

Reflections and Prayers: Bodiam, 'Born in song' and a pair of scales

This is the 22nd 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.

Beginning at Bodiam Castle

Places can evoke memories, some joyful, some sad, because something inspirational, or perhaps life-changing, happened there. As can objects – things – which we acquire, perhaps passed down from earlier generations. Such places and things come to mean much to us. Neil Oliver describes his book, 'The Story of the British Isles in 100 Places', as 'a personal sketch rather than a full-blown painting': Neil MacGregor's book, 'A History of the World in 100 Objects', is rather more comprehensive. The first is about places, the second about things.

Your turn now: forget 100 – just try ten, five or even fewer. Where are those special places have you been to and which precious things have you accumulated in your life? Why are they so significant to you? What are the family or personal memories they evoke for you? Have a think about it as you read on.



I can think of many but, for the moment, I'll offer just one place and one thing. The 'place' is Bodiam Castle in East Sussex, where Joan and I first met, on an afternoon coach trip from The Adelphi Methodist Guest House (mentioned in Susan Howdle's piece two weeks ago) whilst on holiday there in 1965: it has been, is and ever will be a special place for us, even if its distance away means visits are very rare nowadays.

The 'thing' is a unique, wooden cross made by a local carpenter at Leadgate in County Durham for my father when he began his ministry there in 1947. It stood prominently in his study for decades and now stands on a cabinet in mine. When my father died in 1990, I inherited his books, a box of old tools and a bizarre collection of his treasured items (which may feature in these Reflections one day) but the cross remained on a mantelpiece in the house where my step-mother continued to live. When she died some years later, I was immensely grateful that the cross came to me: it is the eternal symbol of our Christian faith.



Photo of Bodiam Castle from National Trust publicity. Photo of the cross by Joan Bell, August 2020.

How are you doing with your places and things? Have evocative memories come flooding back? Perhaps some have. Meanwhile, keep reading on.

We have a further piece from Susan Howdle this week on the theme of a special 'thing' for her – a pair of scales – but first a hymn associated with a 'place'.

Joan and I recently had a day out, in steady rain, in the gardens and grounds of Chatsworth House, country seat of the Dukes of Devonshire in Derbyshire, and we admired the (gravity-fed) Emperor Fountain which everyone who visits remembers and, for many of us, evokes thoughts of the hymn 'Born in song'. Now, enjoy the story of its origin, written for us by Brian Hoare, author of the words and composer of the tune: I am most grateful to Brian, not only for giving the world his hymn, but for kindly recounting its story. It has a certain poignancy in these days of prohibition from hymn-singing.

If you have a hymnbook to hand, you might like to look it up (StF 21, H&P 486) as you read about it, verse by verse.

'Born in Song'

Back in 1979 while I was serving as New Testament tutor at Cliff College in Derbyshire, the Sheffield District of which we were a part was planning a District-wide celebration to mark the 200th anniversary of John Wesley's visit to Sheffield to preach in Paradise Square to what his diary records as 'the largest congregation I ever saw on a weekday'. The event was to be called 'Born in song' (quoting from the Preface to the 1933 Methodist Hymn Book which began with the words 'Methodism was born in song'). I was invited to join the planning group and it occurred to me that the title would make a good opening line for a theme hymn.



Some time later, on a train journey back from a meeting in London, I was thinking about those words and before the train reached Chesterfield I had written both words and music. It was subsequently used around the District and proved popular enough to be considered for the new Methodist hymnbook being planned, *Hymns and Psalms* (1983), subsequently appearing in its successor *Singing the Faith* (2011). It has also been widely used well beyond Methodism, appearing in hymnbooks such as *Anglican Praise* (1987), *Sing Glory* (1999) and overseas in the hymnal of The United Church of Canada, *Voices United* (1996).

The tune includes some big jumps and when I was thinking of a tune name I decided to call it *Chatsworth* since we could see the huge gravity-fed fountain at Chatsworth House across the valley from our home and it seemed symbolic of the music's octave leaps.

I tried to base the words firmly on scripture and follow a Trinitarian structure. After an opening verse affirming that 'God's people have always been singing' verses 2-4 describe the work of God the creator, Christ the redeemer and the Holy Spirit as sanctifier and enabler. Verse 5 is based on the Great Commission and the final verse speaks of the end of time when Christ will reign and his people 'still shall sing his praise'. For those

interested, a study based on it can be found at www.hymnquest.com/resources/bs4.

Music, and especially singing, has been a major element in our Methodist worship from the very beginning, and one of the frustrations of the present situation is that we are no longer allowed to sing together. The Wesleys knew well what Bishop Ambrose had asserted back in the 4th century: 'The singing of praise is the very bond of unity, when the whole people join in a single act of song'. From the start of the Methodist movement the Wesleys encouraged singing and John regulated not only what words were sung but also the tunes they were sung to – a tradition continued to this day with the Methodist Conference 'authorising' new hymn books. At the Foundery, Wesley's London church, the men sat on one side and women on the other, and they would sing alternate verses. John led the singing using one hand to guide the men, the other to guide the women and both hands when everyone was to sing. And sing they did! As the musicologist Eric Routley put it, Methodist philosophy was 'Give us the best music we can have but make it friendly to the people'. It was music for the masses and they sang music they enjoyed as an exuberant expression of their faith.

But the Wesleys were eclectic, trawling music from many sources ranging from Handel to popular tavern songs. Our worship today is similarly broad, enriched by music from Taizé (Roman Catholic), Iona (Church of Scotland), the world church, classic traditional hymnody and from new contemporary worship songs as well as our own Methodist tradition. If it is true that 'God's people have always been singing' it is our privilege to be able to employ songs and hymns from every age and tradition to worship him. Wesley encouraged his people to 'sing spiritually', offering their worship for the glory of God, and whatever our personal musical tastes we must do the same. We should beware lest the music of worship becomes the worship of music. After all, 'God alone is worthy to be praised'.

Revd Brian Hoare, retired Methodist minister, former President of the Conference and hymn-writer, now living in North Yorkshire. Photo by Joan Bell of the Emperor Fountain at Chatsworth on a sunny day in June 2018.

A pair of scales

I'm still musing on John Bell's reflections (no. 17) and going back in time a little this time. As I said before, he and I share so much background, including our minister fathers, Reuben Bell and Ralph Lowery, who in turn had much in common - in their north-eastern roots, training at Hartley Victoria College, and ministry in (amongst other places) the Leeds and Newcastle upon Tyne Methodist Districts. This reflection springs from a memory of my father.

I don't know if you're like me, but I am rather enjoying in these strange days watching people talking on line from home, whether in television interviews or in meetings or services, because I'm a bit nosy and like to see the background of their houses. Some people go to considerable lengths to arrange what we see, 'curating' their bookshelves – or even using the technology to create a very unlikely scenario such as a tropical beach (without necessarily dressing to match it!).

Like some of you perhaps, I've found myself appearing on screen from time to time in recent months, speaking from the study which my husband and I share – his is very definitely the neat and tidy half of the room. People watching me will see a lot of bits and pieces around me, and very un-curated bookshelves. But some of those bits and pieces are very meaningful to me and I want to share one with you which is quite precious to me.



As I hope you can see, it's some weighing scales. But for what? The clue is on the writing you can just see: 'Inland letter rates. Not exceeding 2 ozs - 1½d. For every additional 2 ozs ½d'.

Yes, it's a set of scales for weighing letters to post and you can guess it's quite old (for the younger ones among you – an old penny halfpenny was less than a modern penny). So it's not much 'use' in telling me what stamp to put on a letter now.

Why do I keep it? Well, it's something I inherited from my father, and so it's dear to me in that sense. And it meant something special to him.

The story goes back to another dark period in our country's history - 1942. My father was up in the industrial north east, at West Hartlepool, an area under frequent bombardment. 1942 was not all gloom and doom for him, however: it was the big year in which he was ordained as a Methodist minister and got married to my mother. They had all sorts of wedding presents despite war-time shortages. I know that because my mother (like a lot of people of her generation) hoarded a lot of them 'for best' and when she died there were still quite a few left for me – they were as good as new! They're not as good now!

These scales were a present, which my father always had on his desk, and towards the end of his life he told me the story. There was an old lady, a widow, who was very frail and really poverty-stricken. She had in those days a tiny pittance of a pension, and the only way she could survive was to live in a very cramped house with her son and daughter-in-law and their children; she had to sleep on a mattress in the cupboard under the stairs.

My father would visit her as her minister, and you can imagine how amazed and humbled he was when shortly before the wedding, she proudly insisted on giving him these scales as he was setting up home with his new wife. She'd somehow saved enough to buy them out of that tiny income she had. No wonder they meant a lot to him. And to me.

They always bring to my mind that story in the Bible; something that happened in the last week of Jesus's earthly life, when he had gone to Jerusalem with his disciples and was in the Temple.

'He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.'

[Mark 12: 41-44]

Giving all she had. An inspiration, perhaps even to Jesus. For within a few days, Jesus himself was to do just that – giving his very life, so that all the world should know God's love. There's that amazing line in one of Charles Wesley's most famous hymns: of how God 'emptied himself of all but love' – all that God's own self had to give, for us.

I said these scales weren't any use. Well, they aren't as I stick a 76p stamp on a letter. But at times, perhaps particularly at present, when I like many others feel a bit weary of well doing, the inspiration of that lady in West Hartlepool comes down through all the years to me, in a way she couldn't ever have imagined. It's a gift that keeps on giving - like God's own love for us and for all creation.

Susan Howdle, August 2020. Susan is a former Vice-President of the Conference, living in Leeds. She also provided the photo of the scales. The hymn quote is from 'And can it be', StF 345, R&S 366, verse 3.

Prayers of thanksgiving

Loving God, we come before you with our memories, such as they are, but not always what they were. We give thanks for those places and things which mean much to us, for many different reasons.

In quietness, taking your time, think of places and things which matter to you.

The places may be nearby or distant, open spaces, communities or buildings: the things may be valuable or ordinary, secular or religious. But each an evocative reminder of a moment, an occasion or an encounter in your life-story, unique to you.

Some may bring joy; some may bring sadness.

Some may come from a long time ago; some may be recent; some may be constant – always with you.

Some may have marked turning points in your lives; some may affirm family connections.

Some may symbolise a step on your journey of faith.

Loving God, in thanksgiving, we bring these thoughts and prayers together, in the name of Jesus.

Amen.



Photo by Martin Bell of a silver trowel used to lay a foundation stone for Norley (Wesleyan) Methodist Church in July 1881. The story of its 'coming home' in 2016 is fascinating, and the trowel is treasured by the congregation today.

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.