

FRIENDS: A PEOPLE CALLED TO LISTEN

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There is a quiet place, at the very heart of our being, in the depths of our soul. It is the place where God and humanity meet. As we seek to understand and to know God, it is in that place that we search for reason in the face of starvation and poverty across the globe. It is to there that we escape for comfort in our own moments of personal grief and need, and it is to there that we go when we are struggling with the challenge of the reality of a personal experience of the living, inward Christ. For it is in this quiet place that we will find that still, small voice.

In the past year I have been exploring and seeking to understand the ideas of the early Celtic church, which, originating in Ireland between the 5th and 7th centuries after Christ, sent missionaries throughout Europe, spreading the gospel message during what have become known as the Dark Ages. Men and women like Patrick, Columba, Hilda and Cuthbert come across as people of such deep conviction that I am left challenged by them. There was much in their theology that I would disagree with and some I would say was purely based on superstition, but despite their failings, here were a relatively small group of people, who sought to spread the message of Christ with an emphasis on many of the values Friends have held dear for the past 350 years. They were accepting of women in spiritual leadership. They placed a strong emphasis on the weak and the poor. They believed living simply was vital for spiritual well-being. And while they recognised the political powers around them, these monks and nuns realised that earthly power was unimportant when compared with the authority of God. Sadly, in 664 AD at the Synod of Whitby, Rome regained authority over this breakaway branch of the Christian church and many of the values of the Celtic tradition began to disappear with it.

The reason I am telling you all this is that, while these were women and men of action, their efforts were based on a life of spiritual discipline. Their influence may have spread throughout Europe, and some even claim that it was Brendan who was the first European to find America, 1000 years before Columbus. Yet the emphasis on prayer and contemplation was at the very heart of who these people were. Cuthbert was a good example. Although he was the Bishop of Lindisfarne and possibly the greatest preacher of his era, and although he took concern for both the most impoverished and the most powerful in his world, he also spent many years of his life as a hermit, on small uninhabited islands off the north coast of England seeking the will of the Almighty.

This may be a life that none of us in this modern age could even contemplate. It may be a lifestyle that many in our world would claim has no relevance today. Yet it is where I wish to begin my exploration of our theme 'Friends – A People Called to Listen'.

In preparing for this address I became aware that it would be impossible to cover all aspects of this subject. Whilst I realise that there are many voices in our world that need to be heard, and hopefully some of these will be represented and considered during our plenary sessions, I have focused on the one voice that must come before all others in the life of any Quaker; that is, the voice of God.

If Friends are to consider how best to listen we first must ask, 'What are they being offered in ministry and spiritual encouragement to make their listening worthwhile?'

In our present day world we expect to receive our knowledge in sound bites; small, easy to swallow pieces of information. Not only that, but we want it all presented in a language and a social context that suits us. Sadly this is as true in the Church as it is in the rest of our world. We struggle to package whatever message we offer in a style that doesn't expect much, and asks even less from the listener. While this is a trend that is only likely to increase in the Internet age, it is a problem that Friends have faced for at least a century.

Whilst the roots of the problem are much older, throughout this century I believe that all the main traditions of Quakerism have contented themselves with a second rate, simplified form and experience of spiritual life. Within my own Evangelical tradition the focus has been on Scripture and sound doctrine. They have to a large degree adopted the very Calvinist emphasis on the written word that early Friends rejected. We seem to have forgotten those wonderful words written as a postscript to the letter given forth by the Elders assembled at Balby in 1656.

“Dearly beloved Friends, these things we do not lay before you as a rule or form to walk by, but that all with the measure of Light which is pure and holy may be guided, and so in the light walking and abiding these may be fulfilled in the Spirit - not from the letter, for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.”

We have become bound by the text rather than the experience. Not only that. We have, with the rare exception of my own Yearly Meeting and possibly a few other Friends, established a Pastor-based form of worship in order to ensure consistent and reliable ministry within worship. Almost without exception, (and what a joy those exceptions are), the Evangelical tradition has replaced the priesthood of all believers, with a priesthood of the few.

But we Evangelicals are not the only ones with problems.

Within the Liberal tradition, as this century has progressed, the Spiritual clarity of Rufus Jones and John Wilhelm Rowntree has been replaced by an uncertainty that is both disturbing and detrimental. A desire among Liberals to be as accommodating of as wide a range of spiritual expression as possible has resulted in confusion and lack of direction. This has meant a watering down of many early Friends teachings, to the point that I suspect in many Yearly Meetings, Fox's letter to the Governor of Barbados would cause enormous discomfort. This is an extract from that letter.

“And we do own and believe in Jesus Christ, His beloved and only begotten Son, in whom He is well pleased, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, and born of the Virgin Mary; in whom we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins; who is the express image of the invisible God, the first born of every creature, by whom were all things created that are in heaven and earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers, all things were created by Him.”

What is interesting is that while the letter from Balby is very acceptable to Liberal Friends, the letter to Barbados is a real comfort to Evangelicals. I firmly believe that we need both the emphasis on experiential spirituality found in Balby and the foundation in doctrine offered by Barbados. A Yearly Meeting that can live comfortably with both is a spiritually mature Yearly Meeting. If the ministry in our meetings and churches is to be worth hearing, we must begin to develop both these aspects of our faith. And what better way of doing this than learning from each other.

This does not take away from, but rather emphasises the need for spiritual development and nourishment in our meetings. Programmed Friends will say that they have the Adult Sunday School system and that in Church the Pastor provides good sound teaching. Unprogrammed Friends will tell me that surely their form of worship requires and encourages a greater

commitment to personal study. There is an element of truth in both these ideas, yet I suspect if you were to ask your members how many had read the Bible in its entirety, or had carefully studied Fox's and Woolman's Journals along with Barclay's Apology and Thomas Kelly's Testament of Devotion, you would find a poor response.

Recently it was commented to me during a Quaker study group in our meeting, that the Lord had given me considerable liberty to speak with freedom on such basic Friends principles as our approach to the sacraments and the Inner Light of Christ. However, I believe that the Lord finds it easier to use those who are well prepared. If we truly recognise the priesthood of all believers, then we need to prepare all our members for ministry. This requires discipline, both personal and within the worshipping community. Spiritual laziness is no excuse. Leaving it up to the Holy Spirit or the Inner Light is no excuse. Hoping that the Pastor or Elders will look after it is no excuse. If we are to be a meeting or church that can truly listen, then we also need to be prepared for effective ministry.

While Fox most definitely stated that 'the Spirit was more powerful than the Book to him', it is also said of him that if every Bible in England had been destroyed, he could have rewritten it. That's what I call spiritual preparation.

And now to the question of listening. I have found that there are a number of disciplines that have been vital to me in my efforts to listen to God's voice. I discovered and first explored many of these disciplines while a student. A few years later I came across Richard Foster's wonderful book Celebration of Discipline and realised that he too had explored these disciplines with a very Quaker- based approach, and I recommend this book without reservation. It will give a much broader examination of these principles than I can hope to in this short address. However, I do aim to share with you some thoughts on the most helpful ways I have found of listening to God.

I believe prayer is at the very heart of spiritual listening. Prayer is vital for our spiritual well-being. Sadly, many see it purely as a way of getting our concerns off our chest and handing them to the Almighty. Undoubtedly Christ promised to carry our burdens, but prayer is a much broader opportunity. Prayer should be a two-way relationship. Not only is it our way of communicating with our God, but it is a discipline which requires us to wait, to listen and be obedient to the Light of Christ within. I am reminded often of the words of the letter to the Church in Laodicea which we find in the 3rd chapter of Revelations, where we are told that our relationship with Christ should be like our first love, full of passion and commitment.

However, despite my belief in prayer, I find it a continuous struggle. Perhaps because of my disorganised nature and my busy lifestyle, I do not find it as easy to set aside the time as regularly as I should for this most essential of activities. And yet if I cannot find the time to wait before my Creator, what is the point of having time for anything else? Like many Quakers, I justify this by saying that this is understandable, as I am on so many committees which are doing so many good things. But Friends the world over must continuously remind themselves that our influence in the world does not come from our committee work, or our United Nations Offices, or our Nobel Peace Prize, or from all the wonderful parts of our history that we call our heritage. No, our authority comes from the reality that the living God dwells in our very midst. It is strengthened by the knowledge that we can, and many do, commune with the Prince of Peace on a daily basis. Once again I am reminded of George Fox and the following words of William Penn concerning him.

“But above all he excelled in prayer. The inwardness and weight of his spirit, the reverence and solemnity of his address and behaviour, and the fewness and fullness

of his words, have often struck even strangers with admiration, as they used to reach others with consolation. The most awful, living, reverent frame I ever felt or beheld, I must say, was his in prayer. And truly it is a testimony that he knew and lived nearer to the Lord than other men; for they that know him most will see most reason to approach him with reverence and fear.”

Is it any wonder that Oliver Cromwell, King Charles II, and thousands of others were affected by the words and nature of this man? This was a man who walked in the presence of the living God. And what is exciting is that this privilege is not just for the few. It is available to each of us as we struggle through the day-to-day chores of our lives.

Closely related to prayer, and at the very heart of unprogrammed Quaker worship, is the discipline of waiting. Throughout Scripture and the writing of early Friends, we find continuous reference to our need to wait on God. In the book of Lamentations 3:24-26 we read this.

“I say to myself, "The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait on him." The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.”

And when referring to Public Worship, Robert Barclay in his Apology said the following.

“When assembled it should be the common task of one and all to wait upon God. It should be a time for turning away from one's own thoughts and for suspending the imagination in order to feel the Presence of the Lord in the midst and to know a true gathering in his name according to his promise. Then, when everyone is thus gathered, and all meet together inwardly in their spirits, as well as outwardly in their persons, the secret power and the virtue of life are known to refresh the soul. It is there that the true motions and breathings of God's Spirit are felt to rise.”

These are but two expressions of a principle at the very centre of Quakerism. What more could we ask for as we seek to listen to God, than to experience the true motions and breathings of God's Holy Spirit in our lives?

Another tool I have found valuable in the effort of listening to God is the discipline of fasting. Fasting has always been seen as one of the quirkier expressions of religious life. Yet it has a long and valuable tradition in Christianity, beginning with Christ himself. For myself I began fasting for a very specific reason.

In 1982, in my early 20's, I went to the Triennial in Kaimosi, and during the week was excited by the idea of a world gathering for young Quakers. I happily accepted the role as Irish contact person and heard nothing more for a year. But in June '83 the Friend responsible for getting the European Young Friends organised got a job in Belize. A few days before he left he sent me a letter asking would I be willing to take over his responsibility. I knew hardly any Young Friends in Europe outside of my own Yearly Meeting. While I was excited about this new opportunity, I had absolutely no idea what I was supposed to do.

During the next few months as I called together what was to become the most focused, dedicated and enjoyable committee I have ever had the privilege to be part of, I very quickly

realised that this World Gathering of Young Friends would be a waste of time, if God was not the central focus of it. And so to prove that I was serious about this gathering and God's part in it, I committed myself to fast for 24 hours each week, until the event happened. So it was not because of a desire to hear God more clearly that I began this discipline. Yet what I found was that, as I fasted, I was continually reminded of God's presence. If nothing else, my rumbling stomach would not let me forget. In a world that is too busy, is it not vital to be reminded that God is there and in control, if only I would let it happen? And so, often during the following two years, as we prepared for this gathering, God used my fasting to remind me to have faith in the Divine plan.

I remember sitting in the gardens at Guilford College, on the first evening of the gathering, crying. I had given two years of my life to making this event happen. I was tired and I realised I had done all I could to make it a success. I knew that I had to release it to all the young Friends from around the globe who had arrived to participate. But more importantly, and perhaps most difficult for someone who likes to be in control, I had to trust God that the Holy Spirit would be at work in the gathering. I had to learn that God would use the gathering, as it pleased God. Through a British young Friend, who came past and noticed me crying, God sent the reassurance I needed.

As I look back on the gathering and the impact it has had in our Religious Society, I know that God was in control, that the Holy Spirit was at work. This for me was a lesson in trust.

Hearing what God wanted to say to me through that Young Friend is an example of the last discipline I wish to consider. It is the ability to hear God's voice when least expected. Although it may seem odd, I do believe that this awareness comes with discipline. As I have already said, I have experienced the fact that God finds it easier to use someone who is well prepared. In my own life I have experienced God speaking through the truly mystical and the plainly mundane, but most of all I have found that God speaks through people. With some people it is their words that strike to the heart, while with others, God uses the way they live their lives as a challenge to my soul.

At this point I wish to move to an issue that is relevant both to this subject and to the Friends gathered in this room. If we are to learn to truly listen to God, then we must also learn to listen to each other within the Religious Society of Friends. I suspect I am probably talking to the converted, as you are the ones who have come to this Triennial. But sadly we have, in almost all our Yearly Meetings, Friends who wish to be kept at a distance from those who may contaminate their view of Quakerism. They are believers in the 'Come ye out from among them and be ye separated' policy. Although it may surprise some of you, I believe this problem is just as great among liberals, as among evangelicals. A Friend from the liberal tradition, who is at this gathering, once said to me, 'Liberal Friends are tolerant of everyone except Evangelical Friends'.

Ireland Yearly Meeting is a very rare thing. As I understand, it is possibly the only Yearly Meeting in today's Quakerism that has maintained strong and distinct Evangelical and Liberal wings under its care. These different traditions have sometimes struggled to stay in unity with each other. At various times, some in one or other tradition have feared that their group may be under threat because of influences both inside and outside of our Religious Society. Yet as I have grown up in this Yearly Meeting, I have become aware of these fears being challenged, by the tender concern of many individuals within our midst who truly cherish this diversity. They have understood that uniformity is no blessing, and that there is no greater benefit to the soul than the Friend that challenges where you stand and asks you to validate what you believe. I very quickly realised that if my personal experience of the living inward Christ was real, as I knew it to be,

then I had nothing to fear from having that reality challenged. We all sometimes need a spiritual thorn in the side or pain in the butt.

I have never believed that compromise is something that should be easily given. A faith hard earned is never thrown away casually. Friends who compromise easily tend to end up being all things to everyone, and therefore little use to anybody. But there is a need for each of us to listen, and to hear in gentleness and love, how God has spoken in the lives of others. It may well not be our experience, indeed it may go as far as to dishearten and dismay us. But if as Friends we have always believed the Inward Christ is within each of us, then we need to trust that the living God is at work in all our lives. By listening to other Friends we can be encouraged, nourished, challenged and even transformed by the awesome workings of the Holy Spirit.

I should add one more thing. With each of these disciplines I have tended to talk from a personal and individualistic perspective; yet, they are just as easily of use to a worshipping community as to an individual Friend.

In concluding this section I wish to share some further thoughts. If our prayer life struggles, then so will our ability to listen. If our willingness to be truly obedient to what God calls us to is limited, then so is our ability to listen. If by creating a God to suit our own needs, the real living and inward Christ is diminished, then so is our ability to listen. If we carry past blame and guilt around with us so that we are neither able to forgive or be forgiven, then again we damage our ability to listen. God wants us to be released of all our burdens, to be freed from all expectations, so that in the end we stand naked before the Almighty, ready and open to really hear what we have to hear.

And now for a word of warning. It is important that in seeking to hear God's voice, we take care to discern that true voice from other thoughts, which are of our own or other people's making. Friends, because of their belief that the Holy Spirit rather than the Bible is our final authority, need to take greater care not to be misled by wayward prompting in our hearts. Both the early Church and early Friends established clear guidelines and methods of discerning the will of God, yet almost all Friends today have either abandoned or sidelined some of these safeguards. If we are to ensure that the leadings we have, either as a group or individually, are of God, then it is essential that we test these leadings both against scripture and also before the corporate body of the worshipping community. I believe that much confusion has arisen in many Yearly Meetings over the years, simply because Friends have failed to carefully check their leadings in such a manner.

I knew from the moment I was asked to give this keynote address, that it was essential that I speak personally. I have always believed that I must be honest and share my own struggle to listen and to hear the voice of God. I have never found this an easy task.

Although I would describe myself as evangelical, I have never understood why some evangelicals present our relationship with the living God as easy and simple. I have never found it so. Sometimes I know with a certainty that there is a specific something that God wants of me, while at other times I wonder why I even bother, for I seem to find no clarity as to the way forward. Yet I have found that even in the darkness and uncertainty of the struggle, in the moments when little seems clear, God is there. I often discover, late in my search for a clear leading, that my uncertainty is often due to obstacles I have myself placed on the road to Truth. I am often reminded of a poster I read outside a church in Manchester when I was a student. It simply said 'If you feel far away from God, guess who moved.'

For myself, one of my greatest struggles has been my own ego. Like many Christians, I battle with the crucial matter of who controls my life. I realise that in everyday life I have the responsibility of getting myself out of bed and washed each morning. These everyday necessities are not what I am concerned about. The issue I raise is a much more fundamental one. In essence, it quite simply challenges me to place my trust in the Giver of Life. I frequently find among Friends that many put great emphasis on self-control. While I in no way want to question the fact that it is vital for each of us to feel content and to love ourselves for who we are, this in no way should hinder us from releasing ourselves into the hands of God. In my own life, the struggle to fully commit, to hand my life completely into the arms of God, goes on.

But why should this matter of control be of concern to those of us who seek to listen? It's as simple as this. What is the point of making the effort to listen for the still small voice of God in our hearts, if when we hear it, we simply say 'well, that was interesting' and go and do our own thing? There is little reason in seeking to hear God's voice if it is only for the entertainment value. You may as well stick to the television. The purpose of spiritual listening is to find the will of God for our own lives and for the life of the community we are part of. It is just as vital that each Friends Meeting or Church seek, as a worshipping community, to find the path that God has for them.

In the attempt to speak personally there is one thing I can say with certainty. This is something that I know experientially. There is a God that is real, that can speak in the very depths of your heart. And you will find that there is, in that quiet place, the very Light of Christ gently waiting, as promised in the first chapter of the Gospel of John, for each of us to truly respond, with the same obedience and commitment as Patrick or Woolman. This Light of Christ is not a comfortable thing, for it reveals the sin and failure in our own lives. But for this very reason it is able to challenge us, shake us up, and turn us round. This Light will not push itself upon us. It will patiently wait for us to choose to listen to its prompting. But when we have decided to follow the leadings of the inward Christ, it will expect our all. God never looks for a partial commitment. The Church quite simply doesn't need the half hearted.

We Quakers are as greatly in need of examining our commitment to the Christ within as we have ever been. Are we like the Children of Israel, as they came out of captivity and rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem under the guidance of Nehemiah and Ezra? Do we need to rededicate ourselves as a people to the living God?

Sometimes in my moments of darkness when direction is unclear and listening seems a futile exercise, I remind myself of the words of one of the greatest English cricketers, C.T. Studd, who gave up his fame and considerable wealth to work for the Almighty in China. When asked why he would do such a thing, he simply replied, 'If Christ my God has died for me, there is nothing that is too great for me to do for him.' I am left asking myself how great is my commitment to God? How much do I long for, and how diligently do I endeavour to bring about the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth at the beginning of this third millennium? Is the Light of Christ truly revealed through me? Am I still Listening?