

REFLECTIONS AT 80 - AND SOME SOUVENIRS

Talk at 'time@tyndale' on 24 May 2023

Keith Clements

Having just had my 80th birthday, as with any birthday I've received some presents. Among the gifts and cards was a kind of calendar from two of our grandchildren, listing many of the notable events that had happened in my lifetime – one for each of the 80 years. I was amused that for 1953 it was not Queen Elizabeth's coronation, nor the climbing of Everest, that was listed but the staging of Cole Porter's musical *Can-Can*. But then, what you think were really important events in your lifetime depends a lot on your perspective and interests.

The same is true when any one of us looks at our own life. You can try and reckon up what you've done, how you've made your mark, what you've 'achieved' – or failed to achieve. But that's very subjective, and likely to provoke a good deal of argument with those who've known you – and with yourself come to that. 'Why mention that – and not *that*?' 'What about such and such which at least some people remember even if you yourself don't?'

So, these reflections which I'm about to share are not the story of what I may have done, nor even really about things that have happened to me. Rather, they're about things that were *given* to me, and which are souvenirs because they are gifts: not things I can boast about for having achieved or for having, but which came to me unsought, unasked, unexpected and (mostly) undeserved. They are souvenirs of grace. Grace is the meaning of our lives. God is the centre of life, the source of all goodness, the giver of all good things. It's not a matter for boasting, but gratitude. Paul says to the Corinthians: 'What do you have that you have not received? And if you have received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?' (I Cor 4:7). As a well-known hymn puts it: 'For all the love which from our earliest days/has gladdened life and guarded all our ways,/we bring you, Lord, our song of grateful praise, *Alleluia*.' (BPW 371)

So here are ten souvenirs which over the years have come to me by grace, and which help me to reflect on grace: on the graciousness which is at the heart of life as I've experienced it, and which I value because they make me think, and ponder what really matters in our lives. Some of them may strike you as quite poignant, others you may think are rather odd things to be thankful for, even trivial; but all of them still speak to me.

Chinese gifts.

So let's begin at the very beginning. Eighty years ago this month I was born to my missionary parents in the village of Gulin, set amid the mountains of Sichuan province in south-west China. Westerners were a rare curiosity in the eyes of the local Chinese, and the news that a white woman had just had a baby was greeted with wonder in the village. Scores of people came to view and admire me (the only time this has happened in my life), and they called me 'The King of Gulin'. More than that, they brought me gifts: a beautiful satin bib, and several pairs of baby shoes (Sichuan dust is still visibly ingrained on the soles).

When, 51 years later, I returned to China with an ecumenical study group from Britain, we were given special permission to travel to Gulin, and saw the house where I was born. I took with me the bib and some of the shoes. Even the local communist officials ‘minding’ our party were intrigued. ‘Oh, these would only have been given to a VERY important person!’, one of them said with a grin.

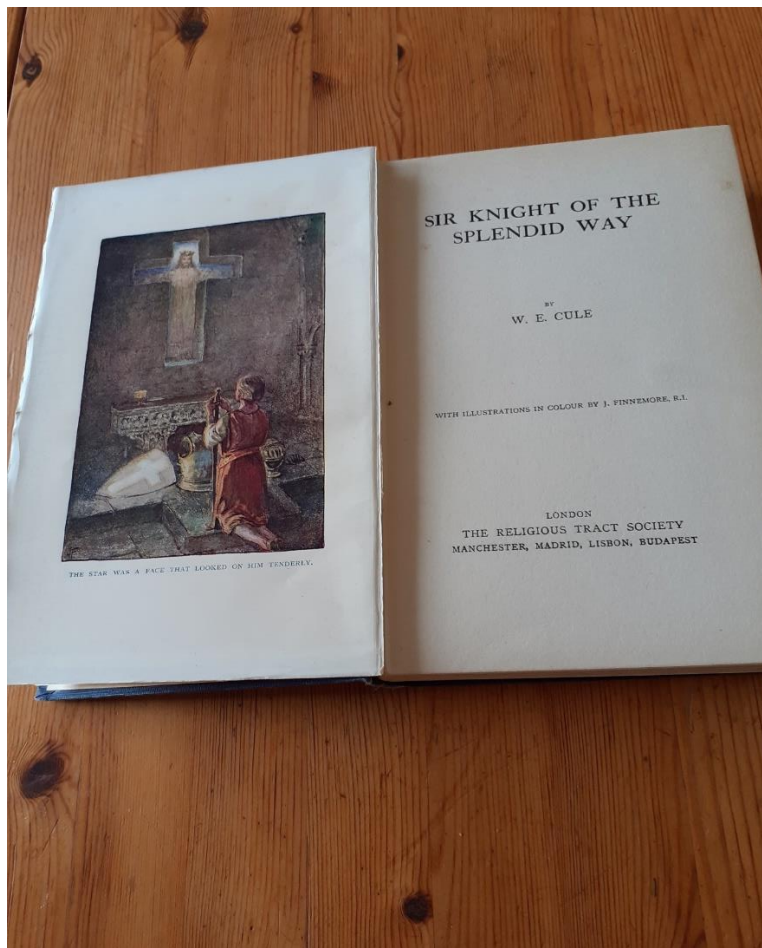
So, at the very start of life I was a stranger and taken in. I received the kindness of strangers too. That was grace.



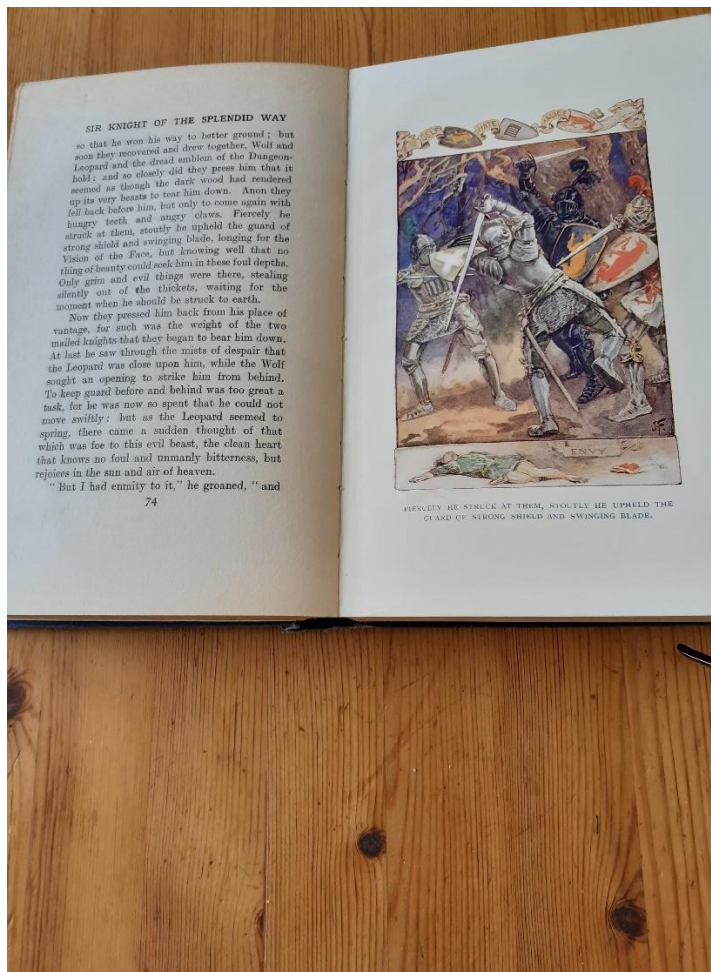
Sir Knight of the Splendid Way

We move on a few years to 1952, when I was nine years old and we were living in Darlington in County Durham. It was a weekend early in December, and in those days the second Sunday in Advent was observed as ‘Bible Sunday’ in many churches. That particular weekend the Bible Society had a big exhibition in one of the churches: displays showing the work of Bible translation in many countries, talks by Bible Society workers, films, and a large bookstall. I presently found myself browsing at the bookstall. Now at that time I was into stories of knights in armour, histories of jousts and tournaments, the crusades and so on, and my eye was caught by a particular book on the stall. It had a picture on the front cover, of

a knight in armour doing battle. I picked it up, turned to the first chapter and was immediately hooked. It was in effect a retelling of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* in the form of a young knight's journey from taking his first vows, through all the challenges that he faced and the adventures he had, and his final arrival at the city of the Great King. I was totally enthralled and had just about finished the first chapter when one of my parents hauled me off to see one of the films, or to have tea or something. I told them about this book and how marvellous it was.



As soon as I was free I hurried back to the bookstall to resume reading where I'd left off. To my dismay, I couldn't find it! Someone else must have bought it – but who on earth could have wanted that book more than me? I complained bitterly to my parents how unfair this was. They made the sort of 'never mind' noises that parents always do, and that was that. I suppose I learnt to put up with the disappointment as the days passed, but it still niggled.



SIR KNIGHT OF THE SPLENDID WAY
 so that he won his way to better ground; but soon they recovered and drew together, Wolf and Leopard and the dread ambition of the Dungeon-keeper and the dread ambition of the Dungeon-keeper, and so closely did they press him that it held; and so closely did they press him that it seemed as though the dark wood had rendered up its very beasts to tear him down. Anon they fell back before him, but only to come again with hungry teeth and hungry claws. Fiercely he struck at them, stoutly he upheld the guard of strong shield and swinging blade, longing for the Vision of the Face, but knowing well that no thing of beauty could seek him in those foul depths. Only guns and evil things were there, stealing stealthily out of the thickets, waiting for the moment when he should be struck to earth.

Now they pressed him back from his place of vantage, for such was the weight of the two mailed knights that they began to bear him down. At last he saw through the mists of despair that the Leopard was close upon him, while the Wolf sought an opening to strike him from behind. To keep guard before and behind was too great a task, for he was now so spent that he could not move swiftly; but as the Leopard seemed to spring, there came a sudden thought of that which was foe to this evil beast, the clean heart that knows no foul and unmanly bitterness, but rejoices in the sun and air of heaven.

"But I had enmity to it," he groaned, "and

74



FIERCELY HE STRUCK AT THEM, STOUTLY HE UPHELD THE
 GUARD OF STRONG SHIELD AND SWINGING BLADE.

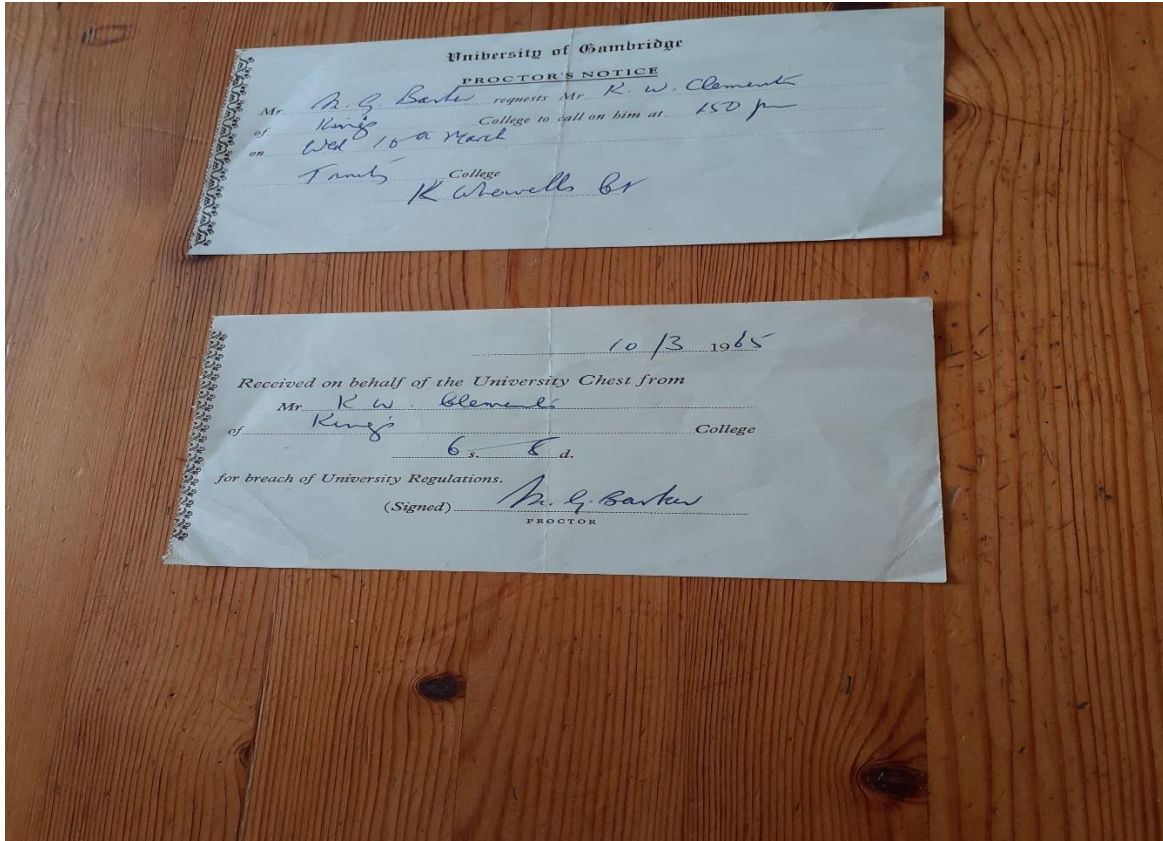
Anyway, there came Christmas morning, and the exciting ritual of unloading presents from the pillow-case. Toys, models, books . . . and one book in particular which astounded me when I pulled off the wrapping paper, that book which by now I'd almost forgotten about: *Sir Knight of the Splendid Way*. And of course, only then did I realise why that book had disappeared from the bookstall three weeks before: who had surreptitiously bought it and why. My parents had seen that it was a good book, and that I would dearly love to read it, and they wanted me to have it – but at the right time so that it would be mine for keeps; no longer to read in hurried snatches on a bookstall, but to read and re-read again for as long as I wished. So it did become mine – and it still is. Grace comes in unexpected ways, often when patiently waited for, or even when almost forgotten about. The right gift comes at the right time.

The author incidentally, was W.E. Cule, a Welsh Baptist who as well as writing a number of books for young people became head of publications at the BMS.

Sir Knight of the Splendid Way, like its model *Pilgrim's Progress*, as well as stirring tales of gallantry and renown, includes people and episodes of a more modest nature but essential to the story: like the nameless knight who lives by himself, out of the public eye, to guard and keep pure the spring which from afar flows down and refreshes travellers along the long and

arduous way. He stands for those in the king's service who by their quiet and faithful prayers keep watch and provide a channel of strength to others. There is depth, as well as excitement, in these pages.

Cambridge fine



A strange souvenir. A fine! What on earth . . .? There are many souvenirs I could have produced of my student time at Cambridge, but this one will have to stand for them all, because like few others it recalls what life was like then, and how times have changed. In those days (the early 1960s) university discipline was becoming more relaxed but there were still some rules and restrictions. You were supposed to be back in college by midnight and some colleges still had gruesome metal spikes or coils of barbed wire adorning the tops of walls to deter unofficial entry or exit. My college, King's, had dispensed with these and indeed, for those in the know, had provided a couple of subtle means of getting in and out safely (if slightly awkwardly) after the gates were locked. But some rules remained from the Victorian era or earlier, including the requirement that undergraduates had to wear a gown when walking round the town after dark. So here is the evidence, that one evening in March 1965 I was challenged by the Proctor patrolling Trinity Street who wanted to know, first, if I was a member of the university; and second, if so, why I was not wearing my gown in defiance of university regulations. Here too is the receipt, confirming that I had duly reported to the Proctor's office a few days' later and paid the fine of six shillings and eight pence. Ironically, one the evening in question with a couple of friends I'd been making one of my rare appearances at the Christian Union Saturday evening bible study gatherings. They had

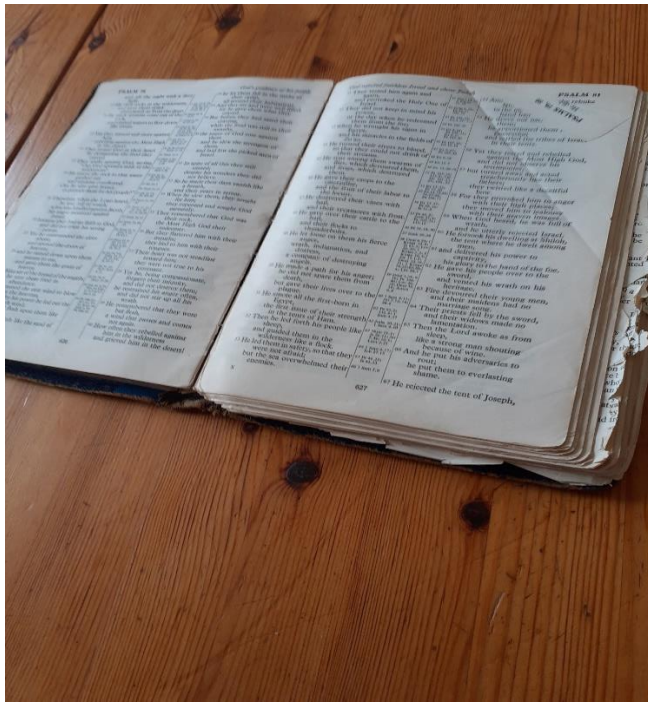
slipped away down the street before the Proctor could observe them properly and left me standing there!

That seems a different world now. Even then we treated such things as a bit of fun really, and no more than minor nuisances. There was so much that was positive and rich in student life. In that generation more than any preceding one in that century, we enjoyed the benefits of peace, whereas many of those who taught us had known first-hand the horrors of two world wars. Many of us were also the beneficiaries of the 1944 Butler Education Act which had opened up the possibility of university education for the first time in our families' histories. We knew we had more than enough to be grateful for, above all the blessings of friendships both in college and in groups like the (Baptist) Robert Hall Society, 'RHS'. Not just from our tutors, we learnt a lot from each other, and we laughed a lot together which probably helped our learning too. The other day Margaret and I were talking about this with a friend of those RHS days, Robert Bradnock. He couldn't say enough about how privileged we were to be part of a circle of such diverse friends - even if a couple of them once left me in the lurch with the Proctor and his 'bulldogs'! So, these two slips of paper represent so much for which I give thanks.

A Bible



A Bible, rather worn, battered-looking but I like to think well used. It was presented to me at my ordination in September 1967, by Dr Henton Davies, Principal of Regent's Park College, who preached at the service at Tarporley Baptist Church in Cheshire. It's quite a few years since I last used it, whether in leading worship and preaching, or in the study.



It's not just that it's physically falling apart but this particular version – the Revised Standard Version (RSV) – which came out in 1952 is now itself a bit dated in its language and style. But I think it was the best of the many successors to the King James (or 'Authorised') Bible that came out during the 1950s, '60s and '70s. It not only used more modern language and took into account the latest scholarship on the original biblical manuscripts, but in fact it retained much of the dignified style and speech rhythms of the King James version. So much so, that soon after I became minister at Downend an elderly couple in the congregation said how glad they were that I was using 'the old Bible'. (I didn't let on that I wasn't in fact using the King James!).

Despite all that, I still keep this 'old' RSV safe. It recalls to me the great and gifted teachers I had both at Cambridge and then at Regent's in opening up the treasure-house of the Bible, the 'lively oracles of God' as the Moderator of the Church of Scotland said a few days ago in presenting the Bible to King Charles at the recent coronation service. I'm forever grateful for that grounding in biblical study which must be the foundation of any minister's formation. Certainly that is the Baptist tradition, though I sometimes wonder if the Word of God as found in the Bible is still as central in the life and worship in all Baptist churches. Some years ago I happened to be at a service where the leader said at one point, 'Now just before the worship group lead us in some songs, a few words of Scripture . . .' Really? I ask you . . .

A piece of silver

Now for something completely different: a silver snuff box, dating from about 1830. It shows in relief the four King Georges of the 18th and 19th centuries. It was given to me by a German lady, Dr Käthe Gregor Smith, widow of the Scottish theologian Professor Ronald (Ronnie) Gregor Smith. They had become engaged in the late 1930s, and when war broke out in 1939 he was a young minister of the Church of Scotland in Selkirk, and later a chaplain in the Scots Guards, while she was in Germany teaching English in a high school. So the war meant eight years of separation for them. After the war Ronnie was posted to Germany to work with

the Allied Control Commission, with special responsibility for reestablishing the University of Bonn. So at last they were reunited and were able to be married – their wedding service conducted by the great theologian Karl Barth in a little church on the banks of the Rhine. A genuinely moving love story. They returned to Britain, where Ronnie became editor of the SCM Press and then professor of Divinity at Glasgow University. He died tragically early in 1968, aged 55.



I wrote my Oxford BD thesis on Ronnie Gregor Smith, which was a fascinating exercise because he was first of all a skilled translator and interpreter of many of the great continental theologians and philosophers and was much influenced by them - like Barth, Bonhoeffer (who of course was becoming specially interesting to me), Rudolf Bultmann, the Jewish thinker Martin Buber and others, and I was intrigued by his own thought. One of his early books was called *The New Man*, and in it he coined a phrase which has always stuck with me, 'the web of grace'. Faith, he says, is always rooted in history, it arises as a call spoken to us in history, above all in Jesus, and it leads us into history in turn. Human life and history are caught and indwelt by the Spirit of God which takes hold of us not just as individuals but as communities too. Grace is what we receive, and we are called to become a means of grace to others, leading us into a fellowship, a movement whereby grace spreads its effects in furthering human community. Grace is a story that we become part of. It's a web spun around

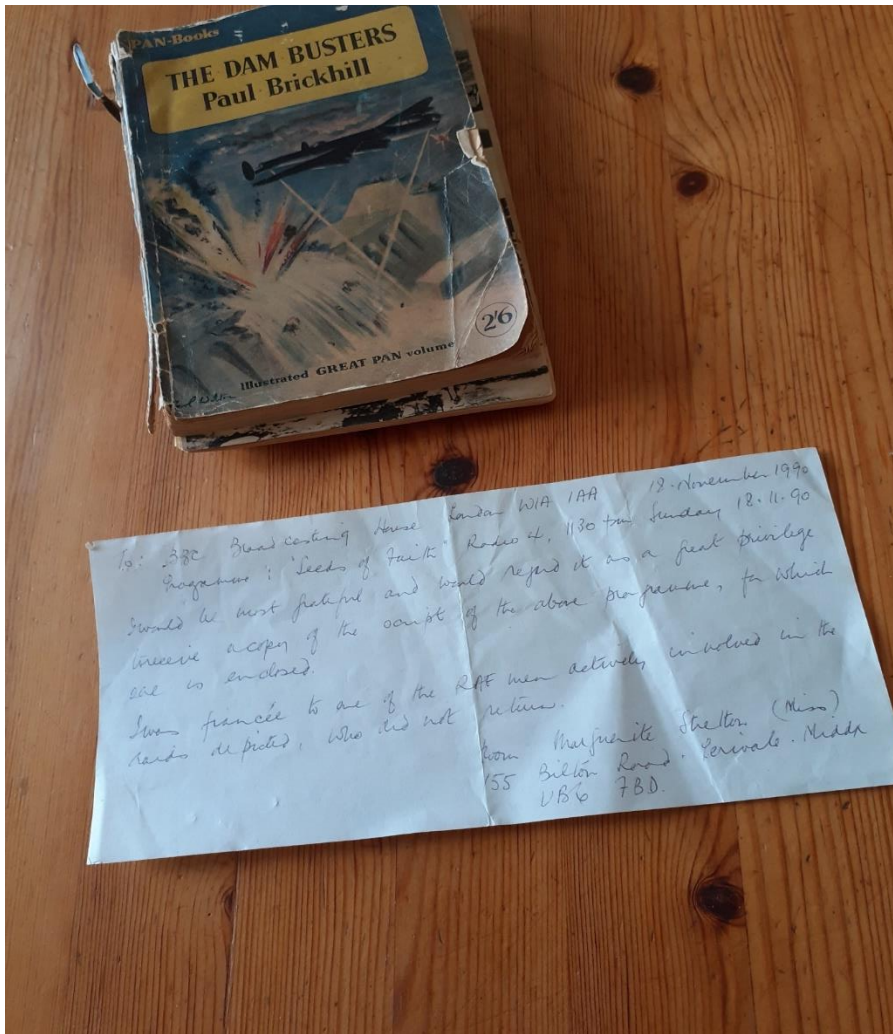
us and we enable it to be spread beyond us by responsible action. It's very personal, but not just individual.

In writing my thesis, which I began a few years after his death, I was greatly helped by Käthe and got to know her well, frequently corresponding and visiting her in Germany a couple of times. Then in 1983 Margaret and I and the boys had a short holiday in the crofter's cottage which she and Ronnie had bought by Loch Lomond and which she kept up for summer visits after his death. I was touched when she gave me this snuff box as a thank-you present for my efforts to preserve Ronnie's memory and present his life's work. She was a very gracious person, as was Ronnie by all accounts to those who knew him. One of his doctoral students at Glasgow was an Australian, Harry Wardlaw, who went back to Australia to teach in Melbourne, and Margaret and I on our visits there got to know him and his wife Ruth well. Harry once said to me that Ronnie, more than anyone else he knew, showed what it means to live by grace. I cherish this gift, as a token of the web of grace which we enter into by faith, and shows our life in a new light.

A short but moving letter

There was another 80th anniversary just a week ago: the famous RAF raid on the German dams in May 1943: the stuff of legendary British heroics, called to mind whenever we hear Eric Coates' stirring 'Dambusters March' which accompanied the equally famous film starring Ruchard Todd as Wing Commander Guy Gibson and Michael Redgrave as Barnes Wallis, inventor of the ingenious 'bouncing bomb'.

During my time as Tutor at Bristol Baptist College I did a certain amount of broadcasting with the BBC, and in 1990 wrote and presented a series of Sunday evening programmes for Radio 4, 'Fight the Good Fight'. It comprised four reflections on famous battle sites which I'd visited, on what had happened in those places, on war and its consequences: courage, suffering, loss and grief, and the questions it leaves us with. We started off at Hastings, Battle Abbey, 1066 and all that. Then we went to the Middle East, the land of Jordan and the crusader castle of Krak in Moab where Richard the Lionheart and Saladin the Turk faced each other out. Third, we crossed the Atlantic to Valley Forge in Pennsylvania, where George Washington in the American War of Independence fought against bitter cold and near starvation to rebuild his army which finally won that war. Then, fourthly, we went to the Möhne Dam in Germany reflected on the: the action of that dramatic night, the terrible cost (a third of the aircrews of 617 Squadron were lost) and the human cost on the German side, with more than 1,200 civilians drowned in the ensuing floods. Most were not in fact German but forced labourers from occupied countries.



That particular programme, which, included a short clip from the film, produced quite a large postbag of appreciative letters from listeners. But the letter which touched me most was the shortest, written on a slip of paper – the one shown here. It was from a lady, who very much wanted a copy of the script of the programme and wrote: ‘I was fiancée to one of the men actively involved in the raids depicted, and who did not return.’ She signs herself ‘(Miss) Marguerite Stretton’. *Miss Marguerite . . .* This was nearly 50 years after the event, witnessing to an irreplaceable loss, still deeply felt. Amid all the adulation and celebrations of heroism, the apparent glamour of war, there is still the immeasurable amount of personal pain and grief which at times we’d like to ignore but which must be registered. I cherish this letter as a constant, salutary reminder of what war actually involves.

A gift from Mosul

In 1994, when I was working for the Council of Churches (now Churches Together) for Britain and Ireland, I was a member of a small group that visited Iraq on behalf of the World Council of Churches. It was four years after the first Gulf War (‘Desert Storm’ etc). Saddam Hussein was still in power. International sanctions were hitting the economy of the country hard, and the people were suffering a great deal. We spent most of our time in Baghdad but also journeyed north to the city of Mosul. As well as being an important city now, it’s very significant for its place in history. It’s on the site of the ancient Assyrian city Nineveh, the

remains of which we visited. It's also, according to proud local tradition, where the prophet Jonah is buried, he having preached there after his adventure with the whale.

Our main purpose in going to Iraq was to show solidarity with the people and churches there in their difficult situation, to learn more of their problems, and assuring them that they were not completely forgotten. On the Sunday that we were there, we attended the evening service at the Syrian Orthodox Church, where we made warmly welcome. The congregation was of all ages, from toddlers to the very elderly. After the service I wandered into the little shop at the back of the church, where various ornaments and pictures were on sale – as in many a church in any part of the world. My eye lit on this alabaster relief of Mary and her baby – or it could have been Sarah and any of her children – or indeed any mother and child. I asked about its price, because I would like to buy it as a souvenir. The conversation went something like; ‘How much please?’ ‘Nothing. It is a gift for you’. ‘But I want to pay for it.’ ‘No, you are our guest. Please take it.’ ‘But your church needs the money especially in these difficult times.’ ‘No, it is our pleasure, please take it.’ Then I remembered that I was indeed in the land of Abraham and Sarah, where hospitality was – and still is – regarded as a great honour and joy to give, even in simple ways.



So now it hangs on the study wall, another reminder of the kindness, the grace, of strangers even in their own great need.

It has also brought sadness and anxiety. In 2014 Mosul was taken by Islamic State (IS). Mosul was left in ruins by the fighting, and the people were met with terrible cruelty, not least the Christians there. I can't look at it now without thinking of what these kind people must have gone through. Mosul was liberated from IS in 2017, but it's still in a ruinous state. My souvenir speaks to me of the vulnerability of grace in a violent world. Can we believe that grace will nevertheless triumph? That requires a faith that enters into the depths of Good Friday and looks to Easter.

Another another-and-child image



Here is a Greek Orthodox ikon, which was given to Margaret and me when I retired from the Conference of European Churches in 2005. It was a gift to us from his Beatitude Anastasios, the archbishop of Tirana in Albania. Of all the European countries under communism during the Cold War period, Albania was the one where religion, during the regime of Enver Hoxha, was most ruthlessly suppressed. Churches, mosques, synagogues – all were closed or destroyed, and any form of worship forbidden. When communism fell in the early 1990s the work of re-establishing the Christian church in Albania looked an awesome task. Which is where Anastasios came on the scene. He was a priest and professor of theology of the Greek Orthodox Church based in Athens, but with a wide vision. He'd worked for the World Council of Churches and been a missionary in Africa too; now he was the one chosen by the Church of Greece and the Ecumenical Patriarch to go and rebuild the Orthodox Church and Christian life in Albania. His name was appropriate to the task too, for 'Anastasios' in Greek means 'resurrection' and it's been largely under his leadership that the faith has been reborn in Albania and has flourished again – in local parishes, in relief work, in the setting up of hospitals and a new theological college for training priests and teachers.

This ikon is very precious to Margaret and me because it's a gift from a great but very humble servant of Christ, who also became a dear friend to us particularly when I was taken ill in Geneva in 2000. Like the relief from Mosul the ikon tells the story of the love between Mary and her child, but takes us just a bit further. (I say 'tells' rather than 'depicts' because the Orthodox talk not of 'painting' an ikon but of 'writing' it.) Mary and Jesus are deeply aware of the love between them, but they are not actually looking *at* each other. They are so sure in the love between them, the love of God. that they can look out and away from each other into the world, in compassion. Grace is received and shared, and overflows. I can look at this for ages. It is timeless.

A poem from Nigeria

Hassan Musa is a young pastor and teacher at Kigoro Seminary in Nigeria. We met at the International Bonhoeffer Congress in Stellenbosch, South Africa, in 2020. And we've been in touch ever since. His situation in Nigeria is hard, very hard. There is much unrest in the country, including attacks by Islamic extremists on Christian institutions, including his own seminary, becoming more frequent. He's been wanting to further studies of Bonhoeffer in Nigeria, as he thinks Bonhoeffer is so relevant to the Nigerian scene and the life of the churches. We've been trying to help the funding of books for him by the Dorothy Porteous Fund. Remarkably, he's not just concerned for his own situation and that of Nigeria as a whole. He is wanting to be a channel of grace for others. Two years ago, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine he asked me help him make contact with Christians in Ukraine, because he and a group of his students had formed a prayer group for Ukraine. In the midst of his uncertain and precarious context, he with others was nevertheless looking outwards. At about Easter this year, he sent me this poem he'd written, called 'Moments of Hope'. It speaks of looking for hope in even the darkest moments:

"Moments of Hope"

Moments of hope are but moments
These are the fragmentations of time

Into that which defines our time
These are moments of interruption
For new interactions
These are moments we neither knew nor actually anticipated
These are moments that shape us into
Being new
Into being us
These are moments of life and death
Moments we receive our lives anew
And moments we have to recognize the passing away of those gone ahead of us
These are moments that make history
These are moments that call to true silence
And true worship.
There are moments we sweat and toil to make ends meet
And there are moments we see things emerge from the secret place of God
This divine presence is what is but we cannot see
This is the truth that made us and our nature
This is the reality we do not fully understand
In the fragmentations of life and the darkness of its many turns
It is enough to go back to the cross
To go back to that place
To that act at a defining moment
That swallowed the time we know as history
And gave birth to life in its fullness
At the cross we find hope in the new moment of life and death
This is the moment of hope beyond all thoughts and wishes of our hearts.
This is the moment of hope born in grace and grasped by faith
This is the new gift of grace and the being of life in its beauty beyond the darkness of
the cross
The voices of mockery only remind us of the renewal of history
The crack was hard at the breaking point
All that remains is the fullness of life.

Another treasure. What a gift from this young Nigerian, to be able to write like this in the midst of danger. He penned a message at the end of the poem: 'Happy Easter. I hear gunshots from the distance around me. Please pray for our safety. Somewhere close to us is most probably under attack this night.' This poem is a gift, affirming grace, to feed into the web of grace.

And finally . . .

A gift earlier this year to Margaret and myself from old friends of student days. It's appropriate to finish as we began, with something Chinese. A wok!



At age 80, one is still trying to making sense of life. How does it all hang together? Or does it? There are grave and cheerful moments. There are productive and painful times, successes and failures. It's hard to fully comprehend it. Søren Kierkegaard once said that life can only be understood backwards, but it has to be lived forwards. Only by looking back can we start to see some shape, some pattern emerging. But at its leading edge, the bow of the ship

heading into the unknown waters, there'll always be questions, about the unknown. For the moment, all we can do is put them into the wok with all the other ingredients. The wok is gracious: it can take everything, and in God's time we'll know more of what it has all been about, how the varied moments of grace are part of the whole, how the separate bits, each with a distinct flavour of their own, make up the feast which is God's purpose for us. *'Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known'* (I Cor. 13:12) But even now there is more than enough grace for our needs.