerful way of bringing about real social and environmental justice, he claims.

Life has given him the chance to practise the art in urban Liverpool, rural Dorset, on the Solomon Islands, in the Ugandan bush and with both Arabs and Jews in Palestine.

Vivid anecdotes grab the attention – a con man teaching him how to tile a roof, an attempted kidnap, the retrieval of a body from the mortuary. And cameos of human frailties and healings abound.

As a fairly new priest, Herbert queues up with his inner city neighbours for the magistrates' court. Like them, he hasn't paid his poll tax. His boss tells him it's his Christian duty to pay. The scene is delicious as these 2 men of the cloth have words about their profession – "career" is not a word the young cleric understands!

Years later a trip to the family court ends in tragedy. He accompanies a teenage Gypsy mum. Her baby remains in care because the system doesn't get Gypsy ways of child-rearing. Their families are extended, not nuclear. The mother, of course, is rendered speechless by the court's intimidating surroundings and Canon Herbert is not allowed to speak.

The book's rich hinterland features economist Kate Raworth, academic Edward Said and God's biographer Karen Armstrong. But it is far from cerebral. Manure, urine and the soil are important characters in this book, as Herbert is nothing if not down-to-earth.

One of his comments on our mad world of getting, spending and robbing the earth of precious resources sums him up.

"Call me cynical, but I'd much rather be pushing a wheelbarrow full of s\*\*\* down the farmyard than rushing round a shopping centre looking for that perfect gift."

He has been living in Dorset for over 20 years, first in the Pilsdon Community which provides asylum for those in recovery from addiction.

He now lives at Hilfield Friary, an Anglican community from where he carries out his duties as the Salisbury Diocese's chaplain to Gypsies and Travellers.

Living in community is something he learned the hard way.

“I spent the first year [at Pilsdon] worrying that I should be doing more to help people change... There was so much raw pain on display and bottled-up anger...

“I began to see my role at Pilsdon as first being alongside individuals not as a social worker, support worker or a carer but simply as another human being who gives and receives support simply by being there and sharing a common life.”

The writer has to accompany himself while serving as a human rights monitor in Palestine when he witnesses the torture of an 8-year-old boy. Emir is walking down the street in Hebron when he is handcuffed, blindfolded and bundled into a van. Once released, the child is traumatised and almost mute.

Herbert recounts how he got through his own trauma. He even spares some compassion for the brutalised young soldiers who did it.

But back in London he finds himself filled with anger on seeing an Orthodox Jewish family on Waterloo Bridge.

“I had never met the family but found myself having such profound feelings of revulsion for them that I crossed over the road as I couldn't bear to be near them...

“I too Jonathan Herbert, usually the ‘peacemaker’ who always sees everyone's point of view, had become polarised, projecting my anger at the injustice of the Israeli occupation on an innocent Jewish family.”

The prejudice took him completely by surprise, and his determination to resist it by remembering the God-given humanity of The Other is a lesson for us all.

*Sharen Green*

*'Accompaniment, Community and Nature' by Jonathan Herbert  
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