

Christ is our Peace (Ephesians 2)

Marisa Johnson

To ask a Quaker from the liberal, unprogrammed tradition that is prevalent in Europe and the Middle East, and especially this Quaker, to preach, is like asking someone who has never played a particular musical instrument to give a solo performance. I would therefore ask your forgiveness in advance for the many notes that might sound false to your ears as I share this personal testimony. After I have spoken, I hope we can share a few minutes of "open worship" when, out of the stillness, some spontaneous contributions may be offered, or we may remain in silent reflection and contemplation, as led by the Spirit.

"Christ is our Peace" – what does this mean to us today, in the 21st century, as our churches and communities struggle to live out their faith in a secularised and violent world? What did it mean to the Ephesians, to whom Paul is reputed to have addressed these words?

It is an affirmation that not all Quakers would understand in the same way. The worldwide family of "Friends" is very diverse indeed. It encompasses on the one hand churches with Pastors and programmed services, often with a very evangelical message, and silent, unprogrammed Meeting for Worship, where traditional Christians are often in a minority, and sit with humanists, atheists and non-theists and some Friends who identify as Jews, Muslims, Buddhists or Pagans. The majority of Quakers, Friends, as many prefer to call themselves, would understand at once and be perfectly comfortable with the title "Christ" and might regard "Peace" as the state of interior quietness and rest – the Greek Eirene - that comes from faith in Him. Quakers like me, however, would find the expression challenging, especially the word "Christ", as we may read exclusivity into it. So we tend to substitute "Jesus" for Christ, being more comfortable with the teacher and prophet who lived among us, and place the emphasis on the word "Peace" – Shalom, in Hebrew the process of achieving wholeness, completeness. These are profoundly different interpretations, that lead to very different ways of living our faith. And yet, if we but explore these words and dig under the layers of meaning that have evolved in apparently different directions, we may yet find a unity of understanding and of experience.

Let me start with "Peace". We have just celebrated the 350th anniversary of the declaration made in the 11th Month of 1660 (which was actually January 1661) by the harmless and innocent people of God, called Quakers. "Our principle is, and our Practice have always been, to seek peace and ensue it and to follow after righteousness and the knowledge of God, seeking the good and welfare and doing that which tends to the peace of all. We know that wars and fightings proceed from the lusts of men, out which lusts the Lord hath redeemed us, and so out of the occasion of war. - . That the Spirit of Christ, by which we are guided, is not changeable, so as once to command us from a thing as evil and again to move unto it; and we do certainly know, and so testify to the world, that the spirit of Christ, which leads us into all Truth, will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons, neither for the kingdom of Christ, nor for the kingdoms of this world."

This is the basis for what we call our Peace Testimony – one of a number of Quaker Testimonies - Truth, Integrity, Equality and Simplicity. It is common today among Quakers in Europe and the Middle East to refer to our Testimonies to Peace, Simplicity etc., as though these were absolute values in their own right which we seek to align our lives to. Friends in our other traditions remind us that these

Testimonies are of truth, integrity etc. What the first Friends were trying to convey was that these testimonies were witnesses, signs of the presence of the Kingdom of God among us. In this, their understanding was very close to that of the very first Christian communities. They thought of themselves very much as the new apostles of the Good News. They had a strong sense that "Christ had come to teach his people himself" - an immediate realisation of the second coming, and when a community met in his name every aspect of its life would bear witness to "Gospel Order" - the right relationship between people which would naturally result in equality, simplicity, integrity, peace and truth in all things. It is right relationship with God, and with each other, that is the source of the signs of the Kingdom, and not the other way around.

Yet our Liberal , unprogrammed Friends may counter that in committing to, and practicing the ways of peace, equality, simplicity, truth and integrity we come to understand our place and connections to one another and then to "God". For me, the message is that, no matter what the starting point, if we are truly guided by grace, we will live in a way that is consistent with the "Good News" message.

The book of Christian Discipline of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain offers the following "Advice" (no. 31): "We are called to live in the virtue of that life and power that takes away the occasion of all wars. Do you faithfully maintain our testimony that war and the preparation for war are inconsistent with the spirit of Christ? Search out whatever in your own way of life may contain the seeds of war. Stand firm in our testimony, even when others commit or prepare to commit acts of violence, yet always remember that they too are children of God". And in "Advice" (no 32) we are urged to: Bring into God's light those emotions, attitudes and prejudices in yourself which lie at the root of destructive conflict, acknowledging your need for forgiveness and grace." So, before we can presume to lecture the world about rejecting violence and choosing peace, it behoves us to look at our own lives, at our own communities, and practice "Gospel Order" among ourselves, starting with reconciling our own differences.

So how is it that from such solid Christian roots could evolve over time a tradition within Quakerism that is so ill at ease with the very word Christ? "Advice" (no. 4): "The religious Society of Friends is rooted in Christianity and has always found inspiration in the life and teachings of Jesus. How do you interpret your faith in the light of this heritage? How does Jesus speak to you today? Are you following Jesus' example of love in action? Are you learning from his life the reality and cost of obedience to God? How does his relationship with God challenge and inspire you?" Right from the beginning Quakers shared an insight that faithfulness to God was a matter of commitment to "inward" experience, rather than allegiance to "outward notions". For this reason, outward sacraments and rituals and the observance of "times and seasons" were soon discarded, as in all things Friends sought the Spirit rather than the letter and strove to live the all of life as sacred. "Salvation", understood as right relationship with God, was not seen as exclusive to Christians - in 1693 William Penn wrote: "The humble, meek, merciful, just, pious, and devout souls are everywhere of one religion; and when death has taken off the mask they will know one another, though the divers liveries they wear here makes them strangers". And in 1762 John Woolman, the tireless campaigner for the abolition of slavery, wrote: "There is a principle which is pure, placed in the human mind, which in different places and ages hath different names; it is, however, pure and proceeds from God. It is deep and inward, confined to no forms of religion nor excluded from any where the heart stands in perfect sincerity. In whomsoever this takes root and grows, of what nation soever, they become brethren."

Given how profoundly rooted early Friends were in scriptural Christianity, it is very unlikely that they perceived any conflict between this insight and their understanding of the revelation contained in the New Testament. The universalist message seems implicit in Paul's own teaching about the new order brought about by the death and resurrection of Jesus, recognised as the Christ, and in the breakdown of barriers between Jews and Gentiles – living as Children of light (Ephesians 4:20-32) requires us to abandon the ways of the self, and embrace compassion.

In her book *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life* Karen Armstrong, the distinguished theologian and historian of religions, emphasises the "Golden Rule" – Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you. It sounds simple and self-evident. It is expressed in one form or another in every major religion, and underpins secular human rights. Yet it is the most difficult rule to apply. There seems to be deeply ingrained in our psyche a sort of rider/exemption that says: unless they do it to you first, unless it is self-defence. I am reminded of my experience as a lay Magistrate in the British Courts (a Justice of the Peace, to give it its proper title, which I am very fond of). In British law self defence can be invoked only when there is a real and present threat of immediate violence against the self or another, the force used is proportionate to the threat and limited to preventing harm, and evidence must be shown that the person tried to remove themselves from the situation if at all possible. But the Golden Rule goes beyond self-defence. It challenges us to treat even those who harm us, even our enemies, with the same compassion that we naturally feel about those we care about. It is a tough and demanding discipline.

The steps outlined in the book start with looking at our own world and ourselves. It is a sad reality that many of us can turn the harshest criticism towards ourselves. Many have low self-esteem, or very high standards against which it is inevitable to always fall short. We need to let go of our need for perfection, and accept ourselves even with our shortcomings and faults. It is not an accident that the early Church instituted the sacrament of confession – it would be wonderful if we could repent once and for all of our imperfect feelings and behaviours, and be free for ever of the pain that our constant stumbling causes us. Admitting our struggles, and finding forgiveness, is a compassionate way of helping us to continue to practice, and get stronger and more compassionate little by little. We then turn our attention to our families and friends, our communities, those who are like-minded and exercise our care and compassion towards them. We learn empathy and mindfulness, we put our intention into action to relieve suffering and injustice. As we become more aware of the limitations of our own experience, we venture to discover the realities and points of view of others, often very different from our own, even challenging, until we are ready to face the last step, the call to love our enemies.

This approach may sound an exercise of the will, and indeed it does require us to make a deliberate choice of orienting our life to this purpose. But as all of us who have tried relying on ourselves know that our will alone is not enough, that we need grace. This is for me the crucial difference between belief and unbelief. It is not about how we express our belief, but whether we have experienced that power beyond power which allows us to glimpse the possibility of transformation and of a life radically different from what we may have hitherto thought inescapable. The theologian Luke Timothy Johnson says in his *The new Testament, A very Short Introduction* that "Religious experience is the human response to what is perceived as ultimate power, a response involving mind, body and will as well as feeling." There can be no doubt that Jesus' followers had such an experience following his

tragic death, when all seemed lost and all hope gone. It transformed their lives. They described their experience as the certain knowledge that the Christ, the anointed one of God, was not just resuscitated as a human life that would end at a later time, but was experienced powerfully as being more fully alive than ever before, and that moreover they themselves could share in this "eternal" life. George Fox and early Quakers also had a direct experience of God's power in their own lives. They described it as the inner Christ, come "to teach his people himself", and were able to read the Scriptures in the light of this new understanding.

Friends, when and how do we experience this ultimate power in our own lives today? I saw a glimpse of it in the steadfast compassion of Rabbis for Human Rights planting olive trees with Palestinian farmers after they had been uprooted by those who want to drive them off their land. I experience it when I accept the things that I cannot change in my life, and discover that grief can be transformed into joy. I heard it in the dignity and composure of a broken-hearted mother in Omagh, Northern Ireland, who, just days after her precious only son had been killed by a bomb placed under his car, asked that there should be no retaliation, and that people continue on the road to peace that they have committed to.

It is not easy to be Children of the Light, the advance party of the Kingdom of God. The divisions in our Quaker tradition, in Christian history, let alone the wider multi-faith, multi-cultural world, show us that the work of reconciliation need to start from ourselves and our communities in an ever-increasing circle of compassion. The Friends World Committee for Consultation, the Quaker organisation I work for, has been dedicated to this intra-Quakers work of connection, communication and mutual understanding, since 1937. Next year we shall hold one of our once-in-a-generation World Conferences in Kenya. Our theme is Being Salt and Light – Friends living the kingdom of God in a broken world. There will be those among us whose faith is nourished by the bible and a strong belief in a personal God. There will be those who do not identify with Christianity, and may not believe in God at all. We shall sing, dance, pray aloud, hear preachers, and worship in stillness.

My hope is that we shall all be inspired to commit ourselves anew to a life of faith, grounded in compassion and mutual affirmation, and expressed through acts of solidarity and kindness towards each other, the rest of the human world, and the earth that is our precious home.

I know you have similar opportunities and challenges in your own traditions – we can encourage one another and heed the exhortation of George Fox, who wrote from his prison in Launceston in Cornwall: "And this is the word of the Lord God to you all, and a charge to you all in the presence of the living God: be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people, and to them; then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one".

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