

The new Birmingham Library was opened a year ago by Malala Yousafzai. Malala has been in the news again recently as the joint winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. She was told of the award during a Physics lesson at Edgbaston High School for Girls where she is studying for her A-levels. In her speech, last year, she spoke about the power of books. She told how in her school in Swat she was top of her class and was very proud of herself because she had read nine books from the library. And then she said:

*Here people tell me that they have read hundreds of books. It does not matter how old they are, they take a keen interest in reading, even children of six and seven years have read more books than me. Now I have challenged myself that I will read thousands of books and I will empower myself with knowledge. Pens and books are the weapons that defeat terrorism. I truly believe the only way we can create global peace is through not only educating our minds, but our hearts and our souls. This is the way forward to our destiny of peace and prosperity. Books are very precious - some books can travel you back centuries and some take you into the future. In some books you will visit the core of your heart and in others you will go out into the universe. Books keep one's feeling alive. Aristotle's words are still breathing, Rumi's poetry will always inspire and Shakespeare's soul will never die. There is no better way to explain the importance of books than say that even God chose the medium of a book to send his message to his people."*

I have really enjoyed exploring Birmingham Library and am proud to be living and working in a city like ours which places this, together with the Rep and Symphony Hall and the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery right at the heart of its life. I hope, too, that local libraries will continue to thrive and develop. In Hall Green we are very blessed to have easy access to both Hall Green Library and Yardley Wood Library. (Times are hard though, and staffing, funding and opening hours have been reduced.) Some say that money would be better spent on other things, now that people are doing a lot of their reading on the web and by means of e-books. But libraries are not just places to borrow books. I can think of at least two reasons for celebrating libraries as places to go (and there will be countless more).

Firstly, it is a public space, and a public space dedicated to learning. When children go they may go with their parents, or their friends and they are inspired by other people to look at things they might not have looked at otherwise. Meetings can happen in libraries, and libraries can be the focus for all sorts of cultural events that not only keep our history told and alive, but also, because culture changes with a changing population, enable developments in culture to happen together. I may go into the library, say, and see a friend from the Hindu community who is advertising a concert of traditional Indian music. So I go along and find myself enriched by the experience.

Secondly, libraries are places to inspire you to explore, and to keep you curious about the world of books and many other aspects of culture. When I was at university I used to study in my room. But then I discovered it was much more inspiring to go to the University Library. There, I knew, I could find a corner to study and could take myself to the shelves to pick out books which, being arranged next to books I knew about because they were on the same topic, tempted me to open them, to skim, to spot little gems of interesting insights. As I made my way to the stacks I might pass through the ancient manuscripts reading room. Here, under specially controlled conditions, priceless manuscripts were available for readers to study - scraps of texts from scrolls penned nearly 2000 years ago. Some of the most precious achievements of the human mind there to challenge, to encourage and to inspire us to continue to build on and to explore further.

Yes, libraries, books, learning, questioning, exploring, arguing, proposing all serve to empower each of us to relate, to connect, to change our mind, to write and tell. No wonder extremists in every epoch have hated libraries. From the burning of the great library of Alexandria to the attempt to silence a fifteen year old girl in Pakistan. Libraries, books, learning and knowledge allow us to have our own views. When you want to control people's views you shut down the library - or even, in our age, attempt to block internet access. (Here's a new and valuable freedom to explore.)

In our house we are book mad, and not ashamed of it! Books in the bedrooms, books on the landing, books in the toilets, books in the kitchen, books in the study, the dining room, the garage, the side passage way! I tend to be reading 3 or 4 books at a time. (You don't always want to be reading religion, nor biography, nor a book about food or the natural world or history or poetry - so I have books in a variety of styles going. A poem in the toilet, a bit of theology while giving platelets, a story before going to sleep! ) Nothing beats the opening of a new adventure in this way. And how satisfying to finish a book and wonder what to read next.

So, yes, let's celebrate books. And, as Christians, let's celebrate the book of books, that compendium of books in one volume we call The Holy Bible: history, myth, prophecy, drama, correspondence, gospel, apocalyptic vision, proverbs, songs, love poetry - all at our finger tips, and all ready to inspire, to challenge, to argue with, to ignore, to puzzle, to make us laugh or cry.

Now what was I reading?!...

Martin Stephenson