

The Transforming Power of Holy Obedience

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In the summer of 1985 in North Carolina, on the first evening of the World Gathering of Young Friends, during the unprogrammed worship that followed the speaker in the first session, I felt led to offer vocal prayer out of the worshipping silence. It was a prayer of thanksgiving that despite the many obstacles, this gathering had brought together young Quakers from almost every Yearly Meeting on the planet. It was a prayer requesting God's almighty presence in our midst in the week of worshipping and sharing that was to lie ahead.

When that evening's meeting was over a young Guatemalan man came over to me and started talking excitedly in Spanish. Quickly realising that I didn't understand a word he was saying he rushed off to find an interpreter who could help him share his thoughts with me. He had felt that what I had prayed had spoken to his heart. It quickly became clear that my new friend simply wanted to spend time in prayer with me. And so for the next hour we spent our time together, away from the large group of gathered Friends, taking turns to pray to the God who dwelt in both our lives, and we prayed in our own languages. I had no idea what my Guatemalan friend was praying about and he had no idea what I was requesting from our God. Yet I have no doubt that our God of love and grace heard all our prayers in both Spanish and English.

I also know that in that hour of prayer, on that hot summer evening, with a man who I had only just met and knew nothing about, something had changed in me. I had reaffirmed in my own life the reality that our God is without boundaries, that where two or three are gathered in Christ's name God is present, regardless of whether the two or three know anything about each other or not. I was reminded that despite our differences, and they were many, that the God that my friend was seeking to serve was the same living, transforming and loving God that I was trying to follow. I realised that if each of us at that gathering were fully open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and were willing to be led into what the American Quaker Thomas Kelly called 'Holy Obedience' then the potential for God to work amongst those of us called Quakers was limitless. It was a wonderful beginning to a wonderful week, a week which was to have a profound effect on many of those who attended that gathering.

Since that very special moment in my life some 30 years ago, the core truths of that experience have been revealed to me again and again. The universal nature of God's grace still speaks and touches lives in every corner of our planet. Whether we live on the shores of the breathtakingly beautiful Lake Titicaca or among the green rolling hills of County Armagh in Northern Ireland, the transforming indwelling presence of the living inward Christ is available to each of us, if our hearts are truly open to the promptings of God. God loves us unconditionally and because of that amazing truth we are offered the wonderful possibility of a living relationship with our Divine Creator.

I am reminded of the wonderful opening words of Psalm 40 where David recognises the transforming power of God's unconditional love. In it David writes of God's capacity to bring us from darkness into light and from situations of desperation toward hope.

I waited patiently for the LORD;
he turned to me and heard my cry.
He lifted me out of the slimy pit,
out of the mud and mire;
he set my feet on a rock
and gave me a firm place to stand.
He put a new song in my mouth,
a hymn of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear the LORD
and put their trust in him.

Blessed is the one
who trusts in the LORD,
who does not look to the proud,
to those who turn aside to false gods.
Many, LORD my God,
are the wonders you have done,
the things you planned for us.
None can compare with you;
were I to speak and tell of your deeds,
they would be too many to declare.

Sacrifice and offering you did not desire
but my ears you have opened;
burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require.
Then I said, 'Here I am, I have come
it is written about me in the scroll.
I desire to do your will, my God;
your law is within my heart. Psalm 40:1-8 (NIV version)

And like the clear sense of calling that David felt he had to respond to in this Psalm, Friends across the world have over the past 350 years felt called to be obedient to the gentle promptings of the Holy Spirit to live out God's purposes in their lives. From the very earliest days in Quaker history Friends have spoken clearly of how the reality of the presence of the living inward Christ gives us hope and purpose and a sense of the peace that passes all understanding.

In the mid 1600s the rediscovery of this profound truth inspired a whole group of early Friends, a group often called the Valiant 60, (although there were in fact 64 of them), to travel from their homes in the north of England to many parts of the world, sharing the reality of God's grace in their lives. I would like to briefly share the story of one of these Friends.

Mary Fisher was a young woman in her 20s working as a servant in a large house, when she heard George Fox preach and became convinced. Between 1652 and 1654 she was repeatedly imprisoned

for her faith. In Cambridge in 1653, she, along with another woman Friend, Elisabeth Williams, became the first Quakers to be publicly and brutally flogged for their ministry. In 1656 Mary Fisher, along with another woman Quaker preacher, Ann Austin, became the first Quakers to visit the Americas, arriving in Boston. They were immediately put in prison by the authorities in that city and were only saved from dying of starvation by the kindness of an innkeeper who secretly got food to them by paying their jailers. Mary and her friend were freed after 5 weeks and put straight back onto a ship sailing for Barbados. In those 5 weeks they had been unable to share their faith with anyone except the innkeeper, Nicholas Upsall, who became the first convinced Quaker on this side of the Atlantic. He went on to help establish the first Quaker Meeting in the Americas in the town of Sandwich in Massachusetts.

Mary returned to England, but God had not finished with calling her to travel in the ministry just yet. In 1657 she, along with six other Quakers left England for Turkey with the intention of gaining an audience with the powerful ruler of the Ottoman Empire, Sultan Mehmed IV. They arrived into Smyrna (now Ismir), one of the major cities of this empire, only to be turned back by the English ambassador in the city who put them on a boat for Venice. However, Mary Fisher was not so easily put off and she convinced the captain to let her off the ship at a harbour on the Greek coastline. From there she walked on foot and alone, the 800 kilometres over the mountains of Thrace and into the city of Andrianople where the sultan was based.

After some time, the Sultan heard through one of his advisors that there was an English woman in the city 'who had something to declare to him from the great God'. Mary was given a meeting with the Sultan and he received her as he would an ambassador. Through an interpreter he asked if she had a message to bring from God. She replied 'Yes' and he urged her to speak. There is no record of what Mary Fisher actually spoke of in her meeting with Mehmed IV, yet after she had finished she asked him if he had understood all that she had said and it is recorded that he answered 'Yes, every word, and it is the truth'.

The Sultan offered her an escort on her return journey to the harbour but Mary declined, saying that she trusted in the Lord alone. She later recorded in her writings that in the Sultan and his advisors she had found men who were open to and near the Truth, and she hoped that God may continue to be revealed to them and she retained a prayerful concern for the people of the Ottoman Empire for the rest of her life.

You may wonder why I have told you this story from the earliest part of Quaker history. Here was a young, poor, not very well educated woman, living in an environment largely controlled by men, who despite all of these disadvantages, on hearing God's voice and being transformed by the experience of the indwelling presence of Christ in her life, goes out into the world with boldness and conviction to share this living experience with others. Nothing and no one was going to hold her back from telling of this wonderful Truth that she had experienced in her own life.

Two things strike me as important.

Firstly if the message that she heard George Fox preach had only been inspiring words and nothing more, Mary Fisher's zeal for that message would have ended quickly. But Fox was preaching a Christianity that was not of the head, but of the heart. For early Friends God was real, God touched something deep within those who longed to be obedient. God was not some abstract theological

principle, but instead dwelt as a living transforming presence in their lives. Mary discovered that reality for herself and it changed her completely.

Secondly I am reminded of the great call of obedience that the prophet Isaiah experienced in chapter 6 of the book named after him.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.”

Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷ With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?”

And I said, “Here am I. Send me!” Isaiah 6: 1-8 (NIV version)

And like Isaiah, this young English woman, transformed by the hot coals of conviction and convincement, heard God calling her and with an open heart simply said ‘Here am I, send me!’

If we, the worldwide Quaker community of the 21st Century are to be ambassadors for the Divine purposes of the risen Christ, if we are to follow in the footsteps of women and men like Mary Fisher, then there is something that must become central to our daily lives.

Firstly on discovering the transforming power of God’s grace in our own lives we must bear testimony to this change in us. Some would suggest that the way to do this is to constantly go about telling people that you have discovered God and that they should discover God too. While this can have an impact, and preaching the good news of Jesus is vital when the right opportunity arises, I am greatly challenged by the words of Fox when he said ‘Let your lives preach’.

We all have those who live near and around us who may know little if anything of God’s grace in their lives and appear to have no interest in such things. Yet these friends and neighbours are often put off seeking God because their experience of religion is one of hearing judgemental self-righteous preaching, of questioning empty church traditions and symbols, and of seeing in those who claim to be Christians, lives lived that show little of the nature of Christ.

When Fox challenged us to ‘Let our lives preach’ he was challenging us to live lives of wholeness, where our actions and the principles we believe in are the same. And if our day to day existence becomes a living expression of integrity, then our neighbours and our friends, that we come in

contact with, will see that the God we love is real, not because we tell them so, but because they see the transformation that our relationship with God has created in us. Our God is a God of changed lives.

And as I visit among Quakers throughout the world I see the way in which God is working amongst us. While our differing forms of worship affect the way we express our faith, while the countries and cultures we come from have a profound impact on our witness, while our varying theological perspectives mean we sometimes struggle with each other, I believe the world wide community of Friends has a primary purpose that must be at the heart of all we do. Our essential purpose it to be obedient to the promptings of the Living Inward Christ in our lives. This is not just our purpose as individuals. We must also fulfil this aspiration as a worldwide Christian community.

I wish to share a few short stories of how Quakers have endeavoured to do this in recent years.

Following the tribal based Rwandan genocide of the mid 1990s and the similar conflicts that also occurred in Burundi and other neighbouring countries, Quakers living in those communities who belonged to both tribal groups, the Hutu and the Tutsi, began to establish peace-building activities within those countries, supported by North American and European Friends. What has become known as the African Great Lakes Initiative tries to provide opportunity for reconciliation between the two tribal groups. Having established this work additional peace projects in other countries in the region have also developed. These include the Kenya Friends Church Peace Team, which works to reconcile communities torn apart by the post-election violence in 2008. These African Friends are endeavouring to show the love of God through building bridges in their divided communities.

In a completely different part of the world, a pastor from a Christian community church in Myanmar, a small country between India and Thailand felt led to attend a Bible College in the Philippines. Here, one of his classmates in the college was the pastor of a Friend's Church in that country. After much discussion between these two men about faith and a considerable amount of reading about Quakers and prayerful searching during his period at the Bible College, Lal, the pastor from Myanmar decided to return to his church suggesting that they might become Quakers. This happened and when I met Lal at the World Conference of Friends in Kenya two years ago his church had already decided to release him so that he might go to Rangoon, the capital of Myanmar to start trying to establish a second Friends Church in his homeland. God called Lal to bring the church he was part of into our worldwide community of Friends and in meeting him I sensed that he felt a real clarity that this was what God wanted him to do. As an isolated Friend in a country with so few Quakers, attending the world conference and meeting Friends from all over the planet brought a real joy to our Friend from Myanmar.

Finally I want to share a little about my own Quaker Meeting in Northern Ireland. I come from the unprogrammed tradition of Friends. We do not have a pastor, our worship comes out of a silent waiting on God. For those of you who are used to a pastor, and a sermon and hymns and a full programme this may seem very strange. But let me tell you that the first time I attended a Friends Church at the age of 18, I found it very strange too. I remember that I kept wishing that there could be a bit of quiet so that I might settle into worship and feel a sense of God's presence. I needed to stop being distracted by all the things that were going on around me. I want to explain that, while I greatly value the spoken ministry, the inspiring prayer, the helpful Bible readings and the occasional singing that are all part of the worship found in my home meeting, for me God is most often and

most deeply found in the silence. Over my many years of worshipping on a Sunday morning with the 30 or 40 Friends who gather at Richhill Friends Meeting House, I have on numerous occasions felt my heart being challenged, my thoughts being changed, my actions directed and my intentions moulded by the silent promptings of the Holy Spirit. Often I have left Meeting with a new sense of God's will and purpose, and the words 'Here am I, send me' whispered from my lips.

And so, we as the worldwide community of believers called Quakers can be the vibrant, God-driven community we long to be. We simply have to be open to a process of transformation in our own lives. Our hearts must be open, not to our own longings and desires, but to seeking the wonderful purposes and will of God. Our lives must show the impact of God's indwelling presence. Our Meetings and Churches must display the fruits of the Holy Spirit poured out in service to the needs of others. With our different gifts and talents as individuals, we must at the same time understand that we are called to be one Church, the body of Christ.

And we can do all this if we simply live obedient lives.