

## Retail Therapy

*Marg is an Urban Expression Mission Partner, living and working in Stoke on Trent. This may—or may not—be a parable. Thanks Marg.*

The Kingdom of Heaven could be like this. One Sunday a church minister took a journey north to The Trafford Centre, a huge new shopping complex on the outskirts of the city of Manchester. Having found herself with a free Sunday she decided try doing what other people do with their Sundays and go shopping.

Arriving around mid-day the church minister joined the stream of cars pouring into the acres of car park, and then walked with the eager crowd into the entrance of the John Lewis store. As much as she wanted to feel righteous judgement about ‘temples of consumerism’ she found that inside it was splendid! Everything was really lovely – bright and shiny – the stuff for sale and the people too. Taking time out from browsing each tantalising department she relaxed with a cappuccino in the café and observed the staff paying care and attention to the elderly customers and especially the mums with their kids in tow – helping them carry their food and sort out chairs at a table. As she sat there in the comfortable surroundings looking at the pleasant people around her, (for they did all look like nice people), the families and friends sharing a meal, she thought, “so why on earth would you want to go to church on a Sunday morning when you could come here?” She began to admit to herself that being there made her feel good, her spirit felt uplifted – she wondered if she had indeed found the Kingdom of Heaven at hand.

The next day, on being back home she had reason to go up into her own city centre. But when she got there she couldn’t help but notice that it wasn’t full of ‘shiny-happy’ people. It was, well, fairly deserted, drab looking, and dull compared to the previous day’s location. There seemed more than the usual number of local drugaholics walking around, hood up and clutching carrier bags scrunched around bottles; there were women looking hard-done-by and not very on-trend at all; there were a lot of ill looking people and others who, at that time of day, really should have been at work. Unlike in John Lewis, she noted, not many people looked like they were thriving. Neither did the shops – on the main street a huge empty dark space lurked behind what was the window display of T J Hughes in what was once Woolworths. There were many other empty shops around too, and a lot of the occupied ones were offering second-hand goods or cash for your gold. And the church minister began to notice how different she felt from the previous day, not uplifted, but sort of dragged down in her spirit, a bit gloomy. She wondered if the Kingdom of Heaven needed to come into this place.

It was whilst travelling back to her home that she remembered a conversation she’d had some weeks earlier with young-ish woman she had talked with about visiting the nearby city centre. She didn’t go there much, she said, and so the church minister asked her where she did go to – did she ever visit Birmingham or Manchester? Her reply was, “I don’t go anywhere much, in fact I don’t go anywhere I don’t have to” and then she said “Anyway, what’s the point of going to those big shopping places when you don’t have the money to buy anything?” This made the church minister feel very uncomfortable.

And so the church minister was left very confused about how upbeat she had felt being in John Lewis in the Trafford Centre yet how down she had felt being in her own city centre, for she loved her city. She began to wonder if she really understood what the Kingdom of Heaven was like and where it could be found. But what really concerned her most was just how much it could cost to give people an experience of it. So she decided that maybe it was best just to go to church on a Sunday morning, and let others go shopping... or not.

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