

1st May

Memory Verse

If we confess our sins **he is faithful and just** to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. I John 1:9.

Something to read from modern church history

On 1st May 2021 Mr Ashley Mendes was inducted into the pastorate of what is now known as Woolwich Evangelical Church in South East London. Behind that simple statement lies a little story best told in the words of the late Mrs Thelma Jenkins, author of *A Breath of Fresh Air*.¹ She called it *God Gave Us... a Fence* and without that fence there would almost certainly be no church in that place today. She wrote:



My earliest recollection of West Woolwich Church, as it was then called, was of a very large building surrounded by a grassy plot. Because of its size and many broken windows it was totally unusable. The church of about 15 members met in a small side room, the prayer-meeting room.

In the late 1980's a bus-load of friends came down from Paul Basset's church in Leicester and boarded up the windows to prevent further deterioration from the weather and so the building remained for several years. Gradually, various members left or went to work elsewhere. In 1990 Pastor Graham Bidston retired, after 25 years of service and faithful ministry. Finally, the last remaining elder transferred to the North of England. In leaving he handed the keys to my husband, John, saying, "Well, you'd better close the church down." There were now only three lady members left – Mrs Osbourne (elderly); Miss Hayes (very elderly) and Mrs Andrews (much younger). They came to be known as "the three ladies" and were very keen to carry on but could hardly do so on their own. To close the church was not in my husband's mind for he knew that with the current spiritual climate, once closed it would never open again as a gospel preaching church, but probably be absorbed into some kind of "Community" development. He and the "three ladies" carried on the services for some time, and very hard going it proved!

There being no boundary to the grounds, both fences having been broken down, the area came to be regarded as the local place for walking one's dog. When someone was reprimanded for this, the indignant reply was, "Well, where else can we walk our dogs?"

The building was continually vandalised and the "three ladies" very often had to spend time sweeping up broken glass before the service could be held. Sometimes there were things far more unpleasant than broken glass! The morning services continued, using taped sermons for the benefit of the three or four persons present. In the purposes of God, in the summer of 1992, two dear friends, Jack and Corah Baker, knowing the plight of the church, joined us in the work, greatly encouraging and strengthening John's hands. The seven of us used to meet every week in Miss Hayes' home in Kidbrooke, basing our prayers on the Lord's promise that "the smoking flax shall he not quench;" Isaiah 42v3. It was certainly a dimly burning flax at this point in time!

It was very evident that no real progress could be made with the grounds unless we had a perimeter fence. John and Jack nearly broke their backs in erecting the first panel of a concrete fence – only to have it broken down within a few days. At first the price of erecting a suitable fence seemed

¹ This lovely little book (ISBN0952931400) makes pleasant reading for older children (and adults) and can be had from Amazon second hand for under £5.

prohibitive but, after investigation, a builder was contacted whose price we felt we could just afford. This was only possible because of the very generous financial gifts, that came to us from College Park Baptist church, through the Rev. Joseph Hewitt, their pastor. Arrangements were made for a fence to be erected round the property. The work was put in hand, the fence at the back was put in place, and – just as we were rejoicing that the work had started – trouble arose! The neighbour on the lower side complained that we should have obtained planning permission. We immediately applied to the council and were told that we could apply for retrospective Planning Permission for a fee of £70.

This we did and were promptly refused. The council said that on no account could we have this industrial type of fencing in a domestic area, and everything that had so far been erected i.e. the whole of the back and the gates at the front would have to come down.

It did not take long to see that we were in the position of Nehemiah when he was trying to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem:

But it came to pass, that when Sanballat heard that we builded the wall, he was wroth, and took great indignation and mocked the Jews. So we built the wall and all the wall was joined together unto the half thereof: for the people had a mind to work. But it came to pass, that when Sanballat, and Tobiah... heard that the walls of Jerusalem were made up, and that the breaches began to be stopped, then they were very wroth and conspired all of them together to come to fight against Jerusalem, and to hinder it. Nevertheless we made our prayer unto our God and set a watch against them day and night.

Among ourselves we referred to our neighbour as “Mrs. Sanballat”, not in a spiteful way, but because it was through Sanballat that Nehemiah was hindered just as the work was half completed.

Now began the spiritual battle. We had received a complete “NO” from the Council and we knew that we could only bring our case before the Lord and ask him to intervene for us in the councils of men. We also “made our prayer unto our God.”



A meeting was held at the Town Hall, [pictured on the left] with many local neighbours coming to support our application but the answer was still “NO”. After this, came a site visit when several of the councillors came to inspect the position. Some were in our favour and we were told we could keep the back fence, but *most certainly could not* continue with the sides or the front. That was something gained, but the back fence was useless on its own. One councillor in particular was very much against us – we called him “Blue Shirt” because we did not know his name, but he always wore a pale blue shirt.

Discussions and meetings continued for many weeks but all the time the seven of us continued in prayer to our God. My husband's favourite verse was Proverbs 21 V1 “The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water; He turneth it whithersoever He will” We truly believed that the hearts of the councillors (little though they knew it) were in his mighty hands and He could indeed, turn them as He wished.

At length we were called to another meeting at the Town Hall, where a final decision was made. We all hoped, in our silly, human way that perhaps “Blue Shirt” would have the 'flu, or sprain his ankle and be unable to attend but the Lord did not heed our ideas. “Blue Shirt” was present at the meeting.

After other cases had been discussed, it was the turn to decide about West Woolwich Church.

Imagine our delight and sense of reverent worship when, after some discussion, “Blue Shirt” himself stood up and said in a remarkably casual tone, “W-e-ll, I don't see why they shouldn't have their fence!”

There were several provisos about painting the fence black, which would entail a great amount of labour because it would need three coats of paint. Also there must be planting of shrubs and bushes so that in five years the fence would not be seen.

With what rejoicing we left that meeting, having literally proved that “the heart of the councillor was in the hand of the Lord” and that He alone had “turned it as the rivers of water” so that “Blue Shirt” (though totally unaware of it) had been made to do His sovereign will. From an uncompromising “NO” the Lord had turned the position completely around.

So the fence was finished and we were able to meet in safety. Time would fail me to tell of the hours and hour AND HOURS that John and Jack spent in measuring up sheets of unbreakable glass and then installing it, and making the grounds pleasant to look on and suitable for the Sunday School children to play in on their Monday Club nights.

This may all seem to be “MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING” but, without the fence the church would, by now, be a total wreck and the site, no doubt, used for anything but its designated purpose – the worship of almighty God and the preaching of his gracious Gospel.

Something to listen to²

Did you listen to some music by Brahms when we did the lesson for April 3rd? In 1878 Brahms sent some piano duets by a quite unknown composer to his own publisher with a note that said:

“When you play them [the duets] through you will be as pleased as I am... Dvorak has written all kinds of music... and is very talented. He is also very poor! I beg you to think the matter over!”

The composer of the duets, Anton Dvorak, (1841-1904) died on 1st May. By the time of his death this “discovery” of Brahms's was one of the most popular composers not just in his own country but all over the world.

Dvorak was from a small village north of Prague in what is now the Czech Republic. His music was already well known inside his native country when Brahms first heard his music and he had won a prize offered by the Austrian government³ each year to a poor young composer. In fact, it was when he entered the competition for the second time that Brahms (one of the judges) saw some of his music and at once recognised how good it was.

Brahms's publisher took the hint and published the *Moravian Duets* by Dvorak. They were popular and so Dvorak's *Slavonic Dances* were published next. Brahms's publisher hoped that Dvorak would produce a publishing success on the scale of Brahms's *Hungarian Dances* that you have already listened to. To his delight he was not disappointed and the *Slavonic Dances* really made the Czech composer's name beyond his native country. The first print run sold out within weeks. Everyone loved the beautiful and memorable tunes and the exciting rhythms which came from the peasant dances of Dvorak's country childhood. While writing the piano duet version of the dances Dvorak had also been preparing a version for orchestra. Find a recording and listen to one of the

2 Adapted from material on the Mothers' Companion flashdrive available from <https://motherscompanion.weebly.com>

3 Austria ruled Bohemia (modern Czech Republic) in those days.

dances.⁴ They were played at orchestral concerts all over Europe and also in America where Dvorak's music became popular as a result. Dvorak was able to visit England in 1884 and here his music was very well liked. He was invited to banquets and his music was featured in newspaper articles. He made nine trips to England altogether and earned enough money to buy a little house in the country in his beloved Bohemia where he and his family were very happy.

Dvorak was a keen train spotter and had loved trains ever since the railway first arrived in his native village when he was a child. He loved talking to the engine drivers and when he was working teaching music in the Prague Conservatory he would stroll down to the station early in the morning to take down train numbers and find out which great engine was going to pull the express train to Vienna. At his new country home he enjoyed breeding pigeons and he loved all birds and birdsong. When later he visited the United States he used the song of one of the most brilliant birds of North America, the scarlet tanager, which you can see in the picture, in one of his best known string quartets:



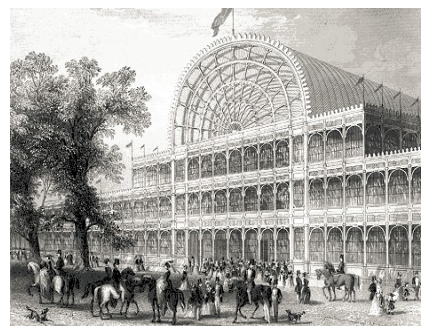
It was in 1891 that Dvorak received a telegram from a rich American lady who wanted to use her wealth (her husband was very successful grocer) to found a Conservatory in America where young composers could be trained. She hoped that in this way a truly American style of music would grow up. Dvorak seemed an ideal choice for Director. He was a brilliant composer who had used the peasant music of his own country in his symphonies and string quartets. Who better to help young American composers find a style that truly expressed *their* national music? Dvorak was attracted by the idea and the generous salary offered and he sailed for America that year.

Dvorak was a great success in America. Everyone wanted to hear his music and he gave many concerts. He was able to give advice about finding an American style. Conscious perhaps that it was the music of the poor peasants among whom he had grown up that had inspired him, he advised young composers to listen to the music of black Americans to gain inspiration for an American musical style. While in the USA he wrote his best known composition the *Symphony from the New World*. However despite enjoying such things as the New York overhead electric railway system, the Czech composer was very home-sick and returned to his native country the following year.

Find a recording of the New World Symphony to listen to.⁵ This is one of the best loved pieces of orchestral music in the world – and with good reason. It is tuneful, exciting, and brilliantly orchestrated. The whole thing takes about an hour. Set aside some special time this week to listen to it all. Doodle if that helps you concentrate on the music. Concentrating on listening to the details of music is very good for your brain!

Something to do

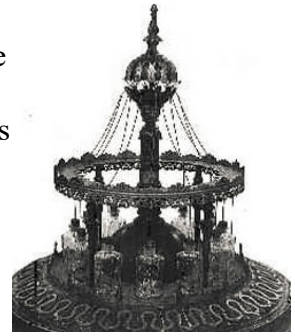
On **1st May** 1851 the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations opened at the Crystal Palace. The exhibition was the idea of the Prince Consort, Prince Albert, and a huge building of glass and iron – rather like an enormous greenhouse or conservatory – was built to house the exhibition. In fact the



4 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WlywT8fKVZA> for instance.

5 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Out5e3OfCvg> for instance.

designer was a gardener, Sir Joseph Paxton (1803 – 1865), and he cleverly adapted his design so that two great elm trees on the site would not have to be cut down – they ended up *inside* the building so it must have felt rather greenhouse-like I think. The exhibits were designed to show the achievements of various nations in every department of human endeavour from machinery to painting. Visitors paid to come inside and marvel at the vast display that included scientific instruments, ceramics, the world's largest diamond, a cast iron piano, fire arms, the complete process of cotton manufacture from the initial spinning to the finished cloth and much, much more.



My favourite exhibit from the display is the Tempest Prognosticator or Leech Barometer designed by the aptly named Dr George Merryweather. He had twelve captive leeches (a “jury of philosophical councillors” he called them) in bottles surrounding a bell. They were arranged in a circle to prevent the leeches feeling the “affliction of solitary confinement.” The bottles had a metal tube sticking out of them. This contained a piece of whalebone connected by a wire to a hammer poised to strike the bell. The inventor explained how it worked:

...into each bottle was poured rain water, to the height of an inch and a half; and a leech placed in every bottle, which was to be its future residence; and when influenced by the electromagnetic state of the atmosphere a number of leeches ascended into the tubes; in doing which they dislodged the whalebone and caused the bell to ring.

The more times the bell rang the more likely it was that a storm was imminent. Did it work? I can't find out but it must certainly have been a sight to behold!

I don't suggest you try to make your own Tempest Prognosticator using bell-ringing leeches but you could certainly hold your own exhibition. Gather together everything you can find that you have made, painted, grown, baked, knitted, written, crafted or made out of Lego recently or even make some things specially for your Great Exhibition. Decide how you can best display your creations. You don't have a crystal palace (although if your house has a conservatory you might be able, with permission, to set it up as a temporary Great Exhibition Hall – that would be fun!) but even a windowsill could house a small exhibition if carefully used. You might need to write some explanations. Dr Merryweather gave a three hour lecture on his invention but a few lines on some neat cards would probably be better and would make your own exhibits very attractive. Most important is an acknowledgement of where your personal creative gifts come from. “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.” (James 1:17) would be a good title to go over everything you have made.

Now think who might like to come along to see what you have in your exhibition. Your parents will enjoy your exhibition, of course, and grandparents, aunts or uncles, a friend from church or perhaps a neighbour – especially if your creative gifts could produce a cup of tea and a slice of cake to go with the exhibits!

What happened to the great Crystal Palace after the exhibition was finished? Find out in the lesson for 7th October!

In the lesson for 27 May is an extract from a letter from Sir David Brewster⁶ about his visit to the exhibition which you might like to read today. After your own exhibition you might like to write a letter to someone who was not able to come to it. You could tell them about what you had on show and who was there.

6 See the lesson for 11th December (Yet to come).