

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT REFLECTIONS ON REALITY IN DIFFERENT MEASURES, John L Bell (Wild Goose Publications, 2022), 978-1-80432-006-8.

We often find ourselves sitting next to someone at a dinner or a meeting and discover that they're on 'transmission mode' only. In fact, it's not a conversation at all. They don't appear to have a 'reception mode' but are banging on about some well-ridden hobby horse that's probably been in service for many years. You might as well save your occasional interjection or thoughts on the topic. It makes not the slightest bit of difference to the monologue being presented.

I have no doubt we have all been on the receiving end of such an encounter. Fairly quickly you recognise that this is a well-rehearsed theme and nothing is going to alter the speaker's view on this particular topic. You are wasting your breath and the technique is to make an exit as graciously as possible.

The danger with this new publication by John L. Bell is that this is potentially a collection of such 'hobby horse material'. It was intended to be a collection of short reflections, mostly featured on Radio 4's *Thought for the Day*. These radio talks generally deal with issues of topical interest from a faith perspective. Such pieces have to be short – two minutes forty seconds – which as we read in the Introduction, 'is appropriate for some subjects, but dangerous when matters of magnitude are reduced to sound bites.'

The Long and the Short of It has subsequently emerged to enable a more comprehensive consideration of bigger issues. As described, 'the range is very wide – from pandemic to paedophilia, from death to discrimination.'

Now here then is a double danger. Not just short 250-word observations, but longer reflections on often difficult and contentious subjects. This could be a stable full of hobby horses.

But what is brilliant about the collection is that it is no such thing. We all know that John Bell has a wonderful way with words. His prolific writing over the past 50 years and his contribution to our worship as the Convener (and music editor) of the committee which drafted the most recent Church of Scotland's Church Hymnary (CH4) are testament to that. He has moved and motivated us for decades.

And here again he doesn't disappoint. Whether he is tackling very sensitive topics or sharing recollections from his own childhood and burgeoning faith, he is neither flippant nor sentimental, disrespectful nor trite. There's the glorious humour of recalling 'big Maureen' and the acute frustration of teenage years when adults simply 'don't get it'.

As I began to dip into his more than twenty reflections, I felt myself being drawn into a real conversation. There is John Bell's voice as if he were in the room sharing his thoughts and insights and inviting a response – the antithesis of the tiresome 'banging on' that we have all been subjected to both in and outside the church. Clergy, alas, are particularly prone to this trap. Because we have thought long and hard about some issues, and perhaps feel passionately about the arguments, we are often in danger of pontificating with great solemnity which suggests ours is the only position. By contrast, Bell shares his insights in a way that positively invites a response. It is no surprise that his *Thought for the Day* series often provoked correspondence from listeners 'which has confirmed and challenged my own assumptions in equal measure'. Here is a man as ready to listen and learn as he is to tell it as he sees it.

His thoughtful pieces from the Christian Arts Festival, 'Greenbelt', made me want to attend; his memories of childhood growing up in Scotland were sufficiently similar to my own growing up in New Zealand, I felt an immediate kinship. We're of an age – I see he's exactly a year younger – and so many experiences are in parallel. I too remember, aged three, attending a little Sunday School which was held in a neighbour's garage. It was before I learned to read but the little booklets on prayer and the first songs I was taught I have treasured all my life. Bell's own recollections of his first Sunday School teacher are so glorious that the extract from 'What shall we tell the children?' is worth reproducing here:

Three songs

My theology has been shaped by three songs I learned before I could read.

The first was taught me by Ina Carey, a beautiful woman who was my first Sunday School teacher when I was around three years of age.

There was an older girl in our church whom I'll call Maureen Andrews. She had the singular ability to be sick in Sunday School. We would be playing at Daniel in the lion's den or colouring in Solomon's palace and we would hear *Whrrruugh* and big Maureen would deposit her breakfast on the floor.

Miss Carey would quickly take Maureen out to get fresh air, and return with a brush, shovel and sawdust to wipe up the mess. That done, she would return smiling to the front of the class and sing:

*Praise him, praise him all you little children;
God is love, God is love.*

I used to think: If God is anything like Miss Carey, able to clean up big Maureen's boke (Scottish for vomit) and then to smile and sing, God must be marvellous. My first picture of God was not as an old man or a judge or someone sitting on a cloud. God was love. And because Ina Carey so well represented that love of God, I never found it difficult to believe that God is not an alpha male.

My mother taught me another song:

Jesus loves me

... and this in a primitive way convinced me that the beautiful love which was in God had been intended for wee John Bell aged three, and that Jesus had come to tell me that.

And my very practical grandmother taught me this song:

*Oh what can little hands do
To please the king of heaven?
The little hands some work may try
To help the poor in misery.
Such grace to mine be given.*

Thus I learned that if God was love and Jesus came to show me that love, then my response had to be to share God's love in acts of kindness and justice.

All my theology is based on these three songs ... which I remember because I learned them before I could read, and they will be with me until I die, and be inside me even should I end up with Alzheimer's. It leads me to ask what are the truths we enable children to ingest which will stay with them for ever. I don't want to be disparaging of light-hearted

songs which children of course should sing. But what kind of lasting spiritual succour will they receive if every Sunday School song is of the entertainment variety, such as:

*I have curly curly hair.
Mine is brown but yours is fair.
God made your hair and eyeballs too
and did the same for the kangaroo.*

A song such as this from Bernadette Farrell would be much more helpful:

*God made me as I am,
part of creation's plan.
No one else can ever be
the part of God's plan that's me.*

With his gentle touch, Bell reinforces some very important truths: the importance of good theology, of good music and of being careful with what we 'tell the children'. It could have a lasting impact – positive or negative. How we teach our children, how we manage Sunday Schools and worship ... These are vital considerations.

Perhaps I found it so refreshing to have some basic messages aired afresh: 'God is not an alpha male'. Consider the damage that has been done to countless generations with this pervasive idea of a wrathful, vengeful God with a 'divine obsession with what people do wrong' ... I felt prompted to shout 'Hallelujah' when reading so many of these chapters. Of particular note is the lengthy piece: 'Rampant male heterosexism' – a talk delivered at Greenbelt Festival 2017. Why don't we hear this more honestly debated more often?

In fact, when I reached the end of this thought-provoking little volume, I immediately turned to read it all once again. Not just because I have the privilege of writing a review, but because I wanted to continue the conversation. I wanted to think again about a number of topics that Bell tackles. I wanted to tease out the ideas and share them with my congregations. I want to send the book to my godchildren and grandchildren – and to 121 George Street.

Here we are in the midst of Presbytery reform as I write this, with the threatened closures of numerous small rural churches where the current-day Ina Careys are often bringing children to faith in tender and lasting ways. I worry that we're in danger of confusing babies and bathwater; of being driven by a particular ideology. Mission is important. So too is Worship. Both must be held in balance, nurtured and developed.

Having read Bell's book, I would love to find out what he thinks about the particular 'reality' facing the Church of Scotland today: dwindling congregations, too many church buildings, not enough money, too few ministers. What's 'the long and short of it'? Where is the Holy Spirit leading us? I am sure the Iona Community with its vision and far-sighted and inclusive spirituality might have much to offer us. I am hungry for more of John Bell's reflections on 'reality in different measures'.

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