

MEETING FOR WORSHIP BROADCAST FROM SUTTON MEETING

January 1980

George Gorman:

Broadcasting a Friends' Meeting for Worship presents a problem because a Quaker Meeting is based on silence and you can't broadcast silence. We are overcoming this difficulty by playing music during the silent period of the Meeting. You will hear it, but the group of Friends sitting quietly in the meeting house will not. They are sharing in a Quaker Meeting similar to those that will be held today all over the country. The meeting house isn't like a church or chapel. It has no pews, pulpit or altar: its just a large bright room with chairs arranged in a circle. Quakers come to their Meeting as individuals but in the silence they seek for the deep still centre of their lives. As they do this they gradually lose the sense of isolation from one another and become a deeply united group, a loving community aware of God's presence with them.

Sometimes a Quaker Meeting is entirely silent but more often than not there will be some spoken contributions. These are never planned in advance, but happen spontaneously when any member of the group feels urged by the Spirit to speak, pray, or read something, perhaps from the Bible. There is no priest or minister to lead the Meeting: all present have an equal responsibility for it. The purpose of the spoken contributions is to help all who are present to a deeper sense of unity and love and joy, in the presence of God. They also reflect the recognition that we have to share this love with others in everyday life.

This morning's Meeting began when the members gathered together in silence. I hope it will be possible for you now, wherever you are, to be quietly with us and share in this. So come with me into a Quaker Meeting.

[silence, then part of Elgar's Serenade for Strings]

Gordon Steel:

St. Francis de Sales recommended to the members of his community 'Half an hour's listening every day is essential unless you are very busy, then a full hour is necessary'. I don't suppose there are many of us here who measure up to that advice. I expect we argue that life is just too busy for the full hour each day, but at least we seem to be able to manage an hour a week. And it occurs to me that a number of us in this room have been doing this for a very long time, for ten or twenty years or more in some cases. And since our form of worship allows us to minister to each other, this means that we have had an opportunity over a very long time to get to know one another at a deep level. In addition we have sat on committees together and done our business together, and many of us have met in mid-week discussion groups together, so that the total effect is that we come to know one another very well indeed. And this means that when someone rises to speak in Meeting we understand beyond the words that are spoken: we hear what they say against the background of what we know about the tensions that they live under, the sufferings that they may have been through, the intellectual journey that they may have followed. We therefore understand beyond the words.

I am sure that this may have happened also in the meeting in France that Kurt has just spoken about [*prior to the start of the broadcast*].

I have been seeing this this morning as part of the general question of how we evaluate words and deeds. And I think that we would feel what is important is not so much the way in which we verbalize our faith but the people we are. I have nowhere found this expressed more clearly than in some words by John Ashford, who is a present-day Quaker who has set this down in the form of a prayer:

‘Lord, I know love is better proved by deed
than word, that deed is difficult,
but word is easy,
that word may be a sterile seed
or broken reed, may be a deed deferred.
I know that deed is surest proof of creed,
that love in action is to be preferred
to love in word, that there is greater need of doers,
that the Gospel may be heard.

Yet you didst use both word and deed to spread thy kingdom,
didst not despise but prize the word well said.
So, Lord, be you in what I do and say and am,
be in my hands and head,
let thy life temper mine,
thy word be heard in mine,
and through my love, let thy love show.’

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Margaret Arnold.

A few years after the war, we took our two small children on a camping holiday in France, and the official campsite proving not too good, we decided to ask at farms whether we could camp there. We came to a low farmhouse, centuries old, and were allowed to camp in an acacia grove. The old proprietor was delighted to meet English people again and he brought out cream and eggs and cheese and milk, which were almost too much for our rationed stomachs. And then we asked if we could fill our water jar and he took us to a well and slowly he let down the bucket and it went down and down - 300 feet he told us - and we waited. The bucket touched water and filled and was slowly winched up again. And we, who had only drunk the chlorinated water of London or the soft water of Sussex surface wells had no idea that water could have such savour.

We meet here every Sunday in a well of silence and sometimes the rope that we tie to our buckets is too short and the bucket doesn't reach the water. And sometimes we are too impatient and cannot wait for it to go down to the depths. But when we do wait, then in the silence healing may come, and insight, and whatever we need to live out our daily lives. And if we really hold up in the love of God those who we know to be in need, sick friends or those who we know to have special problems, those who Kurt has mentioned who are prisoners of conscience throughout the world and who suffer torture for their faith, then we shall come to know what we may say, and to know what we should do.

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Helen Dukes:

I have been thinking about the meaning of silence for quite some time. Is it just an absence of noise; is it an absence of stimulus visually; what is silence? A

picture was given me just before Christmas. I had stayed with my uncle to look after him in a little village in the hills of Switzerland. The night before I left I woke and there was an incredible silence; you couldn't hear the cows down below that one usually heard and I got up and looked out, and snow fell. Everything seemed covered with snow and there was an incredible breathing in of the silence there. Even the bells that one heard during the night normally were different, muted. And I wondered with that picture in that night and I have since thought about it. The lantern down below showed the snow coming down, with a lot of movement really. This wasn't silence, it wasn't an absence of the noise, it was something like a deep-down activity, in the snow coming down, the snowflakes highlighted with the light of the lantern.

This picture has lived with me and gave me a feeling of this deep, inner activity of silence that we experience here, that we are privileged to have in the noise of our world, that gives us the chance to *breathe in*. It wouldn't be valuable, it wouldn't really mean as much as it does mean to us if it wasn't a contrast to a world of noise, of activity, of music.

At the end of the year, Gerald Priestland gave us Thought for the Day, or rather Thought for the Year because it was the last day of the year. And he pointed out the Englishness of church worship in buildings, the visual stimulus of English churches and the beauty of it, then the tradition of hymn singing, this valuable and joyous hymn singing. And then the great tradition of English bell-ringing, the intricacy of the rhythms, the thousand-fold variety of sound that we experience in this. And then he finished saying 'and under it all is the silence of God'.

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Kenneth Aldous:

A few days ago I attended a meeting of nursery nurses who work looking after young children. And many of the parents of these young children have difficult personal problems. We were having some discussions about how to help these parents. And a research worker was talking to us and she was saying to the young nursery nurses 'don't jump in with advice; observe how the parent is looking and above all, listen. Be honest with yourself, because you may not have anything to say. But you may find that through listening you begin to understand, and then together with the parent you can find some solutions to some aspects of the problem.'

In the ministry this morning I have felt that perhaps that research worker was talking in the same terms that we have been hearing. Because the world is full of advice and instructions, but there is an absence of listening - really listening to what other people are trying to say to one another. And we as Friends perhaps are trying to listen more deeply and to observe. And this morning we have observed some beautiful daffodils on the table and we are hearing birds outside. At the other extreme we have been considering people who are being tortured and imprisoned, all part of the same world. And as we listen in spirit we may not find easy solutions; perhaps we will feel that we will begin to work along the right lines in a world where all men at a deep level are brothers.

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Jack Boag:

How are we to respond when we hear of torture in the modern world? Our immediate response is anger, and anger is not inappropriate as a driving force, but uncontrolled it can of course lead to the very thing that we are opposing. A few

weeks ago I was at a Quaker wedding and I remembered two verses of the poem which Robert Louis Stevenson addressed to his wife. But I forgot the third verse and I have been reminded of it now. It goes like this:

‘Honour, anger, valour, fire,
A love that life could never tire,
Death quench or evil stir,
The mighty master gave to her.’

And I think that in a way that sums it up: anger must be there, but it must be controlled by a love that ‘evil cannot stir’.

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Ronald Abbott:

Last Christmas, as so often in the past, I listened to a performance of Handel’s Messiah and as so often in the past I was moved and thrilled when we came to the Hallelujah chorus and the choir made that marvellous affirmation: ‘The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever’. But earlier in this Meeting we heard of the sufferings of prisoners of conscience and of torture, and one has to ask oneself whether this affirmation is a statement of what is actually here: is it a vision, or is it an empty dream? And if it is to be more than a vision, more than an empty dream, it seems that we must all individually make an act of dedication. An act of dedication that can perhaps best be made in the silence of a Quaker Meeting, and that act of dedication be one in which we submit ourselves to God’s purpose, and to his will for us. We don’t know what that means in terms of the tasks that he will set before us and of the demands that he will make. We do know that it is a life in which there will be a constant striving to bring about the power of love, and introduce it into every relationship and into every situation. It does mean a life of self-sacrifice which will also be a life of self-fulfilment. It means, in short, a life which will be based on our understanding of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. And as we contemplate that life, we see that it culminated a death upon the Cross. We pray that the Cross is not our destiny, but if it is we need not be afraid. We need not be afraid because after the Hallelujah chorus the soprano sings ‘I know that my redeemer liveth.’ So that we know that after the death there is the resurrection, and Christ’s resurrection can be ours.

‘Come ill, come well, the cross the crown, the rainbow or the thunder,
I lay my soul and body down, for Christ to plough them under.’

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Christina Holland:

I should like to read a little from our Advices and Queries. These have come to us from the early days of Quakerism. They are still valued and read in our Friends’ Meetings from time to time:

‘Take heed, dear Friends, to the promptings of love and truth in your hearts, which are the leadings of God. Resist not his strivings within you. It is his light that shows us our darkness and leads to true repentance. The love of God draws us to him, a redemptive love shown forth by Jesus Christ in his life and on the Cross. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. As his disciples, we are called to live in the life and power of the Holy Spirit.

Seek to know one another in the things which are eternal.
Live in love as Christian brethren, entering with sympathy into the joys and sorrows of each other’s daily lives. Be ready to give help,

and to accept it. Bear the burden of each other's failings, and pray for one another.'

And because our homes are linked so closely with our Meetings for Worship, the tenth Query:

'Do you try to make your home a place of friendliness, refreshment, and peace, where God becomes more real to all who live there, and to those who visit it?'

George Gorman:

Members of the Society of Friends in Sutton have been happy to welcome you to their Meeting for Worship this morning, which is now drawing to a close. As we leave the meeting room, we hope that you will have caught something of the flavour of a Quaker Meeting, which is the vital core of all Quaker life. This was vividly described by Robert Barclay, who became a Quaker in the early years of the Society of Friends in the seventeenth century. He said of his first Quaker Meeting:

'When I came into the silent assemblies of God's people, I felt a secret power among them which touched my heart, and as I gave way unto it I found the evil weakening in me and the good raised up.'