

Mini-sabbatical

Martin Jewitt, Vicar of St Paul's Thornton Heath

I am grateful to Sion College and St George's Trust, along with the remainder of my CME allowance from Southwark Diocese, for enabling me to spend time at Ridley Hall, Cambridge, in the Autumn of 2008. I spent two periods of two weeks at the college with two weeks at home in the middle.

Study Programme

My main objective was to closely study Jurgen Moltmann's Theology of Hope. Moltmann had grown up in Hamburg to gradually learn of the evils of the Nazi regime around him and, as a university teacher in the sixties, he experienced some of the student unrest. So there was a hunger for real hope against the current confused ideological hopes of utopia. Theology of Hope was his first major work and, along with his friend and colleague, Wolfhart Pannenburg, challenged the theology of what he called the "eternal present" which had dominated German theology under the leadership of Rudolf Bultmann - an understanding of the Gospel which fitted so well into the existential philosophical climate of hopelessness about the future which is still so dominant today.

Moltmann's theme is that the future of Christian believers is bound up in the future of the Lord Jesus, and guaranteed by the historical event of His resurrection from the dead. For any who question whether that event can be objective history, he makes a detailed study of what post-enlightenment history actually is. His conclusion is that history looks to the future as it does to the past, and it is centred in the ongoing mission of the church's proclamation of the resurrection of the crucified one as the guarantee of that future. His final section is on the church, which must resist all the popular expectations the world puts on her, in order to focus on that message, because it is the only future for which the world can realistically hope.

As the future is initiated by the past, I also read JS Fergusson on Creation, Francis Collins, Stephen Hawking, Roy Peacock (A Brief history of Eternity - a Christian response to Hawking based on the 2nd law of thermodynamics) and James Lovelock, on the scientific view of the past and present. John Polkinghorne kindly gave time to talk to me about the interface between science and faith with reference to 2 of his books which I read, as well as Richard Dawkins' challenge to faith and Alistair McGrath's reply to it. Moltmann's own autobiography, A Broad Place, provided the context of Theology of Hope in his life and his other writings, particularly his summary of his second big work, The Crucified God, which arose out of his experience of the inferno which was Hamburg in 1943, and his discovery that he was a citizen of a country which had herded millions of people into death camps - "Does one have a country at all in a dictatorship?".

Life at Ridley Hall

I am very grateful for the setting and the fellowship of Ridley Hall for my study leave. It is a credit to the spirituality of the College that I never heard one negative word said to anybody or about anybody during the 4 weeks I was there. It was very instructive to me to live in a Christian community and observe the relaxed relationships between staff and students. Also to see how delegation works with much of the routine institutional jobs, and the running of the chapel services, shared among the students - I hope they don't get too spoilt when they come up against the realities of many of the churches they will go to. I was unconditionally accepted, both on my staircase (the local fellowship unit), and by everybody else in the refectory and the pub. The Thursday evening Eucharist is a wonderful expression of the fellowship of the College as is the occasional gathering of the Cambridge Federation of Theological Colleges for worship.

Churches I Visited

I was good to have the opportunity to share in worship in a variety of churches, some with my wife, of mostly evangelical, but a wide variety nevertheless. Of particular interest was the styles of ministry and leadership, some very directive, some with well shared responsibility, some small congregations, others packed to the door. Much to learn there.

The Way Forward

I believe the message of hope in God, based on His promises, is the vital message for the world and the church today, as it was 40 years ago. I am grateful to Professor Jeremy Begbie who has encouraged me in putting my studies into writing - a task which I hope to progress as and when time allows, basically for myself.

I am also conscious of the local church for which I am responsible until I retire in the next 2 years. This exercise has given me the focus to trust God to raise our people in the midst of our struggles into an active hope to stand as His family living God's promise of His New Creation to the community around us.