

I guess one of the advantages of growing up in a home for the elderly is that one somehow has many adopted grandparents. Perhaps when the home was busy it was helpful for my parents to entrust us to one of the residents who would then be charged with entertaining the Bellamy children. And just such a resident lived in room six at The Olives. It is a nice sunny room looking out on to St Paul's Church just across the road. Her name was Mrs Lawson. I can't really tell you anything much about her. It was many years ago – perhaps over forty years. But I loved to spend time in the company of Mrs Lawson and to hear what tales she had to tell. She taught me how to sing Frere Jacques – I can never hear that song today without thinking of Mrs Lawson and sitting in room six. St Paul's Church in Colwyn Bay has a very imposing tower, built in 1910. It was specially strengthened to take a peel of bells, but they were never installed. Just one large bell rings from the tower, and I remember Mrs Lawson saying that if you listened carefully you would hear the bell speak. But that it only says one phrase "come to church, come to church..." and as I listened so I could hear it..."come to church, come to church". It's funny the memories that we have.

When I arrived in University I decided to learn how to ring bells. So I went to St John's Church in Cardiff for a ringing practice. I soon discovered that it isn't quite so easy as it looks, and when the bellrope slid through my fingers and gave me a rope burn where I never imagined it possible, I decided that perhaps this was not for me after all. A little later on, I discovered another aspect of what bells can do. I had arrived in Berkeley in California for my final year of theological college. It was to be a wonderful year in America, and I never enjoyed life more. On the first day, when I was a little jet-lagged and dazed from the long-haul flight, I happened to be exploring the college campus, when suddenly I heard the sound of bells – but quite unlike anything that I had heard before – beautiful music ringing across the city. I decided to go and explore, and my explorations brought me to a huge tower standing 307 feet tall, the third tallest bell and clock-tower in the world. And in the tower 61 bells, playable from a large wooden keyboard – it was my first encounter with a carillon – and once more the fascination grew.

Back in Rhyl then for four years as Curate (down to earth with a bump), and I decided to have another look at ringing bells; so it was up the step of St Thomas' tower and a further lesson – which seemed to be going well until suddenly the rope went out of control, with the sharp order to let go as a stay had broken. This meant that the bell was now swinging through 360 degrees and if I held on I'd be going for a ride up the tower on the end of a rope. It was too much. It was the end of my bellringing career. Now I'm happy to hear them, but don't ask me to ring one!

Coming to Prestatyn five and a half years ago, I discovered that there had recently been an appeal for a new ring of six bells. Frequently people express surprise when I tell them that our bells were dedicated as recently as December 2003. Having heard the digital bells that work with the clock, I was even more amazed when the real bells started ringing – they are a small set – but they're not half loud! And if you listen you'll hear that they speak – and it's the same phrase "come to church".

Well today it's particularly appropriate that we are considering John the Baptist. He was quite a character and he always puts in an appearance just before Christmas. He's not particularly civilised, and I doubt that you would find much to charm you in his personality. He has a sharp tongue and his words are not sweet. "Repent!" says John. Repent, turn around, let go. Here in this lead up to Christmas we have a man out in a desert reminding us that we are sinners. That's an unhappy, disturbing thought. No one likes to be reminded that they are sinners, that they are failures, that they hurt people, that their actions and their speech leave a lot to be desired. Here we are in the midst of our Christmas celebrations and John throws cold Jordan water in our face and calls us to repent.

We hear John speak straight to the point, "You snakes! The axe is ready to cut down every tree that does not bear good fruit". We reassure ourselves that John can't be talking about us. He is really attacking criminals, hoodlums, gangsters, drug pushers - the bad types. He can't possibly be calling us snakes.

Then he turns to each one of us, and he says with a roar, "And don't say, "We have Abraham as our father. My family has always been involved in the church. I generously support the work of my local congregation".

Even the chosen, the enlightened, the insiders, the long time church members, the C and E (Christmas and Easter) Christians, even the clergy, must repent, be turned around to be ready to meet their Saviour. So the challenge goes out to one and all....

John is determined not to let us off the hook, "Repent!" he cries in the wilderness. Down on your knees, this is no time to be proud and self righteous

Is it any wonder that the religious leaders of the time feared him? Is it any wonder that the Herod the king hated him, arrested him, and ultimately chopped off his head – and yet the more they try to silence him the more his words ring forth, reverberating through time and eternity. They could not silence him.

In her campanological detective story ***The Nine Tailors***, Dorothy Sayers writes *"From time to time complaints are made about the ringing of church bells. It seems strange that a generation which tolerates the uproar of the internal combustion engine can be so sensitive to the one loud noise which is made to the glory of God. England alone in the world has perfected the art of change ringing and the true ringing of bells by rope and wheel and will not lightly surrender her unique heritage."*

The enemies of the Christian faith have always been keen to silence the bells. The phrase "let not the Greeks ring their bells" appears in the instructions of Mehmet the Conqueror after the capture of Constantinople. He was followed by the Bolsheviks who melted down vast numbers of church bells to forge into the great machine idols of their godless state. The ringing of bells was entirely banned in 1930 to be replaced by the noise of motors and furnaces. But could they keep them silent?? No, and the bells ring out today in Mother Russia as much as ever they did.... they couldn't silence them

John the Baptist calls us to repent, and points us to Jesus. And as Jesus said "There was no greater man born of a woman than John the Baptist." Why? Because he pointed to Christ. And I put it to you that anyone who points to Christ in whatever way, follows in those great footsteps of John the Baptist. So when next you hear the bells rung by Prestatyn's merry band of bellringers, Ffrangcon, Harry, Simon, John, Sylvia, Chris, Elaine, David, Dennis, Joan, and Joel, listen for the echo of the call of the Baptist whose life's work and ministry was to call people to repentance and to point them to Christ.