

The Once and Future Kingdom

A glimpse of the past and future
of The Religious Society of Friends

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'Our birthright is prophecy and the Kingdom'
(Jonathan Dale, Swarthmore Lecture 1996)

Introduction

‘Learn from the past, live in the present and look to the future.’

This concluding sentence from a series of articles written by Ormerod Greenwood in 1964 is still relevant after forty-five years.

It reminds me of a sentence I heard in ministry long ago: ‘Every generation has to forgive the past and we have to forgive our own past.’

Certainly, we must not be imprisoned by the past and when Quakerism is true to itself it has given us freedom to recognise new light. However, we often cling to ideas and customs just because they are familiar. In fact, we are often like the lady who protested against men having beards and ended her protest with this remarkable sentence: ‘ Men should leave their faces as God intended them to be.’

Piety with Enthusiasm

It is beyond the scope of this essay to deal with the life of George Fox. It is sufficient to say that he lived from 1624-91, the son of a weaver. He was brought up in a devout Christian home and he knew the Bible so well that people joked that if the text had been lost, George could have written it from memory. For years before his conversion he had travelled the country, discussing religion with every clergyman and lay person who would talk to him. None could satisfy him or bring him into touch with the living reality he sought. Everywhere he looked he saw religion in terms of outward forms and ceremonies, based on the experiences and revelation of past ages that had hardened into dogma. So when the moment of conversion came to Fox it was not through the Scriptures or through the teaching and fellowship of the Church, but inwardly from God.

To describe their experience, Early Friends used Christian and Biblical imagery since this was the common language of their day and they knew no other. 'So Fox could sound like a Puritan preacher or even like a modern day evangelical' writes Rex Ambler in his book *Truth of the Heart* and he continues: 'But his intention was something quite different: to bring back people to an essentially wordless experience of union with God...He was not, for example, presenting a teaching that people were expected to believe. He was telling them, rather, to do something, because what they needed to make them free and fulfilled as human beings was in them already, without them having to imbibe it from a church or teaching outside. It was an inner awareness which would enable them initially to see themselves as they were in reality, beyond the deceptions of 'the self', but then also to see what they and others could become'.

At the heart of the message was the conviction that men and women should look within for the encounter with God. Everyone has the capacity to respond to God. Various terms were used for this : inward Christ – inward Light – the Seed – that of God – and there were others.

It is important to note that Friends do not claim that the inner awareness brings certainty. What it does do is bring discernment and, if we are faithful, to a gradual unfolding of awareness and a clearer understanding of God's purpose for us. Revelation is now and continuous. It was and is a universalist message. Many of those who lived before the Christian era or outside Christendom and had no knowledge of the Bible have responded to the divine principle within them. Obedience to the Light within, however it may be described, is the real test of faithful living.

So George Fox, a somewhat depressed and hesitant young man, was transformed into a prophet of power and energy surviving harsh imprisonment and physical violence, travelling unceasingly throughout the British Isles, Europe and America. He carried the message that all men and women can have immediate access to God and that this encounter must find expression in every aspect of daily life.

The 'crowning mercy' of Cromwell's victory at Worcester in 1651 gave the Puritans complete power and they continued to rule until 1660. They had no sympathy with the emerging Society of Friends. In fact, they disliked those obstinate evangelists who refused to fight, swear oaths, pay tithes and church rates or to take off their hats to their betters. Their insistence on holding meetings, whatever the law might say, made them rebels against authority, whatever government was in power.

The Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 brought the Church of England into dominance again. The penal laws, which were directed at all non-conformists, were not changed. The Quakers, because of their extreme views, endured great suffering. The King (Charles II) did intervene to help Friends on several occasions, but the laws involving fines, corporal punishment and imprisonment were firmly in place until 1688.

The guns fell silent, but the Civil War had not solved all the questions it had raised. A number of small groups had sprung up – Ranters, Diggers, Fifth Monarchy men and others. All were calling for attention with absolute certainty that they were right and others wrong. Some people were full of hope. Others were in despair and dreaded more violence. Over all there was Calvin's teaching that emphasised the shadow of original sin and the depravity of man. Perhaps we might hijack a famous phrase and say:

'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair ...'

A Tale of Two Cities – Charles Dickens

The Humble People of God called Quakers

The humble people of God called Quakers settled down in the next two centuries to a quieter life, although it was not always an easy one. They were still subjected to very severe treatment from church and state for their failure to obey unjust laws and goods were constantly seized to cover the money owed for fines.

The interest in public affairs which had been characteristic of Friends like George Whitehead, John Bellers and William Penn had been replaced by concern for their own affairs.

The vision of a new revelation for the whole world had faded into a recognition of the Society as one sect among many. At this time, Friends were influenced by 'Quietism', a type of religious thought which denigrated human reason and activity. The importance of waiting humbly before God was emphasised so much that withdrawal from the world seemed a true expression of Quakerism. Later in the eighteenth century the Society was drawn into contact with the Evangelical revival. As a result, Friends ceased to think of themselves as a special group of people. Energies were released for work at home and abroad. The Bible was regarded as the Word of God and therefore literally true. In his book 'English Social History', G.M. Trevelyan writes:

'The finer essence of George Fox's teaching common to the excited revivalists who were his first disciples and to the 'quiet' Friends of later times was surely this – that Christian qualities matter much more than Christian dogmas. No church or sect had ever made its living rule before. To maintain the Christian quality in the world of business and of domestic life and to maintain it without pretension or hypocrisy is the great achievement of these extraordinary people.'

The late Victorian period saw a rediscovery of the original Quaker message which had become distorted or ignored. The famous essay by John Stevenson Rowntree played a big part in this change and it was one of the influences which led to the Manchester Conference of 1895. A new young leadership emerged and we have been living ever since in the glow of that experience.

Now we are approaching our fourth century, what does the future hold for us?

The Widening Vision

Fox 'connected the loftiest thoughts and the commonest obligations alike with a personal sense of a divine communion. He made each member of his society responsible for his brethren. He opened to all, without distinction, the opportunity for spiritual influence' (Bishop Westcott in a sermon preached in 1888).

There is danger that in this secular age we may lose the sense of divine leading.

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For Friends who feel unease about non-Christians entering our Society, remember that in 1678 Robert Barclay, speaking of the Universal Church, said:

'There may be members, therefore, of this Catholic (Universal) Church both among heathens, Turks, Jews and all the several sorts of Christians, men and women of integrity and simplicity of heart, who, by the secret touches of this holy light in their souls enlivened and quickened, thereby secretly united to God and there-through become true members of this Catholic (Universal) Church.'

One of the important questions modern Friends have to face is 'How Christian is the Society?'. Should we admit people of other religions? What about Humanists? What do we think of Jesus? Do we believe that he came to die for our sins? Why is prayer not often heard in our Meetings for Worship?

We know that to these and similar questions there are many differing replies, so what follows is inevitably the thoughts of one member.

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I do not think God entered this universe with the birth of Jesus. From the beginning, God has been indwelling in the universe. He is here now. He always has been and always will be.

And from the beginning, continuous revelation, disclosures of reality, have been poured out for everyone to receive as far as they are able. Keith Ward says 'Revelation is not an infallible and clear vision but a continual urging of the human mind beyond present perceptions to become receptive to broader and deeper insights.'

It is interesting to notice how this can be seen in other spheres. To take a couple of examples :- In the early 18th century the young gentlemen going on the grand tour, making their way to Italy and Greece had the blinds of their carriages pulled down as they passed through Switzerland so that they would not see the barbarous, uncultivated scenery. By the end of the century, however, the 'wildness of nature' was beginning to be admired and the Romantic Movement was opening their eyes to the fact that mountains are beautiful. The other example is that of John Constable, the landscape painter. He refused to follow the conventions of landscape painting in which the use of certain colours was the rule to follow in all circumstances. When a friend urged him to obey tradition and paint his foregrounds in the mellow brown of an old violin, Constable picked up a violin and put it on the grass to show the difference between the fresh green and the brown tones demanded by convention. These two examples were disclosures of reality and they often come through poets and artists as well as through the holy prophets, which St Luke says 'have been since the world began'.

I believe that the mission of Jesus was to open our eyes and quicken our understanding so that we recognise that the Kingdom is within us and around us. As St. Luke puts it :-

'To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.' (Luke 1:79)

For us in the West, the Hebrew prophets and psalmists have been a source of revelation. I think they have powerfully influenced us by their sense of holiness and righteousness of God and the ethical demands laid upon us. They saw clearly man's lack of response to God and sometimes they saw God as punishing or vengeful. But at their highest they reached the concept of a loving God who was not alienated or separated from his people. Once in an after -Meeting conversation a liberal Jewish friend who sometimes worshipped with us asked me if I had heard of Rabbi Jonathan. I hadn't and all I know now about his life is that he died in 289 A.D. In a sermon, the Rabbi said that the ministering angels wanted to sing a hymn of triumph at the destruction of the Egyptians in the Red Sea. But God said ' My children are drowning in the sea and you would *sing*?' The quaintness of the words should not cause us to ignore the powerful insight of this man who grasped there are no special people closer to God than others, but all are God's children, held in his love and compassion.

Why is it that so often we find it difficult to receive new disclosures? I think it is our self-centredness, our self-will and, in a modern phrase, 'me-in-the-middle'. This egotism goes with us into all our relationships, our work, even Meeting and its activities. And by extension we are often caught up in group egotism: 'Our lot is better than yours'. And, of course, family egotism, such a powerful instinct - *my children, my husband, my wife*.

George Fox knew this very well – he called it ‘the veiled mind’:- ‘When your minds get taken up with something external, without reference to the power (within you) it covers and veils what is pure in you.’

I would like to quote William Penn’s words about George Fox :- ‘Above all he excelled in prayer. The inwardness and behaviour and the fewness and fullness of his words have often struck even strangers with wonder’.

So there can be words in Quaker prayer and there used to be a warning in earlier editions of Quaker Faith & Practice not to run on with many words as if God needed information and also to be cautious in using too often ‘the high and holy name of God’. Perhaps they were thinking of Friends like the one in a Northern meeting who is supposed to have started a prayer with the words ‘Oh Lord we know that thou hast read in yesterday’s Manchester Guardian....’ Or perhaps they had heard of the travelling evangelist in America. ‘A finer prayer’ said the report in the local paper ‘was never addressed to a Boston audience’.

There is silent prayer as we gather in Meeting. For some there will be movement towards imageless prayer as we try to centre down. For others there will be silent affirmation of familiar words and texts, images of God which the most orthodox believers would recognise. When we reach a deep level words and phrases and symbols have no power to separate us. And I think such silent communion, rightly understood, includes all aspects of prayer. ‘We pray not to change God’s will but to bring our wills into correspondence with his’.

There are occasions in Meeting where a specific need is mentioned. We may be asked to unite with people in trouble or pain and the phrase most likely to be used is ‘Let us hold them in the Light’. This attitude is expressed in a poem by R.S. Thomas:-

‘...if you will purge yourself
Of desire and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf’

Psalm 123 says.. ‘as the eyes of a maiden unto the hand of her mistress, so our eyes wait upon the Lord our God’. And again, a sentence from Kirkegard : ‘The true man of prayer only attends’.

Does this mean that the trivial round and the common tasks which fill our lives are outside the scope of prayer ? There are Quakers who think it is incongruous to talk about the ‘will of God’ applied to human concerns. They are uncomfortable with some of the Bible teaching which suggests that God is a person who intervenes to punish, a God who can get angry and who expects praise and sacrifice. They see these ideas – and here I would agree with them – as primitive, stumbling steps towards understanding. However, for myself, I can reconcile the thought of God, infinite, eternal, transcendent, with the spirit of love, involved with us here and now. This came to me from an experience I had many years ago. Before we come to that, I would say that to bring ourselves as we are in the actual circumstances of our lives is to open ourselves to the possibility of change. We may gain a new perspective as our thoughts are purified in the Light. Of course our ideas and feelings may be too stupid for that

to happen, like the boy who was heard praying earnestly 'Oh God make Rome the capital of Turkey' because that's what he had put in his exam paper that morning. But there is a story of a priest discussing the outline of a service for a day of prayer during the Second World War. One man said that he wanted to pray for the Air Force so that it would be able to destroy every German city so that no more of our children would be murdered. The priest nodded acceptance and said 'Will you put that into a petition?' But the paper in front of the man remained blank. And then he said 'I can't say that in a prayer. I suppose I didn't really want what I said'.

'I didn't think you did,' said the priest, 'We'll find words to pray for all children'.

And so to my parable of prayer. At the time it didn't strike me as having any significance and I very soon forgot all about it. It was years later that the memory of it rose spontaneously in my mind and it seemed then, as it does now, full of meaning for me. It was March 1939. I was attending a quarterly meeting of a women's organisation. At the end the Chairman said 'There are some letters from the Queen – will the following branches please come up and collect them..'

'Did she say from the Queen?' I said to the woman beside me.

'Oh yes' she said, 'My branch had one a year ago'. By this time my neighbour returned, smiling broadly.

'Oh you must hear this – it's so quaint.' And the letter from a man in Australia went something like this:-

'My dear Queen, I do not want to give you any trouble, but the next time you happen to be in Hallgate I wish you would call and see my brother. It's either York Road or York Crescent, number 20 or it might be number 24. I've lost touch since my dear wife died. She used to write all the letters and cards and writing isn't in my line. Now my sight is going and I'm almost housebound, I think a lot about the old days and I would like my folks to be in touch with me. I should be so glad if you would do this for me.'

The June meeting came round and over tea I met up with the girl who had collected the letter. 'What happened about it?'

'Oh it was very jolly,' she laughed, 'We found the family, though they'd moved. The brother was dead but his widow was going strong and there were grandchildren and even a couple of greats. We arranged to send photographs of them all and we got in touch with the nearest branch in Australia and they're visiting the old chap.'

'I wish our letter had been like that' said someone else at the table. She told us of an outburst of hate and bitterness written by a woman who lived in one room of a shabby rundown house. She was unmarried but she had a son – a little boy of about ten. She had sent him on an errand to the corner shop opposite but he had run in front of a bus and was killed. At the inquest, the driver was exonerated from all blame – no one could have avoided the child. But the mother was angry and she had demanded that the Queen should intervene and see that the driver was hanged. There had been a reply: 'The Queen has asked me to express Her Majesty's sympathy with you in your sorrow. It is not possible for the King to set aside any verdict in a court of law. Moreover, if the driver was made to suffer how would that help you? The Queen is asking some people to call on

you and Her Majesty hopes that with their help you may make new friends and re-build your life'. So two members had gone to see the woman. They went in the evening after their work, but she was out. The two sat down on the stairs and waited and waited. Eventually she came and they had some talk with her. It was not a very satisfactory conversation but the branch had kept up contact, with weekly visits and were arranging a holiday for her.

I said this was June and the next meeting was fixed for September 1939 and you won't be surprised to hear that it was cancelled. I don't think I saw any of those people again. So the story is unfinished. I don't know what happened. Curiously enough this was the first aspect of this parable that struck me. It seems to me that we know so little – we see reflections of reality darkly and we know – we can only know in part .

But then other thoughts came flooding in. How foolish – how incongruous were those letters. How little the writers understood. But if the stupidity and the absurdity were real – something else was real also, something that reflected activity in the spiritual realm. I find it hard to find words to express it, but there is a hint in the Anglican collect for the Feast of St. Michael and All Angels: 'Oh, everlasting God who hast ordained the services of angels and men in a wonderful order.' Suddenly I glimpsed a great network – perhaps today I ought to say 'internet', linking together all created things – the living and the dead alike – interacting with each other, moved by the inflowing energy of the Holy Spirit of God. So I think prayer is a recognition that we are part of this creative process through which we give and receive. There are great forces of power beyond our understanding. The psalm says 'He makes his angels spirits, his ministers a flaming fire.' But we too, equally with them, can be messengers and servants.

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Voluntary work will contrive to have an honoured (and useful!) place in our Meetings. But there is no reason why we should not have more paid workers in new fields such as treasurer-ship, fund-raising, children's work, clerk or clerkship team.

To be good employers and to maintain standards of excellence in all aspects should be recognised as a priority.

We need too (on appropriate occasions) to accept the leadership of expert committees and qualified individuals. Too often Friends, when presented with carefully worked out decisions, insist on going back to the beginning. This happens at all levels.

We must retain the idea that business meetings are Meetings for Worship, but I must confess that I agree with a Friend who said ' The Quaker business method is a beautiful and sensitive instrument, but it is not at its best when dealing with the colour of the door in the cloakroom'. Surely, the solution is to practice discernment, enabling us to recognise when decisions should be accepted and when they should be deferred. To be able to see the difference between a mountain and a molehill might be useful too.

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A few years ago I heard some interesting accounts of a revival in the Coptic Church of Egypt. We heard of active social work, an increase in religious vocations and even some experiments in horticulture that aroused interest within the Egyptian Government. But the Coptic Church in Egypt cannot make converts. It is against the law.

So what about all this energy and enthusiasm streaming into all aspects of the Church's life? It is directed at the existing members, the lapsed members and the children of members who may be drifting away.

Has this anything to say to us? I believe it has. Of course it is splendid to have Quaker Quests (I hope we shall still be having them in a hundred years time!) and there are lots of Meetings with real concern for outreach. But should we not give more attention to the nourishment of the people we already have? One trend that is very likely to develop is the abolition of Membership. Already it means much less than it did, for attenders (folk who regularly worship with us) often work exceedingly hard for us, particularly in our local meetings. I have even heard of a non-member acting as Clerk and I was told he wrote very good minutes.

This means that we would have to make very careful arrangements for new people. It is already a suggestion that reports on applications for membership should be the responsibility of a group rather than two people. This needs a lot of thought, but I expect that the attention of Friends will be alerted to this in the future.

I suggest that Quaker schools could be used more. There are links forged between schools when, for example, an exchange of pupils takes place between Eton College and state schools. This is something that could be started or developed so that Quaker ideas could be circulating among tomorrow's citizens.

The Society did not always heed the warnings of wise Friends. There was Margaret Fell on the plain dress – 'a poor silly gospel' she called it. The attitude to drama, fiction, music and the arts was negative. We are putting a lot of things in a better perspective now. But we need watchfulness so that we can hear the injunction 'Think it possible that you may be mistaken'.

We noted earlier that Quakerism has a universal message. This makes Friends able to contact other religions with ease. The Society has a great part to play in bringing people in our 'global village' together. In the pursuit of this aim, I hope there can be more Quaker centres in trouble spots and places where cultures and religions meet.

But we cannot do everything – a fault perhaps in some expressions of Quaker zeal. Often we shall find our place supporting others who are called in similar ways to us.

And we do not seek to impose our belief system on other people. As a group of early Friends said, expressing their hope for the future:- ‘that no footsteps may be left for those that shall come after to walk by example, but that all may be directed and left to the truth, in it to live and walk and by it to be guided...that our pathway may be as the way of a ship in the sea, which no deceit can follow or imitate.’ (Group of Friends in 1659).

It is easy to reflect on the past: a little harder to put into words expectations of the future.

Just for a moment, pause. In imagination climb Pendle Hill and stand where George Fox had a vision of a great people waiting to be gathered. We look out on a world scene, full of violence and a cacophony of voices proclaiming different needs and ambitions.

But as Martin Buber says in his book *The Way of Man*: ‘Here where one stands, we can let God in’.

And because Friends have always maintained that what people do is more important than what they say, let us end with St.Paul’s ringing words:

‘If we live by the Spirit, by the Spirit let us also walk.’

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