



Newsletter – April 2017

Diary: April 2017

Saturday 1 April	Experiment with Light – 10.00 am, Stratford Meeting House
Sunday 2 April	Preparative Meeting – 11.15 am after Meeting for Worship
Saturday 8 April	Area Meeting – 2.00 pm, Sibford Meeting House
Saturday 15 April	Experiment with Light – 10.00 am, Stratford Meeting House
Tuesday 18 April	Study Group – 7.30 pm, Stratford Meeting House
Sunday 30 April	Themed Meeting for Worship, 10.30 am

Reflecting on equality

Our second themed Meeting for Worship in 2017 will be held on Sunday 30 April, and at Preparative Meeting in March we decided that its theme would be “Equality”.

We have decided to try a themed approach to Meeting for Worship during 2017 whenever there is a fifth Sunday in the month. How does this work? We are all invited to share a reading or thought through ministry on the chosen theme. The Meeting begins in silence as usual, and then after about 20 minutes, people are invited to share their readings and ministry. The first time we tried this, everyone brought a reading and Meeting for Worship eventually ended five minutes over the hour!

Equality has been fundamental to Quakers from the earliest days. In his *Journal*, George Fox wrote that “the Lord God hath opened to me by his invisible power how that every man was enlightened by the divine light of Christ; and I saw it shine through all.” In one of his best known pieces of advice, he spoke of “answering that of God in every one”. For the Quakers of the time, everyone included women as well as men, and they testified against the vast social distinctions of the day. The latest edition of *Advices and Queries* asks: “Do you respect that of God in everyone though it may be expressed in unfamiliar ways or be difficult to discern?” And it continues: “Each of us has a particular experience of God and each must find the way to be true to it.” (A&Q 17)



The idea of equality in the sense of our common humanity goes back to the earliest days of Christianity. Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians: “There is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and free man, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Paul sets out the main divisions of his day – and declares them void.

As Rowan Williams says in his book *Being Christian*, this does not confer on us a status that marks us off from everybody else. Still less does it make us superior. “It is to accept that to be a Christian is to be affected – you might even say contaminated – by the mess of humanity.” Equality is to be like everyone else.

But how do we express this sense of our common humanity? And how do we identify – and overcome – the false distinctions that permeate our society? There will be an opportunity to explore these ideas, and to reflect on their practical implications, during our themed worship on 30 April.

Speaking Christian about ... repentance

In February, in our series based on theologian Marcus Borg’s book *Speaking Christian*, we looked at the idea of *forgiveness*. This month we look at a linked idea – *repentance*.

Repentance is traditionally associated in Christianity with sin and forgiveness. When we have sinned, we are to repent so that we can be forgiven. Repentance means being sorry for what we have done; if we are sorry enough, then we can be forgiven.

But, says Borg, the biblical meanings of repentance are quite different. One main meaning flows from the Hebrew word commonly translated as “repent or repentance” in the Old Testament. This word means “to turn or to return”. The word relates to ancient Israel’s experience of exile in Babylon. To repent means to return from exile – to embark on a journey to return to God, a journey that is also with God.



Repentance is also a big theme in the New Testament. The first words of Jesus in Mark’s gospel are: “The kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15). Borg comments: “The word continues to have its Old Testament resonance: return from exile, turn and return to God, embark on the way of the Lord”.

The word also has a second meaning from the Greek work in the New Testament usually translated as “repent”. Its Greek roots mean “to go beyond the mind we have”. What does this mean? “The mind that we have,” says Borg, “is the mind acquired by being socialised in our particular time and place... a way of being shaped by what we have learnt. ... So to go beyond the mind that we have means seeing in a new way – a way shaped by God as known decisively in Jesus.”

The Bible does speak of repenting of our sins. But the emphasis is not so much on contrition and sorrow and guilt, but about turning from them and returning to God. Repentance is about change. “We are forgiven already,” says Borg, “loved and accepted by God. We don’t need to do anything to warrant God’s love. But repentance – turning and returning to God, going beyond the mind that we have – is the path that leaves to transformation.” And that, says Borg, is pretty exciting.

“I have come into deep waters”

Our monthly Study Group meeting in April will look continue our reflections on individual psalms, looking at Psalm 69: *Save me, O God, for the waters come up to me neck I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me.*

The Study Group meeting in April will take place on Tuesday 18 April, starting at 7.30 pm. As in previous months, we'll be looking at the Psalm and exploring together our individual responses to it. There's no preparatory reading – except to read the Psalm a few times to become familiar with it, reflecting on its meaning for you. Reading this Psalm a few times is recommended, as it is much longer than the psalms we looked at in our Study Group sessions in February and March.

Fly kites, not drones

On a windy Sunday 19 March Quakers in Stratford supported the annual Fly Kites Not Drones event, which draws attention to the ongoing problem of attacks around the world by military drones. This global event coincides with the Afghan New Year and is an act of solidarity with the many people living at risk of death and destruction by armed drones.



Alice, James and Helen fly James' home-made yellow paper kites

Children in Afghanistan and other parts of the middle east traditionally fly kites to mark the New Year on 21 March. But nowadays, children do not look up to watch their kites flying against the clear blue sky. Instead they worry that the clear skies will encourage attacks by drones.

Over the past few years, killer drones have become the weapon of choice for assassinations and executions. The drone pilot is thousands of miles away; at the touch of a button, people can be killed without charge or trial. And nearly 90 per cent of those killed by recent drone strikes were not the actual target – often they were women or children who were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Fly Kites not Drones was started in Afghanistan by the peace youth group, Afghan Peace Volunteers. In Britain, the event is co-ordinated by Voices for Creative Non-Violence UK, a group which is supported by Quakers nationally.

Deepening Quaker Worship

Stratford Quakers will be hosting another Kindlers-on-the Road workshop this October, when we will be exploring the topic of *Deepening Quaker Worship*.

The decision to host another workshop was made after the success of the Kindlers-on-the Road workshop on the theme *What does love require of us*, which was held last October.

The workshop on *Deepening Quaker Worship* will take place on Saturday 21 October – so make a note of the date in your diary! More details will be available in September.

Syrian families in Stratford: an update

The first two Syrian families to come to Stratford continue to settle in – and continue to meet and overcome problems with the help of the many local residents who are working to welcome them. Both families have now been in the town for four months, and are settling into a pattern of activities.



Syrian refugees attend English classes in Canada

Adults have been attending regular English classes at Stratford College, with volunteers providing lifts to classes and the teaching supplemented by visits in the home from volunteers with expertise and experience in teaching English. The volunteers have recently completed a review of progress, which has identified that the younger adults need more intensive teaching and practice – something that is being taken up with Warwickshire County Council.

One child has been in school since mid-January, and her English is rapidly improving as a result, but two other children remain without a school place, as the school nearest their home does not have places in their year-group, and alternative schools are nearly two miles away – and the family has no transport. Again volunteers have been working with the family to try to resolve these problems.

Both families currently rely on benefits, but there have been problems with errors in payments and changes to policies which will cut their support from April. Again, efforts are being made to sort out these difficulties. Representatives from Welcome Here, the group that co-ordinates the volunteers, have started to hold monthly liaison meetings with the local councils and other organisations involved in supporting the families to try to find ways to resolve the problems the families have encountered.

Welcome Here has now adopted a formal constitution, and elected a management committee to co-ordinate its work. Meetings continue to be held in Stratford Quakers Meeting House. On Friday 24 March, however, the group met at Stratford Methodist Church to hear Sabir Zazai, Director of the Coventry Refugee and Migrant Centre, talk about its work and the support it might give to Stratford.

Individual Quakers continue to be involved in the work of Welcome Here, and if you want to know more about its work, or wish to get involved in any way, contact Roger Matthews on 01789 298503 or at roger.matthews@phonecoop.coop.

If you would like to contribute to the newsletter, or simply offer ideas for articles, contact Roger Matthews at roger.matthews@phonecoop.coop or on 01789 298503.