

Talk for Evening Prayer, All Saints' Cottenham with Rampton on Zoom

Mission today

25 October 2020, Alison Wedgbury

Readings: Psalm 46 and 1 Thessalonians 1:2-4

The annual Greenbelt Festival over the August Bank Holiday brings together 'Arts, Faith and Justice'. In 2021, the theme will be 'Wild At Heart'. Now obviously, that's the real me. I admit I now stay in a Premier Inn, not a small tent, but would happily go back to the camping field if others from All Saints' would like to join me! In the Greenbelt 'Takeaway' area, many Christian mission organisations and charities have stalls. My 'take away' from those stalls is that 21st century missionaries aim to learn from the people in the field. I don't mean literally in the grassy field at Greenbelt but learning from people who actually live in countries where need is greatest. USPG is one example. It was founded in 1701 as the United Society Partners in the Gospel. They have a long and complex history of missionary activity in Africa that was often combined with colonial rule. In 2020 they focus very much on local partnerships. 'White Christian Saviours' are no longer what's required.

At times religion can narrow our vision. That's a quote from our very own Revd Ian Winterbottom. Do talk to him about how, over the years, he built up connections between church, police and mining families, between Christians, Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus in Derby, then across Europe with other chaplains in industry and civic society. One of his favourite quotes from his Christian chaplain colleagues in Germany was '*Hier arbeitet ein Mensch*' which translates as '*A human being works here*'. That seems to me an excellent strapline for all kinds of mission today.

Let me tell you also about the amazing Andrew Graystone. His 2020 book '*Faith, Hope and Mischief: Tiny Acts of Rebellion*¹' is dedicated to the Greenbelt Festival. He tells stories of helping all sorts of people, mostly on the edges of British society. He's an older Christian in ordinary clothes and often wears a flat cap. He lives in Manchester. For the Greenbelt open air Sunday communion service he writes quirky, funny words which all ages can sing. He calls himself an *Everyday Activist* who at the same time as '*saving the world*' has to '*stop the water coming through the bathroom ceiling...work out my deepest values and get the shopping in at the same time*'. Something dramatic happened to him in 2019. In Christchurch, New Zealand, a white supremacist killed 51 people at the Al Noor mosque and the Linwood Islamic Centre. That Friday, Andrew Graystone went to a Manchester mosque and stood outside holding an old filing cabinet holder. His handwritten words on it said "*You are my friends. I will keep watch while you pray*". He went there on his own. He did not ask for publicity. He went home on his own afterwards. But soon his image went round the world on social media. It became a wonderful witness of Christian love for his neighbours. Like Greenbelt, that was bringing arts, faith and justice together.

So what does all this mean here, in Cottenham and Rampton? One thing to consider, here at All Saints' Church, is that when we're asked to support a 'mission' organisation or person, it's good to find out how they work **with** local people, learning **from** them, rather than doing Christian mission **to** them. That's the 21st century way. It's God's mission, not ours.

Andrew Graystone writes: 'I have a feeling that if I'm ever called to account for my life by God, God won't ask me, "*Why were you not Prime Minister or President or Archbishop?*" God will ask me "*Why were you not Andrew?*". That's my 'takeaway' about everyday 21st century Christian mission from Andrew's book. To paraphrase him: I have a feeling that if I'm ever called to account for my life by God, God won't ask me, "*Why were you never head of a college, or a politician or a vicar?*" God will ask me "*Why were you not Alison?*". I hope I have an answer.

1 Graystone, Andrew, *Faith, Hope and Mischief* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2020)