

Lift up your hearts



Anna Matthews writes:

THIS year, 2020, marks the millennium of St Bene't's, Cambridge — or thereabouts, building records being somewhat scant from the time when King Cnut ruled England.

There is something comforting in the history of a building whose very presence has withstood Viking raids, plague, religious upheaval, and war, and which has hallowed the lives of Cambridge residents for 1000 years. But, instead of a programme of celebrations to mark this milestone, the church building has remained locked, and the congregation are still dispersed across Cambridge and beyond.

The city is beginning to open up, but streets usually thronged with students and tourists still seem strangely empty. My friend Martin Bond is a street photographer who, every day for the past ten years, has been posting a picture of Cambridge on his website and social media (acambridgediary.co.uk). He has continued this during the lockdown, documenting the Cambridge spring in all its solitariness and exuberance.

I used to wonder how he always happened to be in the right place to take his photos, but came realise that he has the gift of attention. We live in the same city, but I am usually too intent on getting to the next place to notice what's going on.

So, this has been a time to learn to pay more attention. Cambridge is full of green spaces, and I have been taking advantage of a different timetable with early-morning



(C)JYOTI SAHI

The Sign of Jonas by Jyoti Sahi

ATTENTION and kinship have been themes of my **reading**, too. Willie Jennings's commentary on Acts (*Acts: A theological commentary on the Bible*) was an illuminating and expansive aid to Bible study during Eastertide, teasing out the work of the Spirit to draw us into God's desire, and, beyond our self-imposed boundaries, into a community made one in Christ. His is a voice to pay attention to.

Janet Martin Soskice's *The Kindness of God* reflects on God's kindness (his kin-ness with us). Her pointed remarks on the graced nature of ordinary life were a liberating rebuke to my initial lockdown feeling that I ought to make this a time of spiritual self-improvement. Half-read spiritual classics testify to my failure, but Soskice reminds me that prayer is attention to the God who attends lovingly to us.

John Ames, the narrator of Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, surely knew this. I have returned to this novel and its companion volumes

walks. First thing, the common near by belongs to the cows and the birds, and saying morning prayer in their company makes the way creation sings God's praise much less abstract ("Alleluia, Praise the Lord from the heavens. . . Wild beasts and all cattle, creeping things and birds on the wing", Psalm 148.1,10).

I realise how often, previously, the seasons and natural world had seemed to me the backdrop to a life mostly going on elsewhere. Paying attention brings a deeper sense of connection and delight, a kinship with all that is created.

recently. Not a lot happens in *Gilead*, but the gifts of memory and attention reveal a life shot through with grace. When we are used to living at a faster pace, how easy it is to miss the small, daily revelations of it. At the end of the novel, looking back on his life and on a sermon he had preached, Ames writes that "the Lord is more constant and far more extravagant than it [the sermon] seems to imply. Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don't have to bring a

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thing to it except a little willingness to see. Only, who could have the courage to see it?"

AT THE start of the pandemic, I went back to the part of Isaiah set during the Exile, needing to hear God's words of comfort and promise. Now, I am reading the later chapters that deal with the return: a vision of God's justice, and the restoration of his people, which I hope and pray we have the courage to let form our imaginations.

I was supposed to be on my annual silent retreat at St Beuno's during May. I feel its absence deep in my soul. For now, the *Suscipe* — the **prayer** that comes at the end of the Spiritual Exercises — returns me to the sufficiency of grace, and stills my striving: "Take Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will, all that I have and possess.

Thou hast given all to me. To thee, O Lord, I return it. All is thine, dispose of it wholly according to thy will. Give me thy love and thy grace, for this is sufficient for me."

SWITCHING to online church allows for more use of **images** than usual. A happy discovery for me has been the work of Jyoti Sahi. Kinship and inculturation are important themes in his work, which is richly theological and draws out, in a different way from Soskice, the centrality of the kindness/kin-ness of God in the incarnation.

Resurrection is the painting that served as my introduction to him — a work that repays attention to its multi-layered invitation into Easter life and faith.

I haven't watched many **films** recently, although realising just how many of my post-lockdown desires relate to the gathering of people for food, whether round the altar or the dining table, took me back

to the magnificent *Babette's Feast*.

For escapism, I have been watching the **TV series** *Giri/Haji* (not for the squeamish): an Anglo-Japanese thriller that follows the arcs of retribution and redemption lived in the shadow of duty/shame (which is what *giri/haji* means).

For **music**, Mozart's Piano Concerto no. 23 speaks of hope and promise. Alongside it, Sir James MacMillan's "A New Song" makes the psalmist yearn for what is still incomplete. It promises resolution, but makes us wait, inviting attention to the present rather than rushing into an imagined future. We have commissioned a piece from him for our millennium celebrations. For now, we wait. But, later, we will sing.

The Revd Anna Matthews is Vicar of St Bene't's, Cambridge.

Next week: Tom Clammer

Places of welcome

THE return of congregations to their churches this weekend, albeit under strict conditions and only where it has been found possible, is a reminder of the value that so many place on these buildings.

A key element is their openness; so a church where entry has to be restricted is not yet functioning as it ought. Laser counters placed recently in church doorways discovered a far greater number

of casual visitors than previously thought.

What is true of parish churches is doubly so when it comes to cathedrals. In 1973, Robert Runcie, then Bishop of St Albans but one day to be Archbishop of Canterbury, preached at the installation of a new Dean of St Albans, Peter Moore:

WE live in an age of cathedrals. . . The multitudes, and not just the privileged few, are on the move today, and one of the centres they move towards — as iron filings to a magnet — is a great cathedral.

Never have greater numbers flocked to our cathedrals; and even if some of them look, when trapped by a service, as if they were witnessing a waxworks show, it would be a bold and arrogant person who

suggested that there was no Christian impact, no sense of being in a place hallowed by generations of worship, no expressions of wonder at the mystery — and no blame attached to the waxworks!

Let them find here, I plead, a welcoming church — a meeting place for men and women, for young and old, for citizen and foreigner, for Church and State, black and white, intellectual and mechanic, scientist and artist, antiquarian and space-minded, saint and sinner.

Does that sound exaggerated? It will if by welcome we mean only the guided tour, the smile with



LORNA MAY WADSWORTH

Christ as a black man, details from Lorna May Wadsworth's *Last Supper*, currently on display in St Albans Cathedral as its response to the Black Lives Matter protests

the hymn book, and the suggestion that if you try hard you will get used to our little ways. . .

We must create conditions for meeting which go deeper than conventional kindness, which take account of new kinds of deprivation in our society — the deprivation of those who are judged inadequate or to have offended by the norms of our society.

Quoted in Runcie: The making of an Archbishop by Margaret Duggan (Hodder & Stoughton, 1983).



The nave of St Albans Cathedral