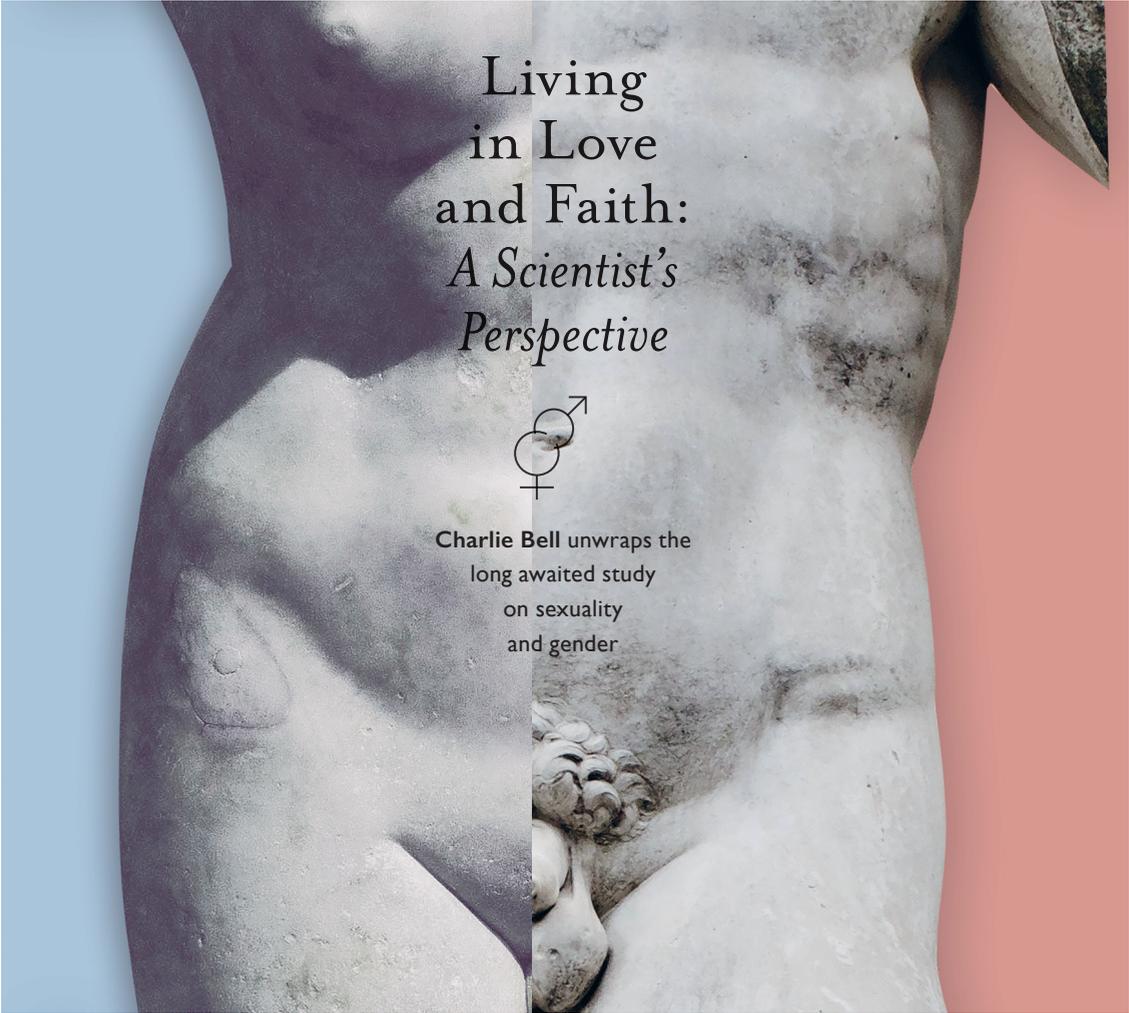


SPRING 2021

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

FEATURES, COMMENTARY AND REVIEWS FROM MODERN CHURCH

A photograph of a marble sculpture of a human torso, split vertically down the middle. The left side is set against a light blue background, and the right side is set against a light red background. The sculpture shows the abdominal muscles and the lower chest area.

Living in Love and Faith: *A Scientist's Perspective*



Charlie Bell unwraps the
long awaited study
on sexuality
and gender

Good Disagreement:
Sex in a Diverse Church
Editorial by Anthony Woollard

Jesus'
Temptations
Jeyan Anketell

Book Reviews
Geoff Miller, Janette Jolly
and David James

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Modern Church is an international society promoting liberal theology. Founded in 1898 to defend liberalism in the Church of England, we now work ecumenically to encourage open, enquiring, non-dogmatic approaches to Christianity.

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EDITORIAL



Anthony Woollard
Editor

LIVING IN LOVE AND FAITH

The most important event in the life of the Church of England since our last edition (apart of course from Christmas under the shadow of the pandemic) has been the publication of the Bishops' study on sexuality – *Living in Love and Faith (LLF)*. In both the study itself and the reactions to it on the Modern Church blog and elsewhere, I have been reminded of the 18th-century divine and satirist Sydney Smith, who, on observing two washerwomen arguing across a London street, observed: "Those two

will never agree; they are arguing from different premises".

Our Church contains those who claim to hold to the full, authoritative verbal inerrancy of the Bible – and can thus not countenance a departure from Biblical strictures on certain aspects of sexual identity and practice – and others whose view of Scriptural authority is rather different and who see the need to take account of new developments in understanding, particularly from the sciences, to interpret its messages. But what other forces might be in play in these *continued >*

Signs of the Times is published in February, May, August and November. It provides news and information about Modern Church and offers members an opportunity to communicate with each other in print. We welcome articles, notices, poems, suggestions, comments and suitable accompanying images. Articles published do not necessarily reflect a Modern Church perspective – in keeping with our commitment to liberal theology we believe that other views should be heard. Send material to the editor by 28th December, 28th March, 28th June or 28th September. Articles should not exceed 1,000 words. We prefer email but will process typed or handwritten text (phone for a postal address).



conflicts? After all, the vast majority of conservative Biblical interpreters would not attribute a continuing authority to all the commands in the book of Leviticus; they may well wear clothes containing a mixture of fibres for example (though the fashion industry presents some moral dilemmas of its own). Conversely, whatever such conservatives might imagine to be the case, liberal Christians do attribute to the Bible a real authority, but one of an overarching and still developing story of which they feel compelled to be part.

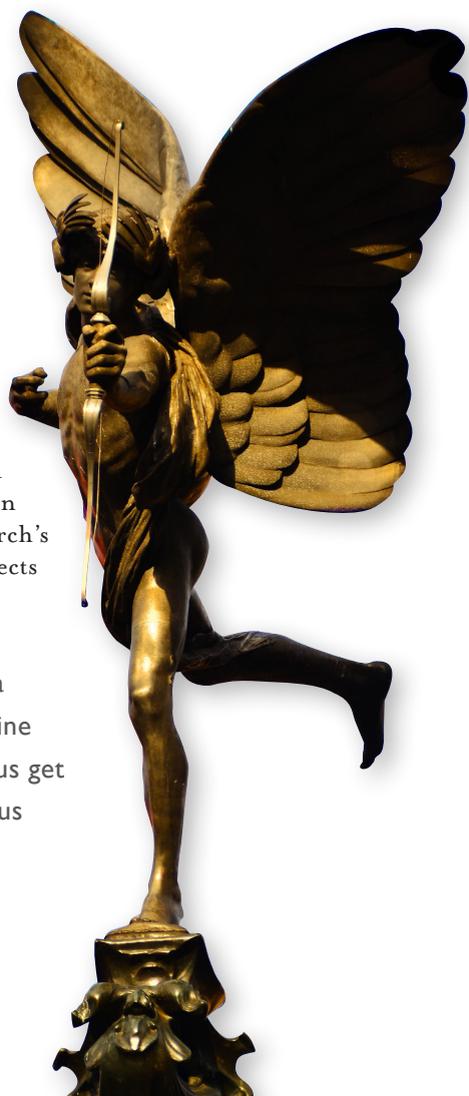
The messy business of love and sex

Anything to do with sex, however, seems to be a special case. A post on our blog by Professor Helen King, herself involved in LLF, observes that the output of that study has paid little attention to history, in matters such as the changing definitions of marriage over the centuries. Members of Modern Church such as Adrian Thatcher, the editor of our sister journal *Modern Believing*, and Susannah Cornwall, who also was involved in LLF, have written highly accessible books which go in depth into the history of the Church's attitudes to sexuality in all its aspects – and they demonstrate a distinct

... eros is dangerous. It can be a vehicle for experiencing the divine – perhaps the nearest some of us get to heaven on earth – or a serious rival to such experience.

ambivalence amongst church leaders to the whole messy business of love and sex, which is well out of kilter with today's secular assumptions, and which, at times, has been almost as cruel to straight people as to gays.

As Charlie Bell's article below points out, LLF appears to sidestep the issue of what it actually means by "sex" (activity, sensation, desire, genital or otherwise). But a clue surely can be found in the ancient concept of eros – represented in Scripture, in graphic terms, in the Song of Songs. And eros is dangerous. It can be a vehicle for experiencing the divine



– perhaps the nearest some of us get to heaven on earth – or a serious rival to such experience. It can be a form of idolatry, and a vehicle for cruelty and exploitation (even within heterosexual marriages) such as we have seen in the recent exposures of the Church's failures on the safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults. Meanwhile, for those who have a concept of natural law, certain identities and practices can all too easily be condemned as "unnatural". No wonder that some Christians are hyper-sensitive about "sex" and fall back on "what the Bible says" as a solution to the diversity of sexualities and genders which present themselves today.

"All you need is love"

For many people, not just LGBT+, the official church line on these matters, though more relaxed than hitherto about divorce for example, has been experienced as deeply unloving and dehumanising. But the slogan "All you need is love" is, quite rightly, open to criticism by conservatives; for what exactly does love demand in particular cases? Not even the most liberal Christian would argue that "anything goes" when it comes to such matters, whether pre- or extra-marital sex, divorce, same-sex relationships or gender transition. The arguments between some feminists and some transgender women demonstrate that there is debate and conflict even in secular society about such issues; and we can think of many instances where the greater "freedom" now available in wider society can be and has been seriously abused. Nothing is simple. No sexual situation – absolutely none – is free from

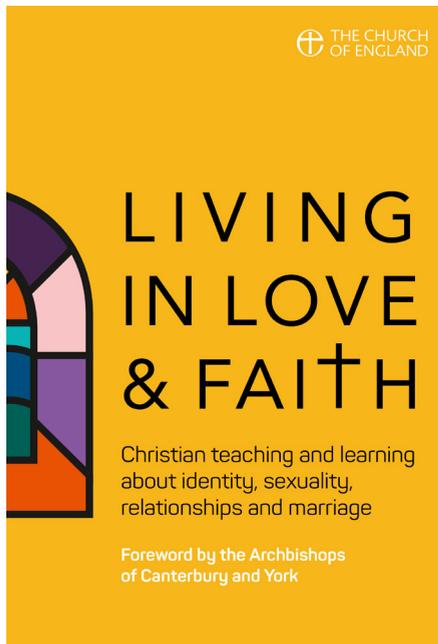
A letter to the Editor in this issue raises the question of symbolism in church vestments – which in the late 19th century in England was pretty much as explosive as sexuality today.

sin. But that should be no surprise to Christians, for whom sin and the need for forgiveness are central to their perception of being human. And in the midst of all these dilemmas, eros remains a source of the greatest human joy and fulfilment.

Whether a massive book on the subject, even supplemented with more accessible videos and study guides, will really help in the quest for understanding of the mystery of sexuality under God, remains to be seen. But at least the issue has demonstrably been taken seriously. And the quest will continue. It may, alas, lead to schisms or semi-schisms, or at least threats of such. But the Church has been here before in its history. And amidst all our anxieties about its very future, we must believe that "great is the truth, and it shall prevail".

Styles of worship

This has its parallels in other conflicts in the life of the Church. A letter to the Editor in this issue raises the question of symbolism in church vestments – which in the late 19th century in England was pretty much as explosive as sexuality today. Then there are issues surrounding styles of worship, which have been exposed quite sharply for some of us with the advent of online services, and which can *continued >*



One of the most important events in the Church of England since our last edition has been the publication of the Bishops' study on sexuality – *Living in Love and Faith*.

In a diverse society and a diverse Church, “good disagreement” may seem to be the most that we can achieve, and even that may be beyond us sometimes...

also be theologically significant even if they look at first sight to be matters of mere individual taste. In such cases, as I know from my own parish church, there can be occasions where those “arguing from different premises” may find themselves unexpectedly joining hands – even if that demonstrates the need for continuing common exploration of the approaches to faith and Christian identity underlying the differences. In a diverse society and a diverse Church, “good disagreement” may seem to be the most that we can achieve, and even that may be beyond us sometimes; consider how we might have to deal with overt racists, say, within a congregation. Yet true community can sometimes break through the over-individualisation of our culture, and enable very different people truly to come together.

Rather different, but hardly irrelevant, is Jeyan Anketell’s article on the Temptations in the Wilderness. Whatever our positions on sexuality or other matters in church life, and whatever our level of power or influence in our local churches or otherwise, this offers much scope for meditation as we approach Lent, regarding how and why we take the positions that we do, and how we use that power and influence.

Focused on the future

Meanwhile, the deliberations of Trustees over the winter have been sharply focused on how Modern Church should go forward with its activities in the current uncertainties. We are hopeful, for example, that our important Annual Conference in July on climate change will happen in some form – but it could have to be online, at least for

Perhaps we should be mindful of one text which some voices in the Church, preoccupied with strategies for numerical growth, seem not to take literally: the saying attributed to John the Baptist that God, if he wished, could raise up children to Abraham out of the stones (Luke 3:8).

most who wish to participate, even if by then mass vaccinations have made medium-sized residential conferences much safer. Another preoccupation has been the future of our structure of paid staff, as we face the loss of our Administrator Diane Kutar on her ordination this summer, followed a year later by the end of our General Secretary Jonathan Draper’s contract, all against the background of the impact of our various recent initiatives, and of the pandemic, on our reserves. There are signs that our efforts to increase membership and affiliation, and hence income, may be bearing fruit. But we still face a period of some uncertainty. Perhaps we should be mindful of one text which some voices in the Church, preoccupied with strategies for numerical growth, seem not to take literally: the saying attributed to John the Baptist that God, if he wished, could raise up children to Abraham out of the stones (Luke 3:8). As long as there is a part for Modern Church to play in deepening the understanding of the Gospel, we should surely be confident that we will survive and be enabled to play that part – in love and faith.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Back in November I watched some of the British Legion festival of remembrance. I couldn’t help noticing the bishop dressed in all his robes. As a simple Methodist, I found this to be totally out of place and quite offensive. Such garments point to power and kingly authority not to a servant, let alone a suffering servant.

The words of John Shelby Spong are apt. “...bishops of the Church do not rule the world from their episcopal thrones as the vicars of a deity who sits on a heavenly throne beyond the sky... One wonders who the bishops are fooling... our costumes seek to disguise the fact that we are engaged in a massively irrelevant charade of enormous pretension. An English divine in Oxford said to me on one occasion, ‘part of our duty is simply to dress up and walk around.’ That may be so, but perhaps costume balls are a more appropriate place for that than churches. Royal vestments will surely be discarded if a new church capable of living beyond the exile is to be born.” (*Why Christianity Must Change or Die*. p.181).

— Malcolm Rothwell

The Revd Malcolm Rothwell is a retired Methodist Minister.

COVER FEATURE

LIVING IN LOVE & FAITH

A Scientist's Perspective

Charlie Bell unwraps the Church of England's long awaited study on sexuality and gender

Putting together a compendium of knowledge and opinions on the perplexingly controversial topics of sexuality and gender was never going to be an easy job, and yet this is exactly what the House of Bishops called for once Synod chose not to take note of their 'change in tone but nothing more' report in 2017. I must admit to being surprised that this was thought to be the best way forward; it is quite simply impossible to offer a dispassionate presentation of these positions, theological or otherwise, without applying any analysis, conscious or otherwise. More disappointing, however, is that the bishops have hidden behind this project and thus, with the exception of the most staunchly anti-affirming, not spoken a word. Even the most unbiased presentation in a book does not enter a neutral arena; the reception of this book and this project is key, and for the leaders of the Church to be keeping silent rather than recognising their own various biases is quite wrong, and ultimately dishonest.

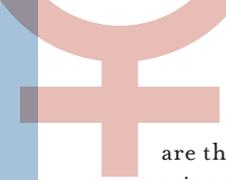
Lack of awareness

Yet to me, this lack of awareness, and indeed lack of introspective analysis, sits at the heart of this vexed question, and unfortunately also at the heart of LLF.

...for too long and on too many issues, the Church has placed itself in a position where in the false debate between Bible and science, the Bible must be right.

It is a good thing that science features in this project; for too long and on too many issues, the Church has placed itself in a position where in the false debate between Bible and science, the Bible must be right. Not only does this produce huge problems for Christian apologetics, but it also calls into question the very morality of the Christian message. Overwhelming scientific and experiential knowledge about the human person and human flourishing flies directly in the face of what is often touted as 'Biblical' evidence against homosexuality – and yet as has been shown elsewhere, this 'Biblical' position is flimsy at best. Those who truly believe gay people should simply marry people of the opposite sex, or who call for enforced celibacy for lesbian and gay people, need to be able to face this consensus and come up with an answer. Stopping their ears is not good enough.

Yet the presentation of science in this book is often bizarre. Any serious scientific review of the literature should make clear who the review's authors are; I take it that they *continued* >



are those in the ‘social and biological sciences’ LLF group, the minority of whom have academic scientific training. The name of the group also highlights another serious fault – the totally inappropriate elision of different disciplines simply because they are called ‘science’. Much is made of the potential bias in the sciences, without effectively highlighting the difference between bias in social theory (which is frequently explored by the social scientists themselves) and bias in experimental science. Conflating these two is crass and wrong – particularly in a book where the bias (or even identity) of the authors is not made explicit! There should be a very big health warning if the differences between theoretical, experimental, social and life sciences are not clearly identified.

Biological facts

Likewise, there is a conflation between technology and knowledge. To be sure, developments in and deployment of new technology require significant ethical consideration, but the underlying knowledge produced by rigorous experimental science itself should not be value-laden. Of course science is not a panacea – but the way it is presented here suggests that the authors rather misunderstand the process, the motivations and the funding arrangements for serious science that is undertaken in our universities. Just as worrying is the presentation of so much research in such broad-brush strokes, and the lack of joining the dots that takes place. That XX does not necessarily equal female is a biological fact – that intersex people exist is a biological fact.



The church’s current position is full of holes – and this book highlights the cruel disconnect between abstract rules and lived experience

Yet these are simply left hanging, as though there is a neat line between Bible and science. Science cannot simply be shut in a cupboard if it gets uncomfortable; God quite clearly did not create a nicely systematised male and female!

In addition, the stories within Scripture are presented as of a different order to the encounters in the modern day, as though the Biblical characters described did not have their own psychological make-up (let alone that of the authors). Yet today’s encounters are also presented without any of the lessons learnt from the sciences being applied; reading them as a psychiatrist, it is impossible not to identify individuals’ own biases, prejudices, concrete thinking – and indeed my own. Yet science opens a window into the real messiness of our lives; it blows apart the nonsense that the Bible can ever be a simple moral guidebook. It doesn’t compete with scripture; it enriches it. The book states that we should be as well-informed as possible about science, and yet frequently fails to enact this in its own presentation, instead meeting science with a hermeneutic of suspicion and missing the plank in its own eye.

The book focuses on the question of relationships yet skirts neatly around what constitutes sexual activity – a major failing if the ‘proof texts’, so frequently cited, are to hold any water. What does it mean to have sex? When does sensual

become sexual? Is it all about genitals? This is a huge missed opportunity – not because I think that what constitutes sex is actually the important thing here, but because much of the opposition to same-sex marriage is about sex; if it wasn’t, the ludicrous ‘ban’ on sex in civil partnerships (as advocated in the faintly ridiculous ‘Issues in Human Sexuality’) would not be in place. If sexual activity is the problem, we had better have a conversation about what it is! You can’t talk about sexual relationships without identifying what that means in the first place.

The authenticity of our faith

The church’s current position is full of holes – and this book highlights the cruel disconnect between abstract rules and lived experience, a disconnect that must be addressed by both bishops and synod. We are told that ‘the authenticity of our faith is in our lived obedience together as followers of Christ’. I disagree. The authenticity of our faith is reading the Bible, and communing with each other, with open eyes – with a commitment to embracing and utilising as many angles as we can to best understand and experience graced embodied human flourishing under God. Faith untested is worth nothing. LLF might begin this conversation – yet if this is the best that we can do in 2020, it shows what a mess we are in.

Dr Charlie Bell is a member of the Council of Modern Church and an Academic Clinical Fellow with the South London and Maudsley NHS Trust.



The Context, Message and Implications of Jesus' Temptations

By Jeyan Anketell

The story of Jesus' temptations follows immediately after his baptism in the river Jordan, in all three of the synoptic gospels – Mark first, then Matthew and then Luke. John's gospel makes no mention whatsoever of either Jesus' baptism or of his temptations in the wilderness.

Jesus' baptism showed him identifying himself with the people's search for God, responding to John the Baptist's call for repentance.

Matthew presents Jesus' baptism as an event where God himself identifies Jesus to the public as indeed being his specially chosen one, the Messiah. "This is my son, the beloved; my favour rests on him".

Mark and Luke both present God's identification as being put privately to Jesus. "You are my son, the beloved; my favour rests on you".

Fully human

Having just presented Jesus as God's specially chosen one, Matthew, Mark and Luke go on to present him as being fully human, just as we are; tested as we are, but of course this is all through our lives, not just for forty days.

The synoptic gospels present Jesus

speaking three times, and each time he uses the phrase "It is written" or "It is said". He answers the suggestions of the devil by referring to the scriptures he is presented as coming to fulfil. The scriptures Jesus quotes are all from the book of Deuteronomy, regarding Israel's testing in the wilderness after their crossing of the Red Sea. (The devil seemingly quotes Ps. 91.)

"The new Adam"

The gospels are here presenting Jesus as fulfilling the role of Israel, passing through similar temptations or tests; but where Israel had failed, Jesus is triumphant. As St Paul might have put it, "The old Adam, son of God, failed and brought us low. The new Adam, son of God, succeeded and raised us up."

If we have a vision, some aim in life, our immediate problem is how to turn that vision into fact; to find some way of turning the dream into reality. This was the problem that faced Jesus in his temptations. How was Jesus to set about his task of leading people home to God?

And Jesus made his decision. He decided that he must never bribe people into following him – turning stones into bread. He decided that *continued >*



AILSA MELLON BRUCE FUND / NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

I tend to see the gospel descriptions of Jesus' miracles as the authors' poetic descriptions of the healing effect of Jesus' teaching and living out of God's great love and forgiveness towards us.

he would never compromise with evil, in the message he preached and the faith he demanded.

Jesus also decided that the way of giving people sensational demonstrations, appearing to float or fly down from the pinnacle; this was not for him. We must not try to make senseless experiments with the power of God.

Miracles as proof

Now, the gospel writers subsequently do seem to use descriptions of Jesus carrying out various miracles as proofs of his being someone extra-ordinary; as do we use them. But then such use of miracles as proof does not seem to sit easily with this last rejection by Jesus.

Nor does it sit easily with Jesus' reported rejection of demands by the religious Jews of his time. Matthew (ch12, v38-42) and Luke (ch11, v29-32) quote Jesus as saying something like this: "This evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign. I tell you no sign shall be given them other than the sign of Jonah". I imagine the temptation stories in the gospels are some kind of summary of Jesus' ongoing teaching of his followers regarding such things.

Now Matthew (but not Luke) presents the sign of Jonah referred to by Jesus as his being swallowed up by a fish in the sea, and then being spat out again

whole, after three days in the fish's belly. Matthew seems to suggest (as do we) that this is a prophecy of Jesus' bodily resurrection from the dead after three days in the tomb. But the swallowing and release of Jonah by the fish was God's sign to Jonah. Jonah's sign to the people of Nineveh was his preaching; as was Jesus' teaching a sign to the Jews of his time.

I tend to see the gospel descriptions of Jesus' miracles as the authors' poetic descriptions of the healing effect of Jesus' teaching and living out of God's great love and forgiveness towards us. A healing experienced by a people weighed down by a sense of sin and guilt: and that the gospel writers were inspired in this endeavour by very much earlier descriptions in the Hebrew bible of miracles of healing, multiplication of loaves and resuscitation from the dead – miracles seemingly carried out by Elijah and Elisha, not to mention the miracles carried out by Moses.

Typical temptations

We might think of these three temptations as being typical for a would-be-leader, or even for any of us: as individuals, as a community, or as a nation.

I conclude with a passage from the prophet Micah (ch 6, v8). "What is it that the Lord requires? Only this: do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly before your God".

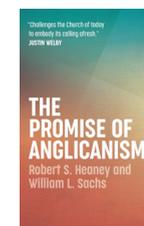
Jeyan Anketell is a retired priest in the Diocese of Lichfield and a Trustee of Modern Church.

REVIEWS



The Distinctive Calling of Anglicanism

I read this book in 'lockdown'. It was a tough read – terse style, dense content, astute analysis and valuable conclusions – but the effort was rewarded. What I read was made all the more relevant by my own context and work. A Dean's life is never without its ecclesiastical challenges, it goes with the terrain, and to be nudged into a better grasp of the distinctive calling, role and promise of Anglicanism can only be for the good. Even more a 'Covid world' has for me provided a stimulus (that's a positive take) to lay low and dare to think and this book framed some of that time



Robert S. Heaney and William L. Sachs
The Promise of Anglicanism
SCM 2019

creatively. However, it was a pastoral encounter that defined the importance of this book for me. I have recently been engaged in some discussion with a young(ish) potential ordinand. He has been a life-long, active (though more and more discontented) member of the house church movement but has been for some time attracted to the Church of England. Our Zoom discussions have centred around trying to uncover the distinctiveness of Anglicanism and this book was written for us.

So how do Heaney and Sachs approach the 'great' promise of Anglicanism. *continued >*

As they trace the development and journey from ‘Anglicanism’ to ‘Anglicanism’ their earlier chapters offer a wide exploration of what may be considered the foundational tropes: contextualisation and catholicity, varied models of episcopacy, discourse and conflict, mission and enculturation and a yearning for cohesion as uniformity (even consensus) constantly proves [for me thankfully] elusive. Each is introduced, given a historical perspective and its impact on emerging and re-emerging Anglican identity considered.

Four thoughts have lingered, all strangely energising and yet challenging even for an old hack though encouraged by the fresh eyes of my discussion partner:

Firstly, it has been enormously helpful to ponder Anglicanism as a Faith Tradition rather than a developing church institution. The richness of its own spirituality (and its oft undervalued Divines), its story in liturgy and word, its particularity in theological expression and study and its prayerful ability to hold together in worship seemingly impossible variances embodied in its adherents.

Then the authors are at pains to remind us that there is no completeness in the Anglican project – it is ‘more journey than destination’ they assert. Part of the promise and the attraction is that we share in the journey.

Then I was struck by the

insight from its missiological survey that much of the real innovation and energy comes not from the powerful centre but those on the edge. Often the counter thinking, cultural resistance and energy of those on the ‘peripheries’ lead the way forward. I ask myself how are we listening to them today? How will they again inform our promise?

Finally, Heaney and Sachs repeatedly underline that Anglican identity (and its promise) is invariably brokered through contest – provocation, conflict, dialogue. These are ever with us Anglicans, perhaps so much that they are very part of our DNA, our calling, our gift to Christendom.

I was left feeling that ‘Promise’ is what excites me most about sharing the Anglican ‘journey’ – painful as that sometimes can be. By some, seemingly random accidents of history, difficult provocations, resilience and a remarkable ability to put down roots and creatively re-imagine itself, Anglicans are able to share in (even bask in) the providence that is God’s and through some nimble grace on his part even to contribute to his Kingdom in our place and in our time.

— Geoff Miller

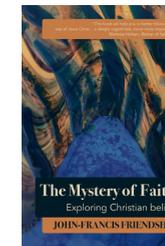
The Very Revd Geoffrey Miller is Dean of Newcastle.



An Apposite Reflection for Our Time

In this book, John-Francis Friendship, an Anglican priest, retreat conductor and senior team member at the London Centre for Spiritual Direction, explores the core beliefs embodied within Christian faith, uncovering the fundamentals and deep significance of centuries-old spiritual practice.

Tightly organised within the structure of the Apostles Creed, Friendship’s accessible writing, richly supported with scriptural passages and relevant thought-provoking quotations, aims to clarify understanding for those seeking meaningful connections between their emerging or ongoing beliefs and everyday life. Drawing throughout on his own experiences of priestly ministry and religious practice to ground his explanations, he begins by focussing



John-Francis Friendship
The Mystery of Faith – Exploring Christian Belief
Canterbury Press, 2019

on God the Creator before journeying through the life, death and resurrection of Christ, going on to explore the significance of the Holy Spirit.

I consider it most important that the inquisitive reader does not omit reading Friendship’s excellent introduction. In this he skilfully draws us in, posing leading questions such as, ‘What’s it all about?’, ‘Who’s the book for?’ Throughout the volume, deeply reflective insight into cultivating inner religious life is illuminated by the writer’s own extensive experience of priestly life and ministry, contributing to the accessible style of his delivery. All of this is structured within a strongly Anglo-Catholic world view, with an ongoing emphasis on Anglo-Catholic traditions, liturgy, sacraments and the importance of the company of saints.

For this reason, *continued* >

'The Mystery of Faith' provides a timely oasis in our present chaotic world as rampant abuse of power, warfare, selfish greed and uncontrollable disease seems to be tearing at the very fabric of global society.

whilst I consider this a volume which could prove a most useful resource for the Catechism of Adults, I remain unconvinced that those individuals completely new to faith without an awareness of Anglo-Catholic tradition would benefit in the early stages of their spiritual awakening from its style and overtly Catholic emphasis and content. Having said that, I maintain it is a worthwhile book for readers of other Christian traditions who wish to broaden their knowledge and understanding of Catholic spirituality and to fully appreciate the deep meaning and mystery enshrined within its traditional sacraments, liturgy and ritual.

Importantly, the strength of this book lies in its unashamedly Franciscan and meditative approach, constantly placing the emphasis on practical application of its spiritual concepts and principles. To this end, questions for individual and group reflection and/or discussion at the end of each chapter are particularly pertinent and powerful.

At the book's close, Friendship presents his reader with a list of questions entitled, 'Developing a Rule of Life', listing challenging reflections for making practical adjustments to daily living in order to nurture opportunity for spiritual reflection, growth and change. These meditations could provide a rich foundation for a group Lent or study course in any Christian tradition, or could identify a specific focus for deep personal reflection and/or meditation

during a searching or established Christian's spiritual journey.

Therein lies this book's power – its persistent and convincing call for Christian agency to be given outward expression through the daily enactment of fundamental spiritual practices grounded as faith-affirming and life-changing actions and interactions.

To conclude, 'The Mystery of Faith' provides a timely oasis in our present chaotic world as rampant abuse of power, warfare, selfish greed and uncontrollable disease seems to be tearing at the very fabric of global society. For, as Nicholas Holtam, Bishop of Salisbury, rightly states in his perspicacious foreword contextualising this book in its current volatile societal setting:

'...it does feel deeply urgent for us to learn again what it is to love God and love our neighbour as ourselves and care for the earth, our common home. According to St Paul, faith, hope and love last forever. Truth, peace and justice are the values of the kingdom of God which Jesus said is very near. These are what really matter and they are accessed through the riches of Christianity'. (p.xvi)

—Janette Jolly

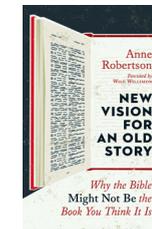
Dr Janette Jolly is a music educationalist and has been a lay pastor, worship leader and satellite congregational leader in her local church.



Rediscovering the Importance of 'Story'

Anne Robertson is the director of the Massachusetts Bible Society and a minister in the United Methodist Church. She wrote this book following a survey in 2016 in Boston by that Society. Alarmed by some of the findings she determined to re-discover the importance of the Bible as 'story'.

She is clearly concerned that reading the Bible as a legal handbook or as a reference textbook feeds the fundamentalist evangelicalism which is at the root of such a shift in American political life. She proposes that understanding the Bible as story allows it to speak the truth and helps us respond to God's invitation into a genuine loving relationship. The Bible 'is a long, wonderful, multifaceted story' where even the strange bits



Ann Robertson
New Vision for an Old Story
Eerdmans

like the books of law, genealogies, and strange visions flesh out our understanding of the larger picture. Thus, we learn about ourselves, the world, and about God

in a way which unites, is creative, and helps us address serious issues of our times.

This is not merely a romantic call to the simplicity of the Bible stories taught in Sunday School. Anne Robertson explores the nature of story, throws up a warning on the agenda of the storyteller, warns against simplicity and is quite rigorous in challenging us to use our minds in understanding Scripture. She is firm on recognizing context, faces the problem of suffering, has insightful things to say about Inspiration, faces the serious issues around Miracle, honest in acknowledging different kinds of story, *continued >*

There is plenty here to tempt us to read on, and we are not disappointed. Story, as Robertson portrays, includes the stark realities, the complexities with which we live, the reality of suffering.

Continued from page 19

including those that are toxic.

New Vision for an Old Story is a good read. The book is not long, and is generous, fair minded and considerate with a fair dose of humour. Each chapter is introduced by a quotation to introduce what follows and vary from Cicero, through Spinoza, to Eli Wiesel. The chapter titles – ‘The Optics of Truth’, ‘Squinting for God’, ‘Grinding the Lenses’, intriguingly suggest imagination and a quest for relevance. There are gems. ‘The Hebrew word for knowing is experiential, not intellectual’, ‘Miracles in the Bible are not God showing off superpowers. They are signs. In the Gospel of John, the word ‘miracle’ does not even appear. John calls them ‘signs. There is plenty here to tempt us to read on, and we are not disappointed. Story, as Robertson portrays, includes the stark realities, the complexities with which we live, the reality of suffering. The helpful questions for discussion and reflection at the end don’t just demonstrate

her skill as a teacher but ask us to be ‘full on’ in our understanding of the world, God, and ourselves. At the end of the book there are searching questions that relate to each chapter, suitable for a Lent study group or as basis for sermons.

I wondered on occasions whether she was falling into the trap which she encourages her reader to avoid, attributing to the Bible a unity denied by modern scholarship. She is, however, clearly enthused by her subject and is writing with a readership in mind, and there is sufficient openness to alleviate that concern.

I was reminded of Margaret Barker’s 2019 lecture to the South West group on ‘Temple Theology’. We were given an understanding of the reality of the content of Scripture, rather than a blinkered reading to support traditional theories, both refresh the text and shed light on (in that case) the modern challenge of Climate Change. Anne Robertson would start from the same principle, ‘giving readers keen new lenses to see beyond the printed page to the God who encounters us in dynamic relationship and transforms our lives’.

— *David James*

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