

BOOK REVIEW

Bradbury, Paul. 2024. *In the Fullness of Time: A Story from the Past and Future of the Church*

Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press
ISBN: 978-1-78622-607-5. £14.99

Reviewed by Nigel Rooms

Some books arrive on one's desk because one knew the author a little, appreciated their approach and was curious about what they had to say (and they were clearly interested in the future of the church). And then on reading the book one realizes that here is a book that truly needed to be written and offers a unique insight into very many questions about ecclesial futures. Such is the case as I ordered and then read Paul Bradbury's new book, *In the Fullness of Time*. It is a short book of only 138 pages which does not wear its obvious scholarship too heavily and is therefore a delight to read; in fact in places it is beautifully written.

Bradbury opens by connecting his purpose in writing to being inspired by James Rebanks' *English Pastoral* (xi), which is a lament for what has been lost through industrial farming, amongst other things, in English rural life while making proposals for its future restoration without retreating into a utopia. So, what we have in Bradbury's book, set out in three sections of "Lamentation, Waiting and Resurrection" (one soon realizes these are not neat sequential categories, but rather they flow in and out of one another) is a reprise of the demise of the place of the (mainly) English rural church in its community and some gently researched "case study" responses to that demise from largely the South and East of England. There are eight of these cases in total, either Bradbury has personal experience of them and/or he explores their contexts and talks to their leaders. And this is not all, because Bradbury also weaves his own autobiographical reflections into the book as we learn how he grew up in a tiny rural community, came to faith, was called to ordination and then discovered the "pioneer" in him that took him to new and experimental places. There is also creative writing and subtle metaphor, parable and poetry alongside evocative line drawings from an artist friend. Bradbury therefore, is a truly creative pioneer

practitioner-scholar, based as he is within Poole Missional Communities on the south coast of England.

There is much wisdom to be gleaned in the book especially about the “fullness of time”, in a church system that is anxious and searching for ever faster, easier solutions to its predicament on the proverbial “burning platform”. God’s time subverts most of that kind of thinking and Bradbury offers evidence for his position from the case studies and his own experience. The book however is also extremely realistic: there are no magic solutions, there is hard work, serious cost and the “wins” are often small, if joyful – I think of the description of an adult baptism – yes just one (40). Bradbury the realist also takes on nostalgia which is a driver of so much of what happens in late-modern Britain and always brings to mind for me Zygmunt Bauman’s concept of *Retrotopia* – the backward-looking opposite of utopia. Thus, without referring directly to movements in the English church which seemingly desire to recreate what was (and there are more than one of these), Bradbury shows us what is possible both from within traditional parish churches and in pioneering experimentation that can and do live alongside each other. In these places, and this is a theme of the book; history and tradition are taken absolutely seriously without becoming absolutes in themselves. The case study priests and pioneers here are “finding a useful future in their past” as I sometimes put it. The examples of how this works throughout the book are particularly instructive.

One question that might be raised is whether the book could travel beyond the shores of England and Britain, since it is a deeply particular and contextual study. I would say a categorical yes to this since the principles that Bradbury elucidates throughout the book are distilled Christian wisdom that could easily travel; all good contextual theology can teach us many things. I suggest that one really useful way this book could be used would be to give it to the sceptical, unconvinced even cynical church member or leader who is open to wondering about what, if anything, is possible for the future of the Christian communities. Bradbury offers realistic and evidenced hope in the God of mission who has not given up on the Church.

About the Reviewer

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