

Reflections and Prayers – encountering God

This is the 19th 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.

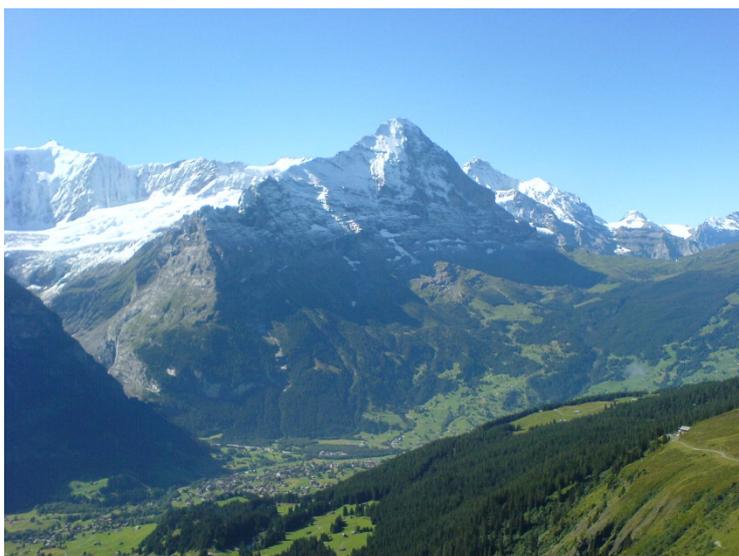
Creation, daily life and worship

We encounter and feel the presence of God in many ways and places, not least in creation, in daily life and in the sacred spaces in which we worship. These reflections seek to illustrate each and to point to their importance in our Christian faith and experience: like the tripod or the three-legged stool (or even the Manx logo), they only stand when all three are present and firmly grounded.

The Eiger

‘God who made the earth’, so the hymn begins, at some point too long ago in time to measure or comprehend. And from those ancient days, literally, millions of years ago, parts of God’s earth must surely never have changed. Mountains hewn in splendour, pointing heavenwards their lofty peaks as if to reach their maker, stand firm and solid as around their base, humans and their inventions scurry like ants to and fro.

Such is the Eiger: massive and immovable: beautiful and yet terrifying as climbers, allured, have perished attempting to scale its mighty walls and reach its summit. Sometimes in clear sunlight its snow-clad walls and rocky faces glistening and appealing: sometimes in darkness, a vast emptiness, with the odd lamp of a mountain hut betraying human ascent: sometimes totally shrouded in mist or cloud, there, unchanged, seen or unseen, as the generations of women and men have come and gone.



It will stand firm from now until eternity, whatever we do down below, threatened not by inflation, or unemployment, or the coronavirus or even the nuclear holocaust. Nothing we can do or imagine can assail its power or permanence.

Is not God’s Eiger a symbol of God himself? It points upwards to God, somewhere beyond the knowledge and experience of everyday life, yet firmly grounded on earth. God, like the mountain of his creation, remains and stands for ever sure; sometimes seen and sometimes not; watching us in our ebbs and flows; the same, yesterday, today, and to eternity.

John Bell, in Grindelwald, Switzerland, 1983, slightly amended in August 2020. Photo by John Bell, the Eiger, 2008.

Transformation

Every Saturday, The Times newspaper publishes obituaries of people who were not nationally known but made valuable contributions to their local communities and were much loved by family, friends and colleagues. In February 2020, the family of Mr Steven Finch, who had died aged 90, submitted their tribute to him. He had been a regular church-attender all his life, but, in his 40s, he ‘met Jesus’ (as he had described the experience) whilst on a Swiss skiing trip and had written, ‘The majestic mountains, the snow-covered slopes and the absolute quiet spoke of God’s sovereignty over his creation’. I can say ‘Amen’ to that.

There’s something special about mountains and they feature in many dramatic episodes in both Old and New Testaments. Mountain-top experiences can be both literal and metaphorical. There is cloud and fire, glory and

fear, dazzling light and pitch darkness, and sometimes the still small voice of calm. Moses climbed mountains to receive his next instructions and perhaps to escape the recalcitrant Israelites for an odd day. Psalm 121 – the Psalm of Ascents – brings comfort as we lift up our eyes to the hills: you might like to read it again. Micah (4: 1-5) yearns for the nations to come to the mountain of the Lord to find, not just judgement, but peace.

Into the New Testament, Matthew (chapters 5 to 7) records Jesus' so-called 'Sermon on the Mount', followed by the breath-taking, rapturous experience of Peter, James and John on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17): I write this on August 6th, the feast of the 'Transfiguration of our Lord'. This turned out to be a mountain-top experience in every sense after the unknowing Peter, rather prosaically, observes 'how good it is that we are here': but is this the clue to Samuel Greg's interpretation in his hymn (H&P 158) 'Stay, master, stay upon this heavenly hill; a little longer let us linger still.' Like children who plead, 'do we have to go home now?' when they're so enjoying a day at the zoo or on the beach. But verse 3 reads:

'No, saith the Lord, the hour is past, we go; our home, our life, our duties lie below.
While here we kneel upon the mount of prayer, the plough lies waiting in the furrow there.
Here we sought God that we might know his will; there we must do it, serve him, seek him still.'



Samuel Greg came from the Quarry Bank Mill family who understood what it meant to know God's will and to do it in daily life. The mill, by the River Bollin near Styal in Cheshire, founded in 1784 by his father (also Samuel), spun and wove cotton for nearly 200 years. Now owned by the National Trust, you can visit it and learn of the strong Christian ethic which underpinned the business in the early days of the Industrial Revolution.

To quote (again) from the Methodist Church's 2005 'Time to Talk of God' report, 'discipleship will be lived out in the ordinary life of the world', where ploughs lie waiting in furrows. Mountain-top experiences may be life-changing, but they are short-lived and must be transformed and worked out in daily life and work.

So, to John Ellerton's hymn (H&P 376), written in 1870, of a similar vintage to Greg's (1854):

'Thine is the loom, the forge, the mart, the wealth of land and sea.
The worlds of science and of art revealed and ruled by thee.

Work shall be prayer, if all be wrought as thou wouldst have it done;
And prayer, by thee inspire and taught, itself with work be one.'

The words may be Victorian, but the sentiments are surely sound and relevant – that we find God in the grandest and humblest, the finest and grubbiest places of the secular world, wherein we are called to exercise our Christian witness and discipleship. We can encounter God as much on Mondays, as we do in worship on Sundays.

But, in the absence of a handy mountain or even the capability to climb it, we seek the strength to sustain ourselves for Mondays to Saturdays through our Sunday worship, in church in normal times, and in whatever ways we can find in these difficult days.

*John Bell, August 2020. It is interesting to note that neither hymn quoted made the cut into StF. Neither did H&P 143, 'Behold, little child, laid in a manger bed', with Donald McIlhagga's wonderful last verse 'Christ, Master Carpenter, we come rough-hewn to thee'. Perhaps a bad day at the office for the StF committee, but at least that one is in R&S (194).
Photo of Quarry Bank Mill from National Trust publicity.*

A prayer: calls you one and calls you all...

Creator God, you have called us to do your will in the world,

in the name of Jesus.



You have called us to be
shop assistants and social workers,
truckers and teachers,
carpenters and chemists,
engineers and evangelists,
labourers and lawyers,
osteopaths and office workers,
and much else besides.

We pray with all people in their daily life and work:
enjoying fulfilment in a purposeful job or challenging vocation,
staring at the uncertainty of redundancy or dismissal,
holding immense responsibility and facing testing decisions,
feeling exploited by injustice in trade,
caring for others, unpaid and unsung.

And we pray for people for whom time passes slowly:
seeking employment, frustrated by repeated refusals,
unable to work through illness or incapacity,
retired, now wondering where they are still wanted,
finding their work a drudge, dreading each new day,
still listening for God's call.

Enabling God,
we commit the insight of our minds,
the labour of our hands
and the love of our hearts,
as we share in daily community life
and shape the future of your created world.

Amen.

John Bell, June 2005, slightly amended, published in the Methodist Church Prayer Handbook 2005-06. Photos from 'job centre plus' publicity and, courtesy Brian Simmons, of Philips (aka City) House, Croydon, where I spent many years before emigrating to Cheshire.



An unexpected moment

We arranged to visit the National Memorial Arboretum near Lichfield on July 29th, our 53rd Wedding Anniversary. We hadn't been so far from home since early March, booked our places, paid £4 to park the car, took a picnic lunch to have beforehand and went in. No queue, no masks required, no questions about our age – just a genuinely warm welcome and a few simple guidelines about what to do. It was so informal, gracious and assuring. There were plenty of people there, all being sensible and social distancing, not being told how to behave: lots of children too, their joyous voices and laughter shrill above the background hum of adult conversation. No need for supervision. It was lovely, as if nothing much was wrong. Almost, yes, normal.

We fulfilled our intention to walk the paths around the Arboretum's one hundred and fifty acres, amid the three hundred memorials, each recalling a critical event in our nation's history or the sacrificial contributions of its Services, military, medical and civilian. There are thousands of names on the stones; each was a living, loved person whose life was lost in conflict from WW1 through WW2 to the Falklands War, in Iraq, Afghanistan, Northern Ireland and many other places. We remembered them, as we paused and read, just sharing an occasional quiet comment.

But the highlight was yet to come. The Chapel was open – just a hand-sanitiser by the door – nobody on duty; an inviting, wide open door and in we went. There was nobody else. Maybe nobody else is missing it, as we do. Nothing was cordoned off or inaccessible: the hymnbooks and bibles hadn't been removed. We could, I surmise, even have played the organ. We could sit anywhere we wished. What a moment, what a privilege, what a joy;



the first time in a place of worship since March 15th and so unexpected; unconditionally and freely available, no strings or rules attached. An emotional, liberating moment.

We sat down for several minutes in silence. The silence of eternity in the house of God. Something beyond and more fulfilling, for us, than sitting on the settee at home watching a service. But then, that's the way we are; what upholds us spiritually, and what has sustained Christians and people of other faiths of all generations, is the sacred space, be it cathedral, church, chapel, temple or mosque, and that's what we are missing. Maybe the road to the National Memorial Arboretum – albeit a 140-mile round-trip – can be our salvation until

church worship nearer home is safely restored.

John Bell, August 2020. This is offered as a personal, honest reflection on the immediate impact of a wholly unexpected moment; the genuine challenges faced to re-open local churches and the value to many people of streamed services are both readily acknowledged. Photo by Joan Bell, the National Memorial Arboretum chapel, July 29th 2020.

Commemoration – here and there

Finally, as it happens, on Saturday August 15th, the Royal British Legion is arranging a Commemoration of VJ Day at the National Memorial Arboretum, to be broadcast on BBC1. There will a time of silence and remembrance at 11 am, led by HRH the Prince of Wales.

In prayer and eternal thanksgiving, we will remember them.



Indeed, we will; but let us also remember the events which immediately preceded the Japanese surrender. On August 6th 1945 an atomic bomb was dropped on the city of Hiroshima and, three days later, another on Nagasaki, killing nearly 200,000 innocent civilian people outright, leaving a terrible legacy of pain and suffering and devastating the cities. This day, August 6th, is also Hiroshima Day. Shells of buildings (see photo) have been left as they were, and a beautiful Peace Memorial Park and museum created, to remind anyone who visits of the sheer horror of war, atomic or otherwise. There is, in the museum, a wristwatch, stopped at 8.15 am on the day.

Over the centuries, the aspirations of Micah's words that nations should beat their swords to ploughshares, their spears to pruning hooks and not learn war any more have gone largely unheeded. The inhumanity of human beings to one another continues and seems to know no bounds.

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 hymnbook (Singing the Faith – StF, Hymns and Psalms – H&P or even the 1933 Methodist Hymn Book – MHB), and for URC readers, in Rejoice and Sing (R&S). the URC's present hymnal.