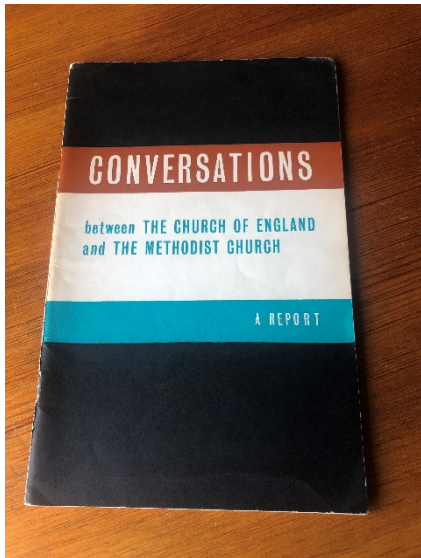


Reflections and Prayers: a crisis is a terrible thing to waste

This is the 17th 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.

July 26th is St Anne's Day



When my father ended his ministry at Lidgett Park Methodist Church in Leeds in 1967, the Revd Dick Talbot, the vicar of St Edmund Roundhay Church of England, just across the road, presented him with a beautifully bound copy of 'The Prayer Book, as proposed in 1928'. In those early days of conversations between Anglicans and Methodists, my father and the vicar always got on well: Dick wrote 'Happy Memories of Roundhay' on the flyleaf of the Prayer Book. Whenever I need to ascertain liturgical details, not least Saints Days, I refer to it, stood among hymnbooks, bibles and other worship materials on my bookshelf. And it is ironic that Professor Peter Howdle, former Vice-President of the Methodist Conference, who has played such an important role in Anglican-Methodist discussions 50 years later, lives just down the road.

First pause for thought: why, despite supreme efforts, do the wheels of church unity grind so slowly?

Photo by Joan Bell of John's copy of the 1963 publication which initiated the continued conversations between the Church of England and the Methodist Church. It included the 'Dissentient View' written by the Revd Professor Kingsley Barrett, distinguished New Testament scholar, whom I was to know well when we lived in Durham in the 1970s. The Revd Dr Neil Richardson, author of one of last week's Reflections, was the President of Conference on November 1st 2003 who co-signed the Anglican-Methodist Covenant, in the presence of Her Majesty the Queen, in Westminster Central Hall, London. It was, apparently, one of the very rare occasions when Her Majesty attended a formal event on a Saturday – such was her interest in the matter.

The Prayer Book reveals that on July 26th we mark the celebration of St Anne, 'Mother to the Blessed Virgin Mary', and therefore Jesus' grandma. The historical evidence for her may be scant, but points to her as the most likely person: after all, Mary must have had a mother. Did Jesus ever know Grandma Anne? We'll never know. My Grandma Bell was Ann Helena, known to her friends as Lena. I remember her well as she lived until I was in my early 20s: she was left profoundly deaf after suffering measles as a girl and I recall, as a boy, that communicating with her could be hard for both of us.

Second pause for thought: do you, like me, ever regret missing the opportunity as a child of not having asked your grandparents about their childhood, early life and family history?

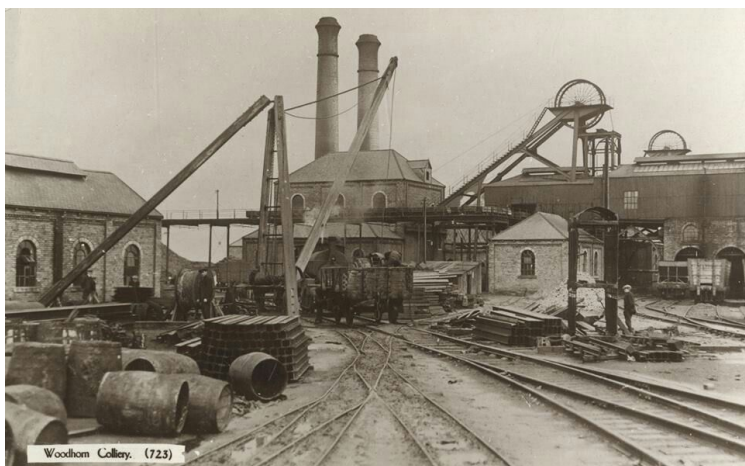
Mine were born in the 1870s, were brought up in the coal-mining villages of Northumberland and Durham, became adults while Victoria was Queen, watched Britain go to war in 1914, survived the Spanish flu epidemic, lived through the depression of the 1920s/30s, watched history repeat itself in 1939 – all before I was born. And why didn't I ask my grandmothers about their grandmothers? They probably knew them: had I done so I might have first-hand knowledge of early 19th century Britain. Alas, I didn't, so I haven't!

The British Coal Corporation contract

On Saturday August 20th 1994, having had little sleep the previous night on the soft plush carpets in Nabarro Nathanson's legal offices just off Piccadilly, London, I signed (as its Managing Director on behalf of Philips Communication and Processing Services UK) a multi-million-pound IT outsourcing contract with the British Coal Corporation (BCC). My colleagues, British and Dutch, and I had worked hard to secure the contract in the face of competition from bigger names in the IT outsourcing world: we were triumphant and tired but had to gather our thoughts quickly as we (that is, when the buck stopped, I) became responsible for running the IT operations of the British coal industry, mainly based at Cannock, Staffordshire, from midnight the day after.

As some readers don't need reminding, any project to secure a competitive contract requires all the stops to be pulled out: you try to think of anything, however small, which might help to impress your potential customer and burnish your credentials. In early July, I met with the Board of Management of BCC as part of a crucial all-to-play-for presentation and found an opportunity to slip into the conversation that both of my grandfathers had worked in North-East collieries all their lives (sub-text, thinly veiled, 'Trust me, I come from coal-mining stock!'): this seemed to be well-received and the BCC Company Secretary (who was spearheading the project) asked what they had done.

When I replied that my Grandda Bell had been a winding engineman at Woodhorn Colliery, near Ashington, he responded in a flash, 'was your granddad a Wesleyan Methodist?'



Third pause for thought: wow, why did he ask that? (I certainly paused for thought – I think gob-smacked is an accurate word – and asked myself the same question: at this stage, he had no knowledge of my Methodist background.)

Slightly apprehensive at his apparent insight, I confirmed that indeed my Grandda Bell was a Wesleyan Methodist and that the family tradition continued, but why did he, the BCC Company Secretary, ask such a perceptive question? He answered 'because it is the one job in the pit where the worker must always be stone-cold sober – the lives of all the miners are in his hands. And there are always Wesleyan

chapels in mining villages.' (The winding enginemen operate the pithead gear which lowers and lifts the cages from the pithead to the underground coalface.) My Grandda Bell's occupation and faith suddenly assumed a new, unanticipated dimension.

Photo of Woodhorn Colliery in its working life: it is now a mining museum, well worth a visit. Some of the old buildings and equipment in the photo have been preserved in the museum today.

The Cannock fire – a crisis is a terrible thing to waste

As we celebrated the moment in August 1994, with the weight of responsibility beginning to dawn, the BCC Company Secretary affirmed that there were two imperatives which I and my colleagues, old and new, must achieve. The first was to complete a software project by December 1st on which the privatisation of the coal industry, due to be completed at Christmas, depended, and he added casually that if it wasn't, I would personally have to explain why to the President of the Board of Trade (then Michael Heseltine). The second was even more blunt: 'if you fail to pay the miners on time [the computers ran the payroll system], you're dead in the water'. So, nothing to worry about really.

Fourth pause for thought: do I/we always realise how much we depend on others – their knowledge, expertise, commitment, loyalty and honest endeavour – to achieve goals for which I/we are held responsible? And do we thank them?

I was soon to find out. Less than three months later, mid-morning on November 9th, fire broke out at the Cannock computer centre, immediately cutting the power supply and sending billowing clouds of acrid, black smoke along the corridors. A colleague on the spot calmly phoned me (in my office in Croydon) that we had a major disaster on our hands, and having first checked that there were no casualties and that the emergency services were present, we set about handling the immediate crisis (alert the BCC management, arrange PR for when the press come asking – it wasn't the sort of thing easily hidden, pinpoint the cause of the fire – it turned out to be a faulty sub-station belonging to the local Electricity Board, tell your boss, etc) and setting in motion the sketchy Disaster Recovery Plan to 'return to normal' as soon as possible. Oh, and check when the miners' payroll was run (2 days before, so a month to recover) and, as it happened, the software project was already complete ahead of schedule, so my encounter with Mr Heseltine was not needed.

Fifth pause for thought: ‘a crisis is a terrible thing to waste’ – what can we learn from the real experience of a crisis, far beyond the well-intentioned, preparatory paper exercises? Is the NHS now in a similar situation, though on a huge scale? And, what of the churches?

God’s interventions in human history

This is a sketchy and superficial picture to highlight God’s interventions. After creation, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, by Genesis 6, in response to the corruption and violence which filled the earth, God says to Noah (verse 13), ‘I have determined to make an end of all flesh’: in other words, ‘this won’t do, let’s start again’. This is a crisis not to be wasted: Plan B beckons.

The Old Testament histories and prophecies run through the roller-coaster journeys and adventures of Abraham and the tribes of Israel and their interactions with God and the empires of Egypt, Assyria and Persia for 1000 years until the 5th century BC. The well-known prophetic references in Isaiah and Micah, telling of a Messiah, were written in the 8th century BC: they had a long time to run before God intervenes again in Jesus, and at a time when the Roman empire was becoming the most powerful of all. Was this another crisis moment?

Sixth pause for thought: why did God give us Jesus at that moment, to herald the start of a new Christian faith which would transform the world and humanity for ever?

For me, the more intriguing question relates to the events of the 7th century AD. The Roman empire had fallen in 476 and the historical period known as the Dark Ages began. Then in 622, the prophet Muhammad begat a new religion, to be named Islam: when he died in 632, rival factions – the Sunni and Shia adherents – vied over who should succeed him. The rest is history, as they say. Most significantly, Judaism, Christianity and Islam are the three Abrahamic religions – they have the same source – and Islam acknowledges Jesus as a prophet. Muslims worship their God, known as Allah, who is the same God as Jews and Christians worship, though with different connotations. This leads to a profound question about God’s will and intention, not least in the light of centuries of world history and events.....

Seventh pause for thought: what was God’s purpose in raising a new prophet, Muhammad, and how can Muslims and Christians find peaceful, common cause to fulfil God’s will for them today?



As an aside, the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul was built as a Christian place of worship in AD 537 and remained so until 1453 when the Ottoman conquest resulted in it being converted into a mosque. Then, in 1935, under the secular leadership of the Turkey’s Kemal Ataturk, it became a museum, recognising the significance of both great religions in his nation’s history. Turkey’s current pro-Islamist President, Mr Erdogan, has decreed that it again become a mosque in 2020.

Hagia Sophia, Istanbul. The four minarets were added after its conversion to a mosque in 1453.

A local diversion

Hartley Victoria College (HVC) in Manchester trained many Methodist ministers (including my father 1945-47) and, in later years to fill its generous accommodation, acted as a ‘hall of residence’ for lay students studying (it was alleged) at the university (including me, 1960-63). I played on the same football pitch as my father had done, separated by 15 years or so. Hartley College, as it was formed in 1881, which trained ministers for the Primitive Methodist Church, owed its existence to its benefactor, Sir William Hartley, renowned for his jam-making. Victoria Park College, also in Manchester, trained ministers for the United Methodist Church and closed after Methodist union (in 1932) to merge with Hartley in 1934.

In the midst of the overcapacity for Methodist ministerial training – now in 2020 it is focussed solely on the Queen’s Foundation at Birmingham – the six residential colleges gradually diminished and HVC closed in 1972, to be acquired by the Royal Northern College of Music as a hall of residence and practice centre for a few years and later by the KD Grammar School for boys, a Muslim school. Its splendid premises are in Alexandra Road South, though tragically the football pitch has given way to housing, but the original clock, atop its tower, still keeps time.

Some old students, me included, arranged to visit the college after it had become a Muslim school. The new owners were most gracious in their welcome and keen to know what the purposes of all the old communal rooms had been when it had been a Methodist college, not least the basement we knew as ‘sheol’ (the underworld, or simply hell) where we kept our bikes. We old students were focussed on one thing alone – what had they done with the college chapel, where generations of students, ministerial and lay, had shared in worship (and indeed I had led evening prayers). The answer was that they had boarded up the organ, removed the pews and laid beautiful carpets on the floor so as to enable it to remain a place of prayer: but what about the clerestory Christian stained-glass windows, visible from the outside as well as the inside, knowing that Muslims do not permit icons in worship?

The response overwhelmed us in its generosity: they said ‘we acknowledge that this has been a place where God has been worshipped for over 100 years, and it still is, so we have simply put curtains across the windows. We cannot see the windows, but the outside world still can.’ The ‘chapel’, place of worship, is still there.

Eighth pause for thought: is there any greater grace than that?

The coronavirus pandemic crisis: a terrible thing to waste for the Churches?

If a crisis is a terrible thing to waste, it can be used for good or ill (some actions of certain world powers spring to mind) and it can fundamentally challenge the old order (as, for example, retail and hospitality businesses are discovering, with far-reaching consequences for town and city centres). In the current phase of transition, we have spoken of the ‘new normal’, yet to emerge: will things ever be the same again? Probably not.

So, to the churches. Over the weeks these Reflections have contained many thoughtful, challenging pieces from several people – for which I am most grateful – about the impact of the pandemic on how we worship, sustain our faith remotely, retain some sense of fellowship and communion with each other and begin to recover what is essential for God’s and our continued mission. ‘Is this another of God’s wake-up calls?’, we are asked: perhaps it is, as new ways of worship through streamed services have been rapidly mounted, reaching out beyond regular churchgoers, and which will surely become a permanent feature of ministry as we move forward.

My hope and prayer is that, as we discern God’s will for us at this time of crisis, wrestle with the obstacles and find new ways of being Church, we shall be able to sustain a living, worshipping presence in the communities to which God has called us, wherever we are and whenever the time is opportune.

Final pause for thought:

**‘All praise to our redeeming Lord, who joins us by his grace,
and bids us, each to each restored, together seek his face.’**

John Bell, July 2020 – all the reflections. And Charles Wesley, StF 608, verse 1.

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.