

Martin's Ramblings: Who I read

This rambling was meant to be a celebration when I started it, it may have turned into a confession. A remark in this morning's "Prayer and Share" Zoom meeting got my mind wandering and considering who are the Christian writers I have read most over the years? I came up with a list of the writers who I still return to and who, if I saw a new book, I would buy on auto-reflex. The list I came up with was: Gordon Bailey, William Barclay, Lionel Blue, Leslie F Brandt, Milton Jones, CS Lewis, Colin Morris Tony Palmer, Adrian Plass and Michel Quoist. Now I was going to comment that these are, in the main, not great theological scholars but they all write in a way that connects with me.

Then I looked again and was brought up short by the fact that every one of the writers is, as far as I know: British, white, male and of the twentieth century.

Now, I am only a partial ignoramus so I have read, amongst others, some : Vicky Beeching, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Joni Eareckson, Julian of Norwich, Martin Luther King Jr, Hans Kung, Desmond Tutu, Susannah Wesley, and (my find for this year) Hilary Brand. I also (sometimes) read weightier and worthier tomes. Nevertheless, if you look at my bookshelves there is an overwhelming majority of white, British, male writers of the 20th century, with some white American males for variety. I am not ashamed of who I am or where and when I was born but it seems to me that I need to make more of an effort to break out of this bubble. I shall be asking friends for recommendations. In fact, I shall start with the Circuit ministers, I think there are only two white British males in that group.

Now I have exposed my guilty secret, back to what I thought was the purpose of this rambling; to share something of these writers and how I came to know and love them.

Gordon Bailey

A poet. You probably needed to be a teenager in the seventies to really know him. His first (I think) volume of verse, "Plastic World", came out in 1972. My own copy is falling to pieces and patched together by yellowing sellotape. He was a staple at all "youth" services. He tended to write from an "outsider's" point of view with a light touch and a dislike of the "plastic" or sham.

From I Wanted To Say

*I wanted to say
"Please help me."*

*I wanted to say
"I need you."*

*I wanted to say
"I'm sorry."*

*I wanted to say
"Forgive me."*

*But,
Mister Preacher,
You were suffering from never-open ears,
A condition resulting from
An ever-open mouth!*

William Barclay

How well I remember the row of red-spined "Daily Study Bibles" on my parents' bookshelves. Perhaps half a dozen or so, those copies are now amongst my own most precious possessions. Over the years I added to them to collect the complete Old and New Testament series. Of course, he wrote many other books as well, his "Plain Man" books were essential reading. When I started preaching, I would always read the William Barclay commentary on a passage before I preached it. I have to confess that too often my sermon might have been very similar to what William Barclay wrote. I tend not to read them before I preach now to avoid that temptation to plagiarise!

From The Plain Man Looks at the Lord's Prayer

When you pray, remember that God is your Father and your King and that, therefore, you go to One in whom Love and Power are equally combined.

Lionel Blue

Obviously, I know that Rabbi Lionel Blue was not a Christian but he was a man full of insight into God and people. It was always a brighter day when he was giving Radio 4's "Thought For The Day". If you manage to find his books, he was also adept at writing clear, humorous English. I probably learned more from this Rabbi about what it means to be a Christian than I have from some Christian preachers, so he is included here.

From Bolts From The Blue

I wandered into a strange church a few weeks ago because I wanted to say a prayer for a friend of mine who had died. It seemed her sort of place, a church where she might have worshipped. I said a prayer for her, but I felt an outsider as everyone lined up for communion, and I sat on, an unbaptised and unbelieving Jew.

As soon as I decently could, I tried to hurry away but in the church hall I was waylaid by a woman who put a cup of tea in one of my hands and a big slice of cake in the other. "Come on lovie", she said, "eat it up, we're not as bad as all that"...I suddenly saw all the people in the hall as God meant me to see them and I will never forget them as long as I live.

Leslie F Brandt

Leslie F Brandt is a comparatively new find for me although he has been producing books since the 1970s. In 2018 I was in hospital for a month and needed a fairly long period of convalescence when my mobility was impaired and I couldn't get out and about, not even for church (feels a bit like lockdown practice now). I also couldn't concentrate for any sort of a sustained period. I didn't think that I could face the crowds at a big Sunday morning service so to get myself back in at the shallow end I decided to go to Newington, a smaller congregation who I knew well and who I knew would be understanding of me leaving part way through the service. The Local Preacher that morning read from "Psalms Now" and the freshness of the language really struck home. When I got home, I immediately ordered a copy and then explored Leslie F Brandt's retellings of the epistles, gospels and prophets. I would never use a paraphrase when studying a text but to get a new insight into the meaning of well-known words they are a real boost.

From Psalms Now (Psalm 23)

*The Lord is my constant companion
There is no need that He cannot fulfil.
Whether his course for me points
To the mountaintops of glorious joy
Or to the valleys of human suffering,
He is by my side.*

Milton Jones

You may very well know Milton Jones as the crazy haired king of the one-liner on “Mock The Week” or Radio 4’s “Thanks A Lot, Milton Jones”. You may not have read his “10 Second Sermons”, in which case you have missed a treat.

From 10 Second Sermons

There are lots of Jesus impersonators of course. Unfortunately most of us are still only part-time.

CS Lewis

Where to start? The Narnia books, Screwtape letters, the Science Fiction trilogy, “Mere Christianity”, “Surprised By Joy”, “The Four Loves” and so many more. I suspect that he is the writer who has most influenced my Christian thinking. Maybe his most underrated book is “The Last Battle”, the last of the Narnia series. Outside of the Bible I must have read more books by CS Lewis and about CS Lewis than any other Christian writer, and I can still read, enjoy and find fresh insights in any of the Narnia books.

From The Last Battle

“You see”, said Aslan. “They will not let us help them. They have chosen cunning instead of belief. Their prison is only in their own minds, yet they are in that prison; and so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out.”

From The Screwtape Letters

He cannot ‘tempt’ to virtue as we do to vice. he wants them to learn to walk and must therefore take away His hand; and if only the will to walk is really there, He is pleased even with their stumbles

From The Four Loves

To love at all is to be vulnerable.

Colin Morris

I am not a great fan of the lengthy sermon; I gladly make an exception for Colin Morris. I only had the pleasure of hearing him preach once. The sermon was over 45 minutes and it felt like less than five. I always looked forward to his columns in The Methodist Recorder. I have read many of his books, I think the first was either “Include Me Out” or “Unyoung, Uncoloured, Unpoor”. Both opened my mind to the thought that being a Christian didn’t mean that you always had to find a middle way and avoid upsetting people.

From Mankind My Church

Action is always superior to speech in the Gospels, which is why the Word became flesh and not newsprint.

Tony Palmer

In writing this rambling looked for my Tony Palmer books and could not find them. At some point I must have lent them and never had them returned so these comments depend entirely on my failing memory. Tony Palmer was a music writer who was also a Methodist local preacher. For a long time, the only column I read in the Methodist Recorder was his record (it was a long time ago) reviews. He also wrote books such as “Jesus & the Christian in a Pop Culture” and (I think) “Sounds Of The Seventies”. I do like pop music of many types and I have read many books, particularly on the music of the Sixties and Seventies. Tony Palmer showed, at a time when this was not evident to all, that it was possible to be a Christian and enjoy the music of The Beatles, Rolling Stones and Bob Dylan. He wrote exploring the lyrics of their songs from a Christian perspective. It was reassuring to know that it was not mandatory to disengage from contemporary culture to be a Christian. Of course, as the years progress, my notion of contemporary becomes increasingly whiskery. But I hope that I remember that there is beauty and meaning, to some, in all manner of music. Wesley, Carter, Kendrick and Redman have all been contemporary, they may, or may not, still speak to you.

The only book by Tony Jasper I still own is a worship book he wrote with Pauline Webb (at last, a female!).

From Worship In Every Event

Music’s ability to unite and bring people together is surely one reason why the Scriptures, when they tell people to worship the Lord, suggest it is done in music.

Adrian Plass

When I saw “The Sacred Diary Of Adrian Plass (aged 37 $\frac{3}{4}$)” at a friend’s house I was immediately intrigued, I was a great fan of the Adrian Mole series whose titles were parodied here. When I picked it up and saw the photo of the author I realised that this was the same chap I had often listened to on the late night ITV programme which had a group of people chatting around a kitchen table for five or ten minutes just before the station closed down in for the night (again, it was long time ago). When I read the book, I laughed frequently and recognized a real person struggling to live a Christian life. Things go wrong, he gets things wrong, he doesn’t always find it easy to believe but his love for Jesus shines through. Since then I have read over two dozen Adrian Plass books and have enjoyed and been enriched by every one of them. I was lucky enough to hear him speak at a “Churches Together” event in Sittingbourne. The fanboy in me couldn’t resist asking him to sign my copy of Sacred Diary. His inscription “To Martin, laugh – stay sane” sounds like good advice to me!

From The Sacred Diary Of Adrian Plass (aged 37 $\frac{3}{4}$)”

Feel led to keep a diary. A sort of spiritual log for the benefit of others in the future. Each new divine insight and experience will shine like a beacon in the darkness!

Can’t think of anything to put in today.

...

Couldn't even smile when George Farmer said he wanted to hear a spontaneous burst of applause after the next chorus

Michele Quoist

I think there must have been a Conference directive in the late 1960s that every service by or for young people had to include Michele Quoist’s “Prayers For Life”. The English edition was published in 1963. Yes, the English edition. At last a writer who was not British, Quoist was a French priest, so here is a token nod to diversity. As a teenager I had no idea that the prayers had not been written originally in English, they seemed to be written in a vibrant, down to earth way.

From Prayers of Life (Lord, I have time)

But we must not lose time

waste time,

kill time,

For time is a gift that you give us,

But a perishable gift,

A gift that does not keep.

...

I am not asking you tonight, Lord, for time to do this and then that,

But for your grace to do conscientiously, in the time that you give me, what you want me to do.