

Reflections and Prayers: the light at the end of the tunnel

This is the 16th in a series of weekly Reflections and Prayers being offered to the Norley Methodist Church congregation and to colleagues and friends in many places near and far. They are kindly sourced by many people. You are invited to use them freely for personal reflection and to share and retain them as you wish.

Leadgate and Consett

I lived in the industrial village of Leadgate, near Consett, from 1947 to 1951, when my father was stationed there as a probationer minister in his first appointment: I have vivid memories of going to Leadgate County Primary School, attending Sunday School and evening services at Front Street Methodist Church (as it was), watching Leadgate play cricket in the North-West Durham League, rambling with friends, without fear in those innocent days, for miles around the local lanes and fields. Memories of people too: Doris Tilney, who gently persuaded me to perform on the Sunday School Anniversary for the first time (much against my inclination), and Sidney Irwin, a passionate and inspiring local preacher, some of whose books (including Paul Tillich's 'Systematic Theology', volumes 1 and 2) I was to acquire, thirty years later, after his death in 1977.

On opening them, I found tickets from the Northern and Venture bus companies. For many years, Sidney Irwin commuted daily from Leadgate to his job at the Co-operative Wholesale Society in Newcastle and he used the tickets as bookmarks: when did you last see anyone reading Tillich on a number 33 bus? No wonder his sermons were well-grounded.

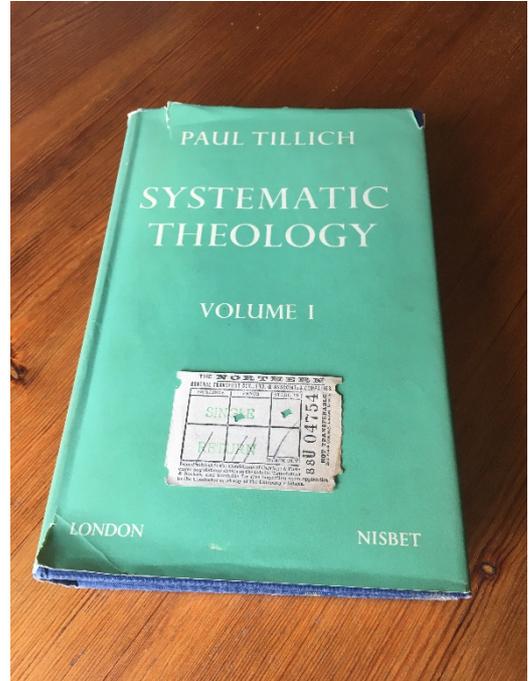
In their different ways, as I look back and reflect, Doris Tilney and Sidney Irwin were the early lights in what became my faith journey: I'd no conception of a tunnel.

Consett is an ordinary town in north-west County Durham, 14 miles south-west of Newcastle and 13 miles north-west of Durham City, on the edge of the North Pennine moors. Its economy was based on its ironworks, founded in 1840, with plentiful coal supplied from local collieries: nobody went to Consett for their summer holidays, for despite the wild beauty of the adjacent moors, it just wasn't that sort of place. The ironworks closed in 1980, with the devastating loss of 4000 jobs and the immediate collapse of the local economy: unemployment soared to 35%. Somebody put a sign up on the Durham road, 'would the last person to leave please turn out the lights.' It doesn't come any bleaker than that.

But there appeared a light at the end of the tunnel. A local company, Siddle Cook, which used to transport finished iron and steel products by road on the start of their journey to customers (its articulated AEC lorries had red-painted cabs) decided to make caravans in order to sustain their business and the local economy: you will have seen them on the motorways for decades with the trademark 'Elddis' – now work out the connection (answer below). Over the years, the physical evidence of the old ironworks has been obliterated, to be replaced by a business park, supermarkets and housing. Consett has survived and the lights are still on.



We remain in uncertain, unsettling times, but in our own way, we may rest in God and look for the light at the end of the tunnel, as Neil Richardson and David Glasson reflect below.



John Bell, July 2020. And Elddis caravans? It is simply Siddle spelt backwards. Photo from an Elddis advertisement.

Rest in God

This is a strange, anxious time for many people, even if, for some, it's been a time of less pressure and stress. None of us can know, just now, how long it will last. And all the while, an even bigger crisis looms – or so our grandchildren's generation may think – the crisis of global warming.

I should like to suggest: *only our Creator, God, can get us out of this mess*. I don't mean that God will 'intervene', working supernatural miracles. God doesn't work like that. God can't do everything. God is a 'partnership' kind of God, whose speciality is working in human minds and hearts. God doesn't manipulate, doesn't override our freedom – nothing like that. But still God's Spirit nudges and calls, still God's Light shines, still God, 'our Father' enfolds us. So, it's true: only God can get us out of the mess we've created for ourselves.

There is a standing invitation from our Creator, (you may have heard it before):

'Come to me, all who are struggling and burdened, and I will give you rest'.

So, today and tomorrow, rest in God. It takes practice. Start by just giving God your attention – as much as you can manage – instead of going to him with your 'shopping lists' – that is, what you want him to do for you. Rest in God long after the lockdown is over, because only God – God's breath or Spirit, God's Light, God's love – can get us out of our self-inflicted morass: a way of life we can't sustain, and which the planet can't sustain either.

Rest in God, *and be glad*. That comes with the invitation – not just to rest, but also to find our deepest happiness. Rest in God, be glad, *and love your neighbour* – no exceptions. That goes with the territory as well. We were never meant to be at loggerheads with each other, and these weeks of lockdown have shown that we human beings function best when we look out for each other and care.

As I said, God's special expertise is changing hearts and minds – though never without our consent. God has a way of winning hearts and minds, creeping into them almost without our noticing – like someone starting to fall in love, or like when a baby arrives, as at Christmas.

Our way of life needs fixing. *Homo sapiens* has come a long way. But *sapiens* is the Latin word for 'wise', and the way we've been going doesn't look wise at all. So, give yourself some time and space each day. Rest in God, and love each neighbour whom God puts your way. God isn't the great supernatural fixer we might think we need. In fact, our Creator has better plans. As he did with Abraham, he says 'Come with me into the future I'm planning for you all. Come with me and let me be your Friend'.

Revd Dr Neil Richardson, June 2020, for Trinity Sunday. Neil was President of the Methodist Conference in 2003-04, is now retired and lives near Ludlow, Shropshire.

The Light at the end of the Tunnel....

'This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light, in him there is no darkness at all.'
1 John 1: 5 (NIV)



During the time I was Minister in the north of Liverpool, for about 5 years, we owned a narrowboat on the Leeds-Liverpool canal. Happy days with the three children and two dogs were spent cruising the waterways. Until, that is, the children got bored with the return journey to Wigan being the extent of the family holiday!

On one occasion we made a transit through of one of the longest tunnels on the canal system. To follow the contours of the land and avoid having to cut (by hand!) through very hard rock this long tunnel meandered along its length. So, when we entered the tunnel there was no sign of the exit, just darkness beyond the

limited beam of our headlamp. We were locked in the darkness as we slowly, at about 3 mph, made our way. We imagined what it was like for the original bargees 'legging' their way through this 4 miles of damp dark tube.

Steering carefully to avoid, if possible, scraping the side of the boat, our eyes would be straining to see the welcoming 'light at the end of the tunnel'. As we negotiated the bends, when each curve became straight for a while, we hoped to see the light.

As I write this reflection, we are still not through the tunnel of darkness that has surrounded us now for many months; Covid-19 is still with us. Our lockdown situation has changed and is changing, but we still meander in the darkness and long for that light at the end of the tunnel.

As people of faith, we *do* declare that 'God is light'.

When on our narrowboat journey, we knew that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. We knew the light was there, even when we couldn't see it! So, as we meander through these strange, difficult and sometimes dark times, let us hold fast to the hope that lies with God. He lights up our lives within the present darkness and his glorious light will welcome us at the end of the tunnel.

Revd David Glasson, July 2020.

Hope and Light

'Hope, like the gleaming taper's light,
Adorns and cheers our way;
And still, as darker grows the night,
Emits a brighter ray'.

Oliver Goldsmith, 1728-1774, from his oratorio, 'The Captivity'.

The opening words of John's Gospel

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.'

NRSV, John 1: 1-5.

And words for the closing of the day

Lighten our darkness, we pray thee, O Lord; and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of the night; that, awake we may watch with Christ, and asleep we may rest in peace; for the love of thy only Son, our Saviour, Jesus. Amen.

Adapted from the Book of Common Prayer.

Note and encouragement to all readers

I have collected and compiled these reflections and prayers, including some of my own thoughts. If you wish to offer pieces for inclusion in future weeks, please send them to me at johnabell@supanet.com Each edition will be released on a Friday so that it can be distributed for Sunday and the following week.

Any hymns are referenced from their most recent publication in a British Methodist hymn book (Singing the Faith – StF, Hymns and Psalms – H&P, or even the 1933 Methodist Hymnbook – MHB) and, for URC readers, in Rejoice and Sing (R&S), the URC's present hymnal.

