

Summoned by bells

by David Grimwood



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The relationship between the church and ringing sustains a perennial discussion in ringing circles. A presentation to the Central Council meeting in 2018 of contributions from members of the Guild of Clerical Ringers and responses received after has prompted this short series of articles, intended to continue thoughtful conversation while also attempting a look below the surface.

The first explores the implications of bells being in church buildings, the second reflects on the shared experience of ringing, and the third suggests ways of relating the two together.

What bells offer – one sound with many meanings

As he lay dying, Longfellow heard in the sound of bells:

“... something more than a name. For bells are the voice of the church;

They have tones that touch and search The hearts of young and old;

One sound to all, yet each

Lends a meaning to their speech, And the meaning is manifold”

(The Bells of San Blas, 1882).

Whenever bells are rung, ringers perform on a distinctive and public musical instrument, and, as Longfellow noted, create a sound that resonates with all sorts of feelings and experiences in those who hear them. Bells are rung for all sorts of different occasions too, and always create a reaction (though not necessarily positive!). The Vicar of St Giles in Oxford wrote to his ringers back in 1850: “at seasons of domestic rejoicing they ring

forth a Merry Peal, as at a Wedding; or they cheerfully usher in some great festival of the Church; or they announce and celebrate tidings of national success or national joy”.

The ringing of bells is a valued element in the wider public soundscape. Bells sounding out from cathedrals and churches across France (and the UK) during Holy Week expressing solidarity and hope following the ferocious fire at Notre Dame in Paris captured the national news and was heard by hundreds of thousands, devastated yet experiencing a huge range of emotions. National and local events are celebrated and remembered through ringing, from the 1918 Armistice to a passing international cycle race or Olympic marathon. Local people and their stories are remembered in a public setting (sometimes even by inscriptions on the bells themselves), as well as the weekly reminder of Sunday and its significance.

A country priest, Robert van de Weyer, talks about bells:

“... everyone in the village is aware of them. They are gentle and reassuring, yet at times they disturb people.

They have been there a very long time, yet they never go out of date. People are slow to respond to their call, but they are regarded with great love and goodwill. To everyone they are a sign of hope and a source of comfort” (“The Country Church: Guide for the Renewal of Rural Christianity” 1998).

It seems appropriate therefore for bells to be housed in a public building in the landscape that stands for hope, reassurance, continuity and values beyond the immediate. Church buildings contain, and can remind us of, a continuous human story; many hold extensive community memories, through memorials, inscriptions, windows, archives and remembered stories, as well as acknowledging those events which are marked by the ringing of bells.

Church buildings are public in nature, maintained and loved by local people and sometimes also by national bodies and patrons. Being public carries a high level of accountability, not only in legacy terms but for the present, in the form of building safety and a desire to protect historic features, but first and foremost to those for whom the building means so much as a place of worship and a reminder of life’s deeper values. An eminent biblical scholar makes this point from a theological perspective:

“In the [Bible] there is no timeless space, but there is also no spaceless time. There is rather storied place, that is a place which has meaning because of the history lodged there. There are stories which have authority because they are located in a place”. (Walter Brueggemann in *The Land: place as gift, promise and challenge*, 1978).

The resulting accountability can sometimes feel restrictive and bothersome, such as the need for restrictions on ringing or requests

to ring at short notice. However, being answerable to the wider public offers positive opportunities, such as promoting the long-term legacy of ringing, opening up possibilities for involvement and even recruitment. It calls for collaboration rather than a selfish pursuit of private interests. It even allows access to national leverage over planning regulations, heritage funding, legal advice and shared experience. The 16,000 Church of England church buildings are “*a visible expression of the Christian faith and the Church’s continuing presence in local communities across the country, which they serve in many varied ways.*” (Church Buildings Review Group 2015 Report).

Another advantage of ringing as a ‘public’ activity is that it is very cheap. Towers are available rent-free. There is no need to save up and commission rings of bells and build towers for them in order to pursue ringing as a hobby or activity – although of course there is nothing to prevent ringers from doing so, as some have! Because of the public nature of church buildings, their upkeep, heating, lighting and repairs fall on many shoulders other than those of ringers.

However, churches are not just public buildings, they are consecrated spaces; they have a significance far deeper than just places to meet. They provide a setting for the worship of God, a place of invitation and hospitality. It is clear that God is not limited to being in a church; rather it is churches that provide a space where God’s presence is specifically acknowledged. Worship itself is also a public act, open and welcoming for all who care to attend.

The fact that rings of bells are in churches at all reminds us of their fundamental purpose. The inscription on Great Paul, hung in the north west tower of St Paul’s Cathedral in London, expresses that purpose clearly: “*Vae mihi si non evangelisavero*” – translating as “*Woe is me if I do not proclaim the gospel*”. The purpose goes back to Psalm 150 in the Hebrew Bible: “*Praise [God] with the clash of cymbals; with triumphant cymbals praise him*”.

The call to proclaim the living God pre-dates bell ringing in churches, yet bells remind all those who hear them of faith in God, whether announcing worship or simply celebrating Sunday, week by week. The distinctive music of bells expresses the presence of the Christian Church and so the Christian faith, just as the call of the muezzin from a mosque affirms the presence of Islam.

So bells form a public musical instrument, ‘*a strange, wild melody*’ as Longfellow wrote, stirring both personal and public feelings. But primarily when they ring out from churches, bells proclaim Christ’s resurrection, stimulating hope in those who hear them, as he added in the final verse of his poem “The Bells of San Blas”:

*“Out of the shadows of night
The world rolls into light;
It is daybreak everywhere.”*