

Reflections and Prayers: peace and humanity

This is the 28th 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.

Contrasting content

Thanks to the inspiration of many people, these weekly Reflections and Prayers cover a rich variety of material, generally related to topical events and celebrations. Last week's focussed on how we're coping with the resurgent coronavirus pandemic: this week's, by contrast, and in their contrasting ways, remind us of the wider challenges faced in the world – pandemic or not – and how we, as people of faith, respond to them.

United Nations International Day of Peace

(This Reflection was prepared for September 20th, the United Nations International Day of Peace. It appears here a few weeks afterwards, but its message is enduring.)

Good morning friends, and a very happy United Nations International Day of Peace to you and yours!



In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the U.N. was formed to promote, encourage and even maintain the fragile peace between nations that the world's leaders hoped to see emerging from the smoking rubble of the War. Peace - no wars, no bombs, no guns, no violence - that was, and remains, the purpose and founding principle of the United Nations.

The first meetings of both the General Assembly and the U.N. Security Council took place on 10th January 1948 in Westminster Central Hall - *our* Westminster Central Hall! Being natural peacemakers, the Methodist Church didn't charge rent for the use of our buildings in Westminster; in lieu of payment, the General Assembly voted to fund the repainting of the main hall in its chosen emblematic colour - pale blue. If you've never worshipped in the church there, let me tell you that it is still painted United Nations blue.

As God's Methodist people, we work for peace. Through the efforts of All We Can, JMA, Overseas Missions and many more, we fund projects, provide encouragement, clear up the aftermath of conflicts, and follow the principles of the U.N. charter. (And WE were the ones who hosted those very first meetings.....!)

But as God's children, the sisters and brothers of the Prince of Peace, I'd encourage us all to think more widely about God's peace today.

As citizens of the world, we celebrate the sterling work of the United Nations in agitating for world peace.

But as God's children, the sisters and brothers of the Prince of Peace himself, let us join together to lift-up before God the work of the Methodist Church to support the peace-makers in all the ways we do and can. So let us also offer-up to the Prince of Peace our prayers for peace in our own nation. Peace in our cities, towns and villages. Peace in our fractured neighbourhoods. Peace in our broken families and our relationships.

And our own peace: peace in our hearts; peace in our minds.

The United Nations designated 20th September as its International Day of Peace, and the World Council of Churches calls on churches to make this a day of prayer for peace, and to offer prayers on the Sunday nearest to September 20th.

So let us take this opportunity to focus on peace, but not just the bombs and the guns; the real peace the world so needs - the Peace of God.

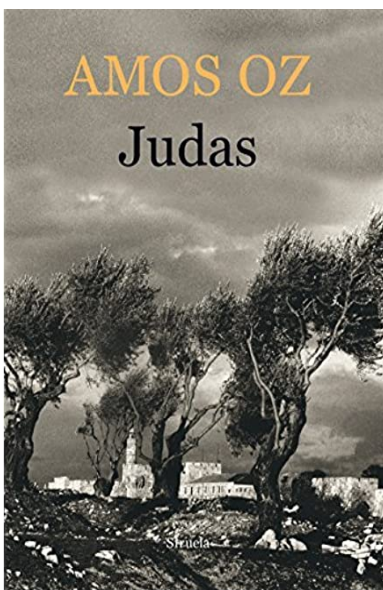
Mark Bennett, September 20th 2020. Mark is a church member in the National Forest East Methodist Circuit in the Nottingham and Derby District.

Lockdown: a time for reading [Part Two]

(Readers wishing to remind themselves of Part One can find it in Reflections edition 21: it is accessible, as are all editions, via the Norley Methodist Church website.)

I previously wrote about two trilogies I've been reading, one set in an Islamic world, the other in a Christian. Time now for another trio, this time written by Jews. Two extraordinary books by a top barrister named Philippe Sands have totally engrossed me. I bought his *East West Street* to help me get my head ready for my duties in the Council of Europe – a body focused on Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law. The book traces the emergence of international law in the years following the Second World War and of two particular laws – those relating to crimes against humanity and genocide – which have become such an important part of the world's recent global legal system. When he gave a lecture on this subject in the Ukrainian city of Lviv he discovered not only that the originators of these two laws, Hersch Lauterpacht and Rafael Lemkin, had both spent their formative early years in Lviv but also, astonishingly, that his own forbears had lived in close proximity to both of them. So the book moves out from being simply about jurisprudence into the realm of autobiography. This book and its successor *Ratline* trace in horrible detail the fate of the Jewish community around Lviv – in a province that in quick succession was Polish, German, Russian and Ukrainian. This is a horror story. So many of the author's own family were hauled off to the camps and murdered. The complicity of both German Protestantism and the Roman Catholic church in the dark history of those times is more than once hinted at. But there's also the tale of amazing virtue and courage on the part of a young woman, a Baptist missionary who, at the nomination of the author, was declared a "Righteous Among the Nations" for her work with persecuted Jews.

The account of the Nuremberg Trials is graphically told. So too is tale of the amazing "friendship" formed between Philippe Sands and the sons of two of the perpetrators of the savagery that we now know as the Shoah or Holocaust. One of these accepted the fact of his father's guilt: Hans Frank was found guilty and hanged at Nuremberg. The other remained in total denial: Otto von Wächter died a mysterious and unexplained death while seeking to escape Europe for sanctuary in Paraguay. Gripping stuff.



It's a novel by Amos Oz that completes this group. I've been reading his work for decades. Here's a true prophet for our times – a patriot but also a fierce critic of the Israeli government's policies of annexation and the use of massive military force to suppress the Palestinian people. He died earlier this year shortly after writing his last novel entitled *Judas*.

This is the tale of a young, idealistic student named Shmuel who, after abandoning his studies in Jerusalem, takes a live-in job as companion to a cantankerous old man. Shmuel had been writing a thesis on attitudes towards Judas Iscariot and much of this beautifully written novel consists of deep discussions between two Jewish men, one young and hopeful, the other old and cynical, about the life of Jesus. At one point the young man declares: "I don't believe for a moment that Jesus was God or the Son of God. But I love him. ... I have loved him ever since I first read his teachings in the New Testament, when I was fifteen years old." At another point, the novelist indulges himself by putting these words into the mouth of Judas. "I loved [Jesus] with all my soul," he says, "and I believed in him with perfect faith... he

seemed to me loving, compassionate, forgiving, but also when he wished, witty, sharp warm-hearted, and even funny.”

There is so much more I could say about this novel. The views of the author about the way the State of Israel was founded, about Zionism, about being edged out and accused (like Judas) of being a traitor. Why is it, a character asks, that the only one of Jesus’s disciples known by Christians to be a Jew is Judas, the betrayer? Awesome questions, a profound exploration of character, a challenging read.

Once again, I’ve been faced with the contradictions and paradoxes, the nobility and the futility, the sustaining and the exploitative aspects of religion. I keep on pondering all this as I continue my own daily struggle with faith.

The Revd Dr Leslie Griffiths, former President of the Methodist Conference and member of the House of Lords: September 2020. Photo of Amos Oz book cover from advertising material.

A prayer for peace



Genocide
Ethnic cleansing
Holocaust
Drone, cluster bomb, mine Tornado
Kinetic engagement
Terrorist attack
Enemy action
Security measures
The right to sell arms
A dictionary of warfare
Protection of national interests
Purity of race or religion
Or dogma or thought
Maintaining the border, standards,
Values, respect,
Our own for our own
The right to bear arms,
A catalogue of justifications.

Love of stranger, enemies,
Poor and voiceless
The extra mile, the other cheek
The first stone not hurled
The line in the sand
The peacemaker blessed
The first word, the last word
The right to open arms
Peace and grace
A thesaurus of faith.



Revd Dr Barbara Glasson, April 2020. Barbara was President of the Conference in 2019-2020 and, after 11 years as leader of the Touchstone Project in Bradford, joined the staff of the Queen’s Foundation, Birmingham in September this year. Photo of the ‘stupa’ containing over 5000 human skulls at the Killing Fields, Phnom Penh, Cambodia: I visited the Methodist Mission in Cambodia whilst attending the Singapore Methodist Conference in October 2004: the story of the wooden cross was told in edition 22 of these Reflections – John Bell.

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 belljohna@btinternet.com Each edition will be released on a Friday so that it can be distributed for Sunday and the following week.