

REFLECTIONS of a first timer

This was the year that we finally made it to Greenbelt. Friends had been recommending it to us for years so we decided to go for day tickets on the Saturday, just to dip our toes in and see how we got on.

For those not in the know,

Greenbelt is a festival that takes place at Boughton House (near Kettering) over the August bank holiday weekend.

“Greenbelt believes that things often kept apart can and should be held together. Things like artistry and activism, spirituality and politics, faith and justice. It is a festival where these things belong together and where all are welcome.”

The theme this year was ‘acts of the imagination’ and the idea was to get us to think about how we might reimagine things like society or the church. Just by asking the question – what would happen if...?

We started the day with morning prayer which was taking place in the Christian Aid tent. Christian Aid are one of Greenbelt’s partners and were hosting an impressive number of events over the weekend as well as providing a cafe – which at 9:30 in the morning was filling the tent with the smell of toast. Morning prayer was run by the Northumbria Community. We used their order for Celtic Daily Prayer as the template for the service which included Christian Aid’s prayer for the day, a meditation and Bible readings. That set us up for the day and we were ready to explore.

We did a little bit of browsing before heading to a talk being given by Revd Dr Sam Wells of St Martin in the Fields (Trafalgar Square) called ‘Who is my neighbour? The global and personal challenge.’ Sam talked particularly about immigration and discrimination and there was plenty of time for questions. (There is a book of the same name with essays by a number of contributors including Sam Wells, Rowan Williams and Justin Welby which I picked up in the bookshop later) Some of the subject matter covered included how the church can and should work with communities rather than doing things to or for them.

I was reminded of a project I visited recently with work – a church in Luton had given over some of their outdoor space to be used by groups like the Red Cross, providing a safe space for refugees to come and grow fruit and vegetables, beyond the practical this gives a sense of community and stability and allows the sharing of recipes and different foods amongst the users. Schemes like this can also act as a fresh produce foodbank – a way of helping to alleviate food poverty.

Sam talked about the power of food and sharing to help start conversations and provide a starting point from which relationships can grow. He also talked about immigration and the Bible – looking at the number and variety of journeys mentioned – in earlier times people were more mobile than we often give them credit for. Inevitably, Brexit was mentioned and Sam talked about how he felt one of the key failings of the Remain campaign was that it failed to articulate an imaginative and positive image of a Britain at the centre of Europe, as a place of welcome and refuge.

With plenty to think about we headed outside for a bite to eat and to take some time to explore the grounds. Boughton House has some wonderful open spaces with formal canals given a modern twist. We exercised admirable restraint in the bookshop coming away with only a couple of volumes. We caught the end of a session on reimagining museums which was particularly interesting for me as I used to work in the museum sector. It was good to have a wander round and check out some of the exhibitors’ stalls and see what else was happening across the site. We also met up with some old university friends later in the afternoon for a catch up.

By coincidence, it was back to St Martin in the Fields in the early evening for a session called Great Sacred Music – this is a type of service that they have been running for some time now. As a central London Church they found that their lunchtime and other concerts were very popular but that they weren’t translating into church going so they came up with a new format – at 45 mins long they still fit into a lunch hour – each service has a theme (in our case this was Love) and the St Martin’s Voices are challenged to come up with around 12 pieces that fit the theme, including a few pieces suitable for congregational singing. Sam Wells introduced each section, explaining the context of the music both historically and theologically. This is one of several initiatives that the church has developed to cater for people for whom Sunday services can be impractical – he talked about young professionals who might visit friends and family at weekends and so aren’t around. Changing work patterns have also affected people’s ability to commit to rotas and so on. St Martin’s have also introduced a service at 6:30pm on Wednesdays which is an informal communion service aimed at those on their way home from work.

The music was beautiful and varied; on what had been a rather showery day the sun stayed out and house martins and swallows were swooping in a clear blue sky. The setting for the concert was the colonnades of the house which gave it a very different atmosphere to the main festival site. It was a very relaxing end to the day.

It was soon time to head home – tired but definitely inspired and already looking forward to Greenbelt 2019: Wit & Wisdom.

Shelly Dennison