

Remembering Bill Snelson

At the time when I worked most closely with Bill Snelson, in the years before and after the Millennium when I was serving as a CTE President, my day job was in the British Museum – whose collections Bill also knew well. So mention of Goldsborough, the village close by Knaresborough where Bill is being laid to rest, immediately brought to mind the hoard of Viking silver found beside the north wall of the church, which has been in the British Museum’s collections since 1859. Among the hacksilver, looted, cut up and used as bullion, is one brooch fragment with two zoomorphic designs which, during the course of the 900s, would come to have deeper Christian significance for the Vikings: the triple interlaced knot, and forming the eye of the beast, a simple equal-armed cross.



Interlacing is an immediate visual symbol of ecumenism. Bill was a lifelong ecumenist – coming from a Methodist family background, he was confirmed into the Church of England in his early teens. Ordained at 24, he served in parish ministry in Leeds, and before coming to CTE was Ecumenical Officer for West Yorkshire. He understood ‘ecumenical’ as being to do with the renewal of the whole church, inside as well as between denominations. He was realistic about the material to hand, being rather less pliable than silver: ‘Because people are fragile, things take time’. But the tally of churches which came into membership of CTE during his time – and whose members have since given significant service - is a striking endorsement of his vision: Coptic Orthodox Church (2003), Church of God of Prophecy (2005), New Testament Church of God (2006), Redeemed Christian Church of God (2007).

The first proposition in CTE’s basis of faith is ‘acknowledging God’s revelation in Christ’. When Bill became CTE General Secretary in autumn 1997, the incoming Labour government had just committed itself to ambitious plans to celebrate the Millennium at New Year 2000. Bill grasped immediately that this was a ‘once-in-a-thousand-years chance to ‘name the name’, since it is our Lord’s birth we celebrate’. Twenty years on, it is hard to conjure up the sheer excitement and anticipation of that time. The Millennium Resolution, the candle delivered to every household, the multiple opportunities for private and public prayer, the death in June 1999 of Cardinal Basil Hume, one of CTE’s presidents and the most widely regarded church leader of his day, who had exhorted us to think of ‘the crib rather than the [Millennium] Dome’ – these were years, unimaginable now, during which the membrane seemed thinner than usual, as Bill expressed it, between ‘personal meaning and public hope’.

Two years later, there came a second moment of public hope, and once again, Bill was on the case. The Queen’s Golden Jubilee, celebrated in June 2002, brought the first ecumenical service ever held at St George’s Chapel Windsor, after which the CTE Presidents signed a personal covenant, which has since been signed by each incoming president. The covenant opens in uncompromising style, ‘We believe in the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit’. CTE has always made space for those churches, like the Religious Society of Friends, who believe that credal statements fetter our response to the Holy Spirit, but that it is a Trinitarian body, committed to work to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is not in doubt. So I have no doubt that Bill would embrace the significance of the triple interlaced knot of the Goldsborough Hoard which, despite its pre-Christian roots, soon came to be understood as a symbol of the Trinity.

In 2006, the four CTE Presidents were invited to visit the Holy Land, to express their solidarity with local Christians, 'the living stones'. Bill organized and accompanied the pilgrimage. However, one of his few regrets was that, as a young man, he had missed the opportunity to take part in national and international ecumenical events. So on his retirement from CTE he was delighted to take on a role with the Anglican Centre in Rome, raising its profile in England and serving for a time as interim Director. The visit of Benedict XVI, the first state visit of a pope to Britain, in September 2010 was a particular thrill. I owe it to Bill that I didn't miss out on attending the ecumenical celebration of evening prayer at Westminster Abbey – having foolishly arrived without photo-id, I was thankful to spot Bill in the crowd outside, and even more relieved that he was on personal terms with sufficient officials to be able to talk me in. In Rome, Bill's contacts were thoroughly international. So by the end of his ministry he would not have been at all fazed by the international make-up of the Goldsborough Hoard – of its 39 coins, just three are from Anglo-Saxon England, the remainder being dirhems from all over the Arab world, minted as far east as Samarkand and the Hindu Kush.

Today, our international currency is made up of pixels rather than gold or silver, so I was delighted to discover that, in the last months of his life, Bill had taken his ministry online. Knaresborough Anglicans' 4-minute Art Attacks proved a perfect vehicle for him to combine his loves – art and poetry, travel and God. In this, as in all he did, he was ably supported by Beryl, whose reflections on a Bellini altarpiece in Venice complement his own on Masaccio's frescos in Florence. And the few personal details he permitted himself were all the more telling. What a joy it was to discover, while musing on the Millennium window at Chester Cathedral, that, on 20 September 2020, Bill had been able to celebrate the 50th anniversary of his ordination as a priest.

A well-meaning Anglican friend once told Bill, meaning to flatter him, 'You could have been a bishop, you know.' I can still hear the incredulity in his voice as he recounted his response, 'Why on earth should I want to be a bishop in one church, when I have this wonderful opportunity to represent so many'.

Churches Together in England was wonderfully served by Bill Snelson. We honour his memory and we give thanks for the grace of God as witnessed in his life.

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