

Reflections and Prayers: contradictions and paradoxes

This is the 21st 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.

Visitors from China

As some readers know from first-hand experience, being President or Vice-President of the Methodist Conference is an immense privilege and brings unexpected moments. Back in 2005-06, when Tom Stuckey and I served, it was still the practice for the Presidency to chair the Methodist Council, the representative body which meets a few times during the year to oversee the work of the Church.



A delegation from the People's Republic of China's Foreign Affairs Department (State Administration for Religious Affairs) was visiting Britain and Europe to understand how the Christian Church could co-exist within the State and they requested a visit to the Methodist Church. It happened in December 2005 when the Methodist Council was meeting in London and I duly welcomed the Director, Mme Guo Wei, and her colleagues to listen in and to observe Council's open, dignified and participative proceedings. Over lunch, Tom and I and senior Connexional Team staff explained how Christian Churches in Britain bring benefit to society and fulfil citizens' spiritual needs, and that the Churches do not threaten the State or seek to undermine its authority. (It wasn't the time or place to explore the Church's prophetic role of speaking truth to power, and we assumed that the Church of England had explained why Anglican bishops sit in the Upper House of Parliament.) Our gracious and grateful visitors asked perceptive questions, took copious notes and were intrigued that lay people should play such a prominent role in national Church leadership.

That was fifteen years ago: if China was then seeking to accommodate Christian Churches, it's been a rocky and uncertain ride since, and, from the tragic news filtering from western China, the Uighur Muslim people suffer persecution because their faith is perceived as incompatible with State intent. What did Mme Guo and her colleagues report and recommend back home? Were there too many contradictions? How is it now?

This week's reflections, though diverse, are bound by contradictions and paradoxes. The first begins with Christians in China and the second invites us, with the writer, to ponder on profoundly important and difficult issues. After all, that's what reflections are for.

John Bell, August 2020. Photo of Methodist Church House, 25, Marylebone Road, London, by Jill Baker. Note the reminder above the door that this building was originally the HQ of the Methodist Missionary Society, known as 'Mission House'. The Richmond Room, in which Council met, contains the huge wallboards of names of ministers who proclaimed the gospel across the world and often died, within a very few years, of diseases from which they had no immunity.

Lasting Effects

Missionaries can never fully know what legacies they will leave behind long after their time in a particular mission field.

Take, for example, Jonah the reluctant missionary to Nineveh (which became the capital of Assyria). Though Jonah was not the ideal missionary, the Lord used him to bring about a great revival in that city. Though that area has had a long and chequered history we can still see in it signs of the ancient activities of Jonah. Nineveh is today's Mosul, an important Iraqi city. Near Mosul is a town called Nebi Yunus (Prophet Jonah) where according to legend Jonah is believed to be buried. What is also significant is the existence of Assyrian Christians – and they have five or six denominations – a largely persecuted minority in Iraq, Syria and other middle Eastern countries. Jonah would never have imagined the full impact of his missionary visit to Nineveh.

In 2011, I was in Suzhou in China and had an opportunity to visit Suzhou University, a bustling educational institution with more than 40,000 students. What may not be known well is that this university was once a Methodist institution established by Methodist missionaries in 1900. My hosts showed me the old buildings of the Methodist University which was changed into the current university when missionaries had to leave China in the mid-twentieth century. These buildings stand today as a reminder of old Methodist activities in Suzhou.



There is another building just outside the university walls that speaks of Methodist missionary activity in a bygone era. It is a functioning church building where a Christian congregation worships God every Sunday. It used to be a Methodist church called St John's Chapel, which was closed down as a church when China came under communist rule. It was put to secular use and was forgotten for some time. Then in the 1980s it was returned to the Christians; yet for several years it was not used. God in His grace had preserved the pulpit, altar and communion rails which were covered with some protective material during the period it was not used as a church.

In the early 1990s the mayor of the city visited the church building and asked why it was not used as a functioning church. He was told that it would be odd to have a church just outside a secular university which taught atheism to its students. He remarked that if the atheists did not do a good job, then the church should be allowed to teach the students about Christ. It was after that that the church began to be used for Christian worship, and today there is a growing congregation there.

It is amazing how in so many places God has preserved the fruits of long-forgotten missionary labours.

Sometimes, what was planted by missionaries appeared to have perished, but new shoots emerge by the grace of God. As we read in Scripture, "the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations" (Psalm 33:11). Missionaries may never guess how their work will last – all because it is eventually God's mission, and He is behind everything that is planted faithfully.

The Revd Dr Robert Solomon, Bishop Emeritus of the Methodist Church in Singapore, written in 2011. We may reflect again, in 2020, on the uncertainties of the Christian Churches in China but the faithfulness of Christian people is surely sustained. Photo of St John's Church, in 2012, from Wikimedia Commons to whom acknowledgement is made.

Lockdown - a time to read: Part One

My decision to re-read Naguib Mahfouz's Cairo trilogy [*Palace Walk, Palace of Desire and Sugar Street*] was taken ahead of a Christmas break we were about to take in Kenya. I finished all three volumes before lockdown but it remains part of the accumulated reading of this troubled year. I'd previously read it in the 1980s shortly after it was first published in English. I knew then that I would one day, when I'd had a little more experience of life, need to have another go at it.

It's the story of a traditional Egyptian Muslim family across three generations through the tumultuous years of British rule. I found the meticulous treatment of the place of faith in such a domestic setting so helpful. It allowed a non-Muslim foreigner like me to feel part of the family. I could sit at table with the characters, enjoy their conversation and understand their worldview in a way I'd never otherwise be able to do. The author points up the contrasts between life within the home and on the streets, between the heavily restricted lives of the women and the carnal and alcohol-fuelled lusty lives of the men, between a resentful local population and the imperious occupying military force intent at all costs on maintaining control of the approaches to the Suez Canal. All these aspects of life are brilliantly put forward.

So too is the way the younger generations drifted either into mystical religion or Marxism or collaboration with the British. The communist activist is intent on fanning the flames of revolution. The hard-nosed Islamic fundamentalist joins the Muslim Brotherhood. Others, in denial of external happenings, turn to hedonistic escapism. I could say so much more but here I'll content myself with the suggestion that these novels gave me an insight into the contradictions and paradoxes, the nobility and the futility, the sustaining and the exploitative aspects of religion. I've been pondering all this ever since.



Then, through the month of April, in the high lockdown season, I found myself re-reading Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies* as a preparation for taking on her magisterial third volume, *The Mirror and the Light*, which had just then been published. I thought I knew lots about those Tudor times but Mantel showed me just how superficial my knowledge really was. The turmoil of those times, the plotting and the scheming, the Pope and the King, the wars of religion raging across Europe in the wake of the Reformation, the jostling for position in the Court, the merciless killings of so many people – all these figure in a compelling narrative that put me in mind of Dostoevsky.

I found myself re-appraising the character of Cardinal Wolsey, re-thinking the whole question of the dissolution of the monasteries, trying hard to assess the nuanced slide of England (political more than spiritual) from Roman Catholicism to quasi-Protestantism. And, of course, the author offers character studies of two towering men – Thomas More and Thomas Cromwell. I'll not enter into a discussion of how well or otherwise she pulls that off – I've already had a number of impassioned exchanges on the matter. Once again, as with Mahfouz, I found myself faced with the contradictions and paradoxes, the nobility and the futility, the sustaining and the exploitative aspects of religion. I've been pondering all this ever since.

Quite a year for reading, so far. John has kindly encouraged me to offer a second reflection on further volumes that will lead me to the same conclusions as those I've written about above. They've all put before me the same contradictions and paradoxes. I seem to have been pondering all this since my childhood. As it was in the beginning, is now and, it seems, ever shall be.

The Revd Dr Leslie Griffiths, now retired, former President of the Conference, superintendent minister at Wesley's Chapel, London, and member of the House of Lords. I am most grateful to Leslie for his willingness to write for us: his second Reflection will soon appear. Readers may even be stimulated to 'catch up on some further reading' themselves. Photo by John Bell, from a cruise ship, at the southern entrance of the Suez Canal in more peaceful days, April 2018.

Prayers

Be still and reflect; as we pray with and for all peoples this day who, because of their deeply held faith, are repressed, intimidated, threatened and persecuted even to the point of death, by national governments or the intolerant leaders of faiths other than their own. They are not forgotten, whoever and wherever they are: and they are enfolded in the eternal arms of an ever-loving God. Amen.

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.