

In the shelter – finding a home in the world - Padraig Ó Tuama

Hello to a book about mindfulness. “In the shelter” is all about learning to say hello, learning to greet yourself, others and God, learning to welcome all the experiences of life – good and bad. Irish poet and theologian, Padraig Ó Tuama, writes with a winsome, delicate charm that makes the reading of this book a complete delight. It is less a book than a conversation; a conversation, a confession even, with a friend who is learning to be so self-aware, and aware of you, the reader too, that you will never feel uncomfortable, even though you will be challenged deeply. The titles of the ten chapters all begin, “Hello to...” and lead the reader gently from “hello to here” and “the beginning”, through imagination, trouble, what we cannot know, the body and the shadow, to the final three themes of change, power and story. I say gently, because the writer’s style is so gracious, so self-deprecating, so humble – in the very best sense of that word – that you will not feel assailed, even when the subject matter is violent, degrading or shameful. The premise upon which the book is based is the idea, learned by the author from a brother at Taizé, where he had fled at a particularly difficult time in his life, that the word usually translated “Shalom” or “Peace” with which Jesus greets the disciples locked for fear in the upstairs room on the first Easter Sunday (John 20:21), could accurately be translated, “Hello”. Within these ten chapters are dozens of other “hellos” – having read the book, I don’t think I will ever use that simple little word again without being aware of what it represents; acceptance, willingness to learn, shalom/peace. The chapters are interspersed with the author’s poems, succinct words, full of truth and grace.

Padraig Ó Tuama has travelled widely and worked in a huge variety of contexts, all of which give colour to his narrative, and from which he draws wonderful stories to illustrate the bigger story. Children and young people with whom he has engaged lend their voices to challenge the way in which we so often see or understand things. He tells of the little girl who, during a church missions week, had heard a story of a station master faced with the choice of letting a train run down a broken line which would lead to the death of all the passengers or re-routing the train onto a line where his own son was playing. The station master chose to save the people at the cost of his child’s death. The story had not, as was intended, filled the girl with awe at the greatness of God’s love for humanity, but rather left her terrified “that my daddy is going to murder me”.

Other poets, writers and theologians are quoted often, and lovers of Tolkien will delight in the way the characters of “The Lord of the Rings” are often called as witnesses to this process of “finding a home in the world”, as the book is subtitled. Bible stories, and in particular Gospel stories, are woven into the text; every time the interpretation is fresh and wise. The good Samaritan (why do we name this story in that way – are we trying to suggest that other Samaritans were not good?), the anointing of Jesus in the home of Simon the Pharisee, the woman who touched the cloak of Jesus and many other characters are given their voice in new ways. Particularly moving is the way Ó Tuama encounters the man known as “Legion” and goes on to liken this man, living with the enforced horror of his name, with his own experiences “as a gay man walking carefully through the halls of God”. Again, grace triumphs over what must have been a temptation to gripe at the unjust, ungodly treatment the author has sometimes known as he has walked that particular pathway through the past forty years of Christendom. Indeed, it strikes me that the reading of this book by many within our Methodist churches would be helpful to us as a denomination, as we discuss and debate the issues presented by homosexuality, in response to the debate of Conference 2014 on the pastoral implications of the same-sex marriage legislation. But the book is not a single-issue book and is worthy of the widest possible readership. Above all, it is a pastoral book, written from the point of view of one who has learned much about identity, compassion, healing and reconciliation.