

**' A time to take forward our faith and to renew our work in society'**

Treasures of wisdom and practical love are to be found in the Society of Friends- but very few people know this. Why? Maybe because, in a real desire to respect the integrity of others, Friends have leant too far in the direction of permissiveness- like a parent afraid to spoil a relationship with a loved child by speaking out. Perhaps it is time for all of us to hear more from Friends. As a Society which emphasises the nonsense of attempting to let our lives speak if we are out of communion with our brothers and sisters, Quakers have the resources to extend centuries of good practice of inclusion into attempts to understand other Christian family members and many Friends do this, as active members of CTBI and informally. It seems to me that a continued deliberate distancing of Friends from other Christian denominations, necessary at the beginning of the movement as for young adults leaving home, indicates now an unQuakerly unwillingness to address Truth in a spirit of reconciliation. This seems rather similar to a middle-aged 'child' refusing to acknowledge parents who do not do everything their way. Reading the Friends website, I was struck both by the goodness and integrity of Friends' beliefs and by a puzzling re-iteration of Quaker difference from other Christian denominations. Different worshipping traditions and emphases in belief should not blind us to the Truth we share; I am persuaded that until the Society takes its place as a hugely significant and potentially transformative member of Christendom, we shall all remain the poorer.

Speaking with Canon Paul Oestricher on the subject of his dual membership of the Society of Friends and the Church of England, I was impressed, though not surprised to learn that this had raised no real difficulties for him. I believe that the image of Quakerism as a silent chapel within the cathedral of Christendom was introduced to me during this conversation. Reflection on this has led me to observe that this 'chapel' seems to have French windows, rather than a wall on its outer side, welcoming many who would hesitate or feel unable to come in through the main door. Would that there were more French windows on the outer walls- but there are others in other chapels belonging to all Christian denominations. What concerns me at the moment is the interior door into the cathedral. Is this firmly shut, or perhaps sometimes to be found propped open so that, maybe, the music of children's voices or the faint waft of incense (the prayers of the people) can reach the silent worshippers? We all have so much to learn from Friends' witness to the Inner Light, the promptings of love and truth in our hearts, the plain speech and integrity which, against the odds, shift the tarnished machinery of so-called civilisation and usher in true peace, the care for marginalised and disadvantaged, the simplicity of lifestyle. Most of all, in my opinion, the Church could learn from trying to emulate Quaker meetings for business- what a refreshing alternative to many a P.C.C!

However, over the centuries, there have also been others, in the Church searching for those qualities of Christianity for which George Fox searched. John Chrysostom (4th century) advised, 'Adorn the altar with fine linen if you will, but do not forget your brother who is outside and without a coat. For he is a temple of far greater value' (Quoted by Michael Ramsay 'The Gospel and the Catholic Church' London: Longmans Green & Co., 1956 pp145-6). Benedict (6<sup>th</sup> century) made similar assertions, such as the kitchen utensils being as holy as the communion vessels and

emphasised ( with Brother Lawrence) the sacramental everyday experience of living in love and peace, both in frantically busy kitchens and other areas of considerable strain in monastic life. In his description of listening while eating in silence, Benedict asserts that the monks should be very attentive to each others' needs. 'We are to listen intently for the Word of God and be aware of those around us at the same time. Either one without the other is incomplete Christianity.' "Mother Theresa, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King belonged to the same imperfect Church as we do. George Fox rightly railed against the hypocrisy and malpractice of many in the Church, together with Wesley, Booth and many other Reformers. The Church has ignored these and many similar words of wisdom at her peril, but where does that leave us today? Peacelovers down the ages have listened and profited from the observations and struggles of humble and holy men and women and if people of integrity combine their commitment and experience to realise the challenges of achieving justice and peace we are more likely to be successful. It should not be necessary to compromise essentials; what we do need to rediscover is that what binds us is greater than what divides us. If, in the past, the Church has been spectacularly stubborn and stupid in its refusal to engage and listen to the honest objections of Friends to the Church's worst excesses, are we to assume, as a Society that this will always be so? Without the help of Friends and other prophetic voices raised in protest and lives of integrity throwing light on our shabby second-hand ritualism, the Church cannot live out the calling expressed so clearly in ~~Quaker Faith and Practice~~ <sup>the Advice and Queries</sup> ~~the~~ <sup>to strengthen its witness (p 2)</sup> ~~duty.~~ "As members of the worldwide church of Christ, try to strengthen its witness."

I am listening to the voices of Young Friends, speaking, I know, also on behalf of many older Friends, who are horrified at the suggestion that the Society of Friends should identify itself more closely with the Church; 'Yes' they say 'We can see how this could benefit the Church but it would be very detrimental to Quakers. One of the Society's greatest strengths is its open-minded, unconditional acceptance of those who find the creeds and formality of Church to be a significant problem. How can being associated with an institution which has failed in so many ways possibly help Friends or help those outside the Society to be encouraged to come in? Would they not be put off, as we are?'

My response to these very real objections is that Friends need not fear that in becoming more 'Christian' they would lose their unique identity. No-one is suggesting programmed Meetings for Worship or any watering down of the Peace Testimony; rather that, while living in the summerhouse in the garden all year round, Friends might also respond to the invitation to find themselves a congenial space within the main family house. Continuing to see the summerhouse as base, some will be content to remain there all the time, but would encourage those who wish, to spend time (perhaps sharing meals, quietly appreciating the aesthetics or in discussion) in the house. This is, of course, the experience now of many Friends fully involved in the work of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland; and notably Rowena Lovrance's service as Chair.

However, my young Friends know that this is not all I am suggesting. There is more to be discovered in the house than occasional visits can uncover, and, while all the furniture and ornaments- and, dare I say it, the manners and dress of some members of the family- may be offensive to Friends, there is a sense of belonging to an interesting bunch of people which is surprisingly cheerful. Odd and rude some may undoubtedly be, but there is something about family which is deeply reassuring. George Fox saw himself as the 'disturber of the comfortable and comforter of the disturbed', which we are all called to be.

So why fuller integration into the Church? Over the past ten years, when my worship has been in steeple-houses more than in Meeting houses, I have been surprised and encouraged to discover that mainstream is actually quite Quakerly, and even Friendly in places. Facing the other way, it also cheers me mightily to read on the Quaker website that 'Christ's life demonstrates the full truth of God' and to read a description of Meeting for Worship as Friends 'waiting in their inmost hearts for the touch of something beyond their everyday selves....listening for the quiet voice of God' because this seems a most beautiful summary of what all worshippers' attitudes, in whatever tradition, should be. But this leaves me confused because there is amongst Friends a certain reluctance to use the name of God or Christ. Open-mindedness which seeks 'that of God' in all and refuses glibly to define the indefinable, is necessary to produce a balanced understanding of the nature of God but ignoring the 4000 year heritage from which Quaker belief emerged seems not only disrespectful, but downright daft. The Bible and Church history is a very mixed bag, but without it the Society will surely lose its moorings. George Fox asserted, 'There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition'. The Church's poor show in his day didn't lead him to reject Christianity and it appears that a temptation to throw out the baby with the bathwater has only crept into the Society over the past fifty years- a reflection of the same trend in society as a whole. Selective individualism will eventually produce narrowing, rather than widening of belief.

Returning to the image of the house and the summerhouse; many in the Church would welcome the insistence of the quiet worshippers surrounded by natural beauty, that God's Spirit is not confined to certain places, occasions or people. If they knew that the summerhouse was there many would come from the house to join Meetings for Worship. However, they might be a bit surprised to see that the silent worshippers didn't seem interested in visiting the treasures in the house, such as the library or in attending discussion groups, concerts and services. It would seem odd to have all those resources on the doorstep and to continue to prefer only the summerhouse experience.

Friends have so much to share with the mainstream Church. Can we take forward our faith and renew our work in society together?

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