

## Reflections and Prayers: Lego, friendship and fellowship

This is the 24<sup>th</sup> 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.

### Daddy, what did you do before there was television?

So asked Martin, our son, when he was about 8 years old. He listened, wide-eyed, with increasing incredulity for a very few minutes, trying not to giggle, as I regaled him with the delights of Bayko and Meccano which had occupied me for countless hours as a lad. The cognoscenti of my generation will recall Bayko was a house-building toy, using green bases with holes into which fitted thin vertical rods, red and white bricks, green windows, red roofs and various other moulded shapes with which you could design and build model villas the like of which only the rich inhabited (i.e. not us). Meccano was always better known and survived for longer.



As an aside, I never built the models in the instruction booklets, whether Bayko or Meccano: I always invented and made my own. Was this an early sign of being a non-Conformist? Discuss.

Now, please don't laugh, but I still have much of my Meccano: why throw it away? Bits sometimes come in useful for that odd repair job: the colourful house number 2 tile from Sorrento, glued to and adorning the brickwork adjacent to our front door, also rests securely on an unobtrusive little Meccano right-angled bracket screwed to the wall. Just for the record, I still have my Hornby-Dublo electric trainsets, in their boxes, but that's another story.



Then came Lego, the Danish invention of Ole Kirk Christiansen, based on the moulded plastic, interlocking, bobbled bricks – almost a fusion of Bayko and Meccano, but not quite either. 'Lego' is derived from the Danish 'leg godt', meaning 'play well'. It is beyond doubt the most popular toy of all time, for children and grown-ups. As well as the standard, multi-purpose, coloured bricks, there are Lego mini-figures, scores of boxed models with an exponentially rising number of plastic shapes which always fit together, Lego stores and Legolands – their own theme parks.

Nowadays, youngsters may be found – with increasing frequency – playing interactive games on their X-boxes. They play with and against friends nearby and strangers they will never meet. We might reflect that, for all the nostalgic attraction and enjoyment of Bayko, Meccano and Lego, these were/are essentially solitary pastimes but none the worse for it; indeed, in the case of Meccano, it left some of us with a legacy of useful metal brackets, strips, rods and the like. In any case, X-boxes hadn't been invented then.



The reflection below, from Jeremy Dare, explores a legacy of Lego a little further. Jeremy, a Methodist minister now retired, was and has never ceased to be an engineer.

*John Bell, September 2020. Photos of bits of John's Meccano and the house number by Joan Bell, September 2020: photo by Alison Bell of Lego model 'Millennium Falcon' (a fictional star-ship from Star Wars) assembled by our younger grandson, then aged 7, in December 2016.*

**Bind us together with cords that cannot be broken**

I have found the time and interest during this strange period to have a look at the first books of the Bible. Recent reading in the latter part of Exodus, where detailed descriptions of the portable tabernacle which formed the focal point of worship are presented, impressed me. The writer's belief that all the sizes, materials and design details were given by God, must have made it an exciting project to work on.

When we bought our house some years ago, we had a damp problem at the back. The ground rose away from the house and moisture from it gathered near the building. A digger and driver were employed to cut the ground back a short distance and a land drain put in. The house was then fine and dry. This year we decided the time had come to put in some kind of retaining wall, as the ground, with a terrace, is gradually crumbling and needs support. We were offered as many suggestions as people we asked. Cast concrete, block work, sleepers, dry stone walling, galvanised wire cages filled with stones, etc. Our prayers for guidance on what to choose didn't lead to any real excitement about any of the ideas.

Then our son-in-law suggested we could use concrete Lego blocks. That idea found a home in our minds and we are proceeding with it. The first ten blocks are in place, most of them a ton and a half each. In the New Testament Christians are described as components in a temple, a place where the presence of God can be discerned. Seeking to grasp God's designs for our fellowship and worship gatherings is an exciting project to reflect and act on as we look ahead. The tabernacle used materials which they had available. The New Testament speaks of placing Christians who God has available in a such a way to form strong and exciting mutually supportive collections of humble and outward facing faithful people. God makes available the resources we need to build, strengthen and grow. We hope our growing retaining wall will function well and be a good support, each block linked by its Lego bobbles and hollows – so too our fellowships.



*Dear Lord, bind us together with cords which cannot be broken!*

*Revd Jeremy Dare, August 2020. Jeremy and Sheila's retirement house is on the Shetland Island of Yell and featured in edition 7 of these Reflections which can be found via the Norley Methodist Church website. The hymn quote is from Bob Gillman's words (in Combined Mission Praise, 54).*

## **Freedom, friendship and fellowship**

Six months into what Jeremy Dare describes as 'this strange period', we now face what we hope will be just a temporary setback in progressing towards 'normal life' as the number of people testing positive for coronavirus increases. So many freedoms we take for granted have been curtailed, not least to meet with friends and to gather for worship and fellowship, let alone attend social occasions or go on holiday. As is often said, we don't realise or appreciate how precious things are until they are withdrawn.

We have coped in different ways, some perhaps more easily than others. If we are drawn to those solitary pastimes (handicrafts, doing puzzles or even building Lego models), or had been awaiting the opportunity to research family history, or (as some contributors to these Reflections have mentioned) finding space to catch up on reading or give the garden a surprise overhaul, the time may have been a blessing. If we are more socially inclined and thrive on face-to-face contacts and interactions, it may have been more of a challenge despite such facilities as Zoom and Skype, if we can access them: these may be better than nothing, but for many they remain second-best, and they may even heighten our sense of isolation. Lockdown has brought both liberation and constraint in unequal measure, depending on our circumstances and inclinations.

In the past week, Joan and I have met face-to-face with a few friends on separate occasions – people we hadn't met with for several weeks. It was good to see them – even if the usual forms of greeting were forbidden – but we 'picked up where we had left off' as if the intervening months had flashed by in a moment. Indeed, we have

had the same experience with friends (some of whom will read this) we hadn't seen for several years: the most extreme example will suffice and, as I recount it, pause and reflect on similar situations you can recall.

During our time in Durham in the 1970s we met Judy and Alan Morrison, from Brisbane, Australia, whilst Alan (a minister in the Uniting Church in Australia – a union of Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists) was studying for his PhD. We kept in touch by letter and then email after we left Durham in 1979 and they returned to Australia. Alan's New Testament scholarship also led to him teaching at Methodist theological colleges in Papua New Guinea and Tonga. In January 2007, Joan and I had our longest holiday ever, cruising on P&O's Aurora from Southampton to Sydney, staying there a few days and flying home. We sailed south-westwards across the Atlantic, around Cape Horn at the southern tip of South America and across the Pacific, where one port of call, on February 21<sup>st</sup>, Ash Wednesday, was Tonga. We had crossed the International Date Line the day before and, going westwards, you lose a day, so we completely missed Shrove Tuesday.



Quite by chance, at the same time, Alan was teaching at the college in Tonga for a term and Judy and he met us at the quay that morning: what an extraordinary experience it was, literally on the other side of the world! We hadn't seen each other for 28 years – but 'we picked up where we left off', for we were the same people, albeit with just a few grey hairs.

Such is the depth and power of enduring human friendship which never fades: like Jeremy's concrete Lego blocks, solid as rock, but also timeless.

How have you kept in touch and sustained your friendships since March? Perhaps by a chance or arranged meeting once they were permitted, by phone, by text, by email, by Zoom or Skype – or, perish the thought, by good, old-fashioned letter or card. Never underestimate the value of the hand-written, paper communication which the recipient can read again and again and retain. Edward Lucas, a regular correspondent of *The Times*, wrote an article in late April, shortly after his father died, saying how much more helpful were written letters of condolence, with their reflective memories, than the short, ephemeral (if well-meaning) phone calls; he quotes a New York funeral director who said that 'in a time when we cannot hug or cry in each other's arms, letters are all the more important'.

We value friendships enormously and have sustained them since March as best we can. Some may indeed have been strengthened, either locally as we have experienced practical support and encouragement (a theme explored in edition 14 by the Revds Roger Cresswell – remember his anecdote about the Tongan boys – and David Emison) or at a distance – indeed, many of my requests for contributions to these Reflections have been greeted with 'how good to hear from you again!'

Finally, fellowship – that elusive, mysterious sense of being joined together in and through a worshipping community, highlighted by Jeremy Dare (above), explored in some detail by Michael Gough a few weeks ago (edition 20) and touched on by many others during 'this strange period' in which gathering for worship has been denied. (As an aside, though they may not use or even understand the word in this context, it is apparent that secular organisations, seeking to persuade employees to return to their places of work rather than home-work, recognise that 'fellowship' is the glue which holds them together as teams with common purposes – perhaps a theme for another week?) Some churches have begun Sunday services, constrained in numbers, format and expression (we still can't do what many enjoy the most – praising God in harmonious singing); others are planning to do so soon; some may be deeply concerned about when they may return, no matter how much they yearn to do so. Sadly, not everyone who wishes will be able to come, for reasons of health and vulnerability: be assured, you will not be forgotten, even as others rejoice.

In the midst of all that is uncertain and unknown, we can be confident that the depth and power which underpins our personal friendships may sustain our sense of corporate fellowship too: we may be temporarily dispersed but we can still feel united with each other and, above all, in Christ.

As we all say during the celebration of Holy Communion:

‘Though we are many, we are one body, because we all share in one bread’.

Thanks be to God.

*John Bell, September 2020. Photo of the Methodist Theological College, Tonga, from publicity material. Quotation from e.g. Methodist Worship Book p 194.*

## Prayers

We give thanks for friends, as we picture them in our mind’s eye, and offer prayers for them:

- those who live nearby, some we meet and some we don’t;
- those who are further away in distance, though not in thought;
- those who are always at the end of a phone line, if needed;
- those we have known for a very long time, and those recently found;
- those with whom we have renewed contact;
- those who have supported us during ‘this strange period’;
- those who have found these months hard, through illness, isolation and vulnerability;
- those others whom we call to mind.



We give thanks for the fellowship of the worshipping community of which we are part, whether in presence or absence at this time, and pray that – whatever obstacles seem to make it difficult – we may find ways to return to praise, prayer and worship, together, in our local churches.

Why hast thou cast our lot  
in the same age and place,  
and why together brought  
to see each other’s face,  
to join with loving sympathy,  
and mix our friendly souls in thee?

Didst thou not make us one,  
that we might one remain,  
together travel on,  
and share our joy and pain,  
till all thy utmost goodness prove,  
and rise renewed in perfect love?

*John Bell, September 2020. Charles Wesley’s words from the hymn ‘Thou God of truth and love’ StF 620, verses 2 and 3. Photo by Martin Bell, September 2017, of Norley Methodist Church to which we hope to return soon.*

### 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](mailto: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. ,