

Weekend reflections

in partnership with WMFF and BCF

3 May

Many Voices



ast Saturday, I joined an international gathering at St Philip's Cathedral. It was organised by Restore, a project that welcomes and supports refugees and asylum seekers. Restore seeks to enable local citizens of Birmingham to befriend and support those seeking sanctuary and refuge in our city. Called 'Many Voices' the event celebrated the diversity represented by those associated with the project. During the two hour programme, 43 languages from across the globe were expressed through readings, prayers and songs.

The feeling of unity generated by being together within a broad and diverse group of people was for me a small glimpse of the vision of heaven described in the Book of Revelation. A great multitude stands before the throne of God. It is so large that no one can count the number of people, except that they are gathered from every nation, tribe, people and language of the world. With so much to divide us in our world, it is easy to forget the strength of the human spirit and the divine power to unite and bring us together, despite our differences.

The experience of last week is a reminder that there is more to gain than to lose when we reach out to others whose culture and background is different from our own.



Colin Marsh works across the Christian community as the Ecumenical Development Officer for Birmingham Churches Together. Ordained in the Church of England, he has worked in a number of different places, including Liverpool, Zambia and Scotland.

10 May

Offering



Visitors approaching the Birmingham Museum tea room this Saturday may be fascinated to hear the rhythmic sounds of Buddhist chanting in a variety of languages, wafting above the background tinkling of crockery and cutlery. It will be a truly multi-cultural occasion! The event is a celebration of Buddha Day, when his followers remember his birth, enlightenment and death, and it also marks the Buddhist New Year.

The 1500 year old Indian Buddha statue now housed in the museum was originally created as an offering. When it was re-discovered after being buried, it was offered to the museum, who now offer the opportunity to use the space it occupies, and the event itself is a form of offering.

Buddhists will tell you ‘There is no giver, no gift and no-one who receives’ - a form of words that expresses the ideal of selfless giving with no expectation of any reward. You can see it clearly when a child reaches out their hand and just offers you whatever is in it. It is so easy for us to judge what is presented and miss the purity of heart that the gesture expresses.

This simplicity can be re-discovered through offering. It is the antidote to grasping and clinging, the cause of many of our problems. Offering, letting go, allowing to dissolve or drop away, are all ways of describing the practice. Offering up anger, frustration, worry, and wanting too much in this way makes us easier to live with and we become more human beings.



Rev. Saido Kennaway is a Zen monk heading the Telford Buddhist Priory and is European advisor to the

Order of Buddhist Contemplatives. He is also the long-time Co-ordinator of the Buddhist Prison Chaplaincy Organisation.

17 May

Journey to Justice



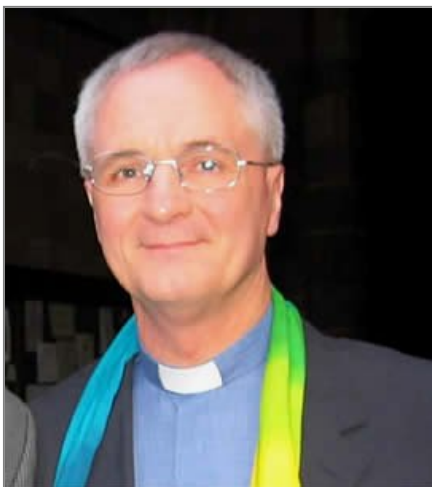
Do you remember collecting till receipts? These were part of a nation-wide campaign to persuade our supermarkets to carry fair traded goods. Ridiculous, but it worked.

In 1998 thousands of people from all around had a day out in Birmingham, as the G8 were meeting, to join a huge human chain circling the city to ask these powerful nations to set the poor nations free from the chains of debt. The campaign has continued, rainbow scarves and white arm bands, and this weekend there will be events in the City centre to mark the tenth anniversary of that great chain, but...

Well, the issue is complex. Progress has been made towards dropping the debt. Certainly we need to continue to hear the cry of the poor. Poverty is caused not only by national debt, but also by trading processes, an issue that affects rice farmers, banana growers and milk producers. People who live in lands ravaged by war, often not of their making, have to put up with all sorts of deprivations. Then, as we have seen in these last weeks, natural disasters can strike and we realise just how vulnerable life can be.

Poverty still blights our world and people do not experience the joy of life, but rather the struggle for it.

As I have travelled to several different part of the world it has been in some of the poorest places that the welcome has been most generous. It's their good example we should be following.



Rev Bill Anderson is Chair of the Birmingham District of the Methodist Church and is rarely seen without his rainbow scarf. He is also a Trustee of the children's charity NCH.

24 May

Walking Right



Earlier this year I attended a funeral on my birthday. Commemorating a birth and a death on the same date jolted me to dwell on what my faith teaches me about life.

If the only certainty in life is death, then, from the moment we are born, our number of breaths is declining. So why celebrate a birthday which signifies another year closer to dying? Before we sink into doom and gloom, Sikh teaching reminds us to value human life as an opportunity to kindle our Divine potential. We must strive to make every breath fruitful, and maintain an ascending spirit of optimism and contentment.

What can maintain this spirit? Shoe shopping, in my case. I'll plan my life so I may be the proud owner of a few (or preferably many) pairs of Manolos... But no matter how many pairs I own, I will still not know how far I can walk in them. How can we plan, and what can we accumulate for our future, when we do not know how long it will be?

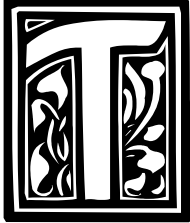
We can spend a lifetime accumulating material wealth. However, by embedding prayer and service into every step we take, we can also accumulate spiritual wealth. In fact, when we use and share this spiritual wealth, it will not diminish, but multiply. A solid path to walk indeed, regardless of which pair of shoes we choose; and one which leads to an ascending spirit not only here, but also in the hereafter.



Pritpal Kaur is a volunteer at Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha in Handsworth. She is currently a PhD student of Sikh Studies at the University of Birmingham and has recently completed the Faith Guides Course.

31 May

Counting the Cost of Our Churches



aking a party of young school children around my local church recently, one keen pupil asked the question: *Who owns this church?* I was pleased to inform him that he did, together with everyone else who lives within the parish boundary, regardless of age, status or faith. He smiled sweetly and remarked: *Wow, so I'm rich!*

Certainly the parish churches of England are rich. Their value in terms of heritage is astonishing and 12,000 of them are listed as being of architectural importance, out of the 16,000 in the care of the Church of England. Beauty comes at a price however and congregations across the country have to cough up collectively over £80m a year on basic repairs to their buildings, not including improvements, development projects or reordering schemes.

There is still a popular misconception that historic church buildings are supported financially by the government or the 'establishment'; if only it were true! English Heritage and the Heritage Lottery fund do offer support to some individual church schemes, but the total percentage of funding for repairs including reclaimed VAT amounts to only a quarter of the total costs.

In the heart of our city and in the surrounding counties, many church buildings are facing a very uncertain future. Still appreciated by many as an icon for the spiritual values of a community, church buildings are under serious threat and if we lose them, all of us will be the poorer.



The Revd Canon Mervyn Roberts is Director of Communications for the Coventry Diocese and Vicar of St Chad's, Bishop's Tachbrook. Described as 'arguably the best known vicar in Warwickshire', he hosts the early breakfast show every Sunday for BBC Coventry & Warwickshire.