

Yearly Meeting Gathering

Tuesday 1 August

Session 4

Bridget Walker

Yesterday Steve talked of speaking truth to power, drew on the image that Jesus used of binding the strong man, and asked us how ready we are to take on the Strong One. Today I would like to start by asking how do we recognise that Strong One.

In 1919 William Charles Braithwaite wrote:

‘ Evils which have struck their roots deep in the fabric of human society are often accepted, even by the best minds, as part of the providential ordering of life. They lurk unsuspected in the system of things.....’ QfP 23.05

Identifying the evils in our society

What are these evils? How do we come to see them for what they are, and what can we do?

Historically, slavery was one such evil which Quakers were early to discern and work with others to end. Today, the arms trade, militarisation, security defined as national interest, nuclear weapons – these are woven into the fabric of our society, promoted by the state and accepted by many. For Friends, our history and our peace testimony help us to see this evil, to challenge it and to offer a different way. This has been work in progress over generations and is not likely to end soon.

Dragging hidden evils into the light

Other evils may be less easy to identify. In fact Braithwaite says there is a need for ‘ men of keen vision and heroic heart ‘ to ‘drag them (that is these evils) into the light’.

We can think of such heroes (Gandhi, Martin Luther King) but I believe that discernment is open to all of us, as individuals and as a faith body, opening our hearts and minds to the spirit and looking through the lens of our Quaker testimonies.

For me working in West Africa for two years was the catalyst. Coming home was a culture shock. What had changed for me was a new and painful awareness of the colonial legacy of white privilege from which I benefited, and of racism which blighted the lives of others, and in which I was complicit. I now saw how racism was insidiously part of the fabric of our institutions, in education, health and housing, and in police community relations, in South London where I was living. As I was part of the problem I needed to engage with the situation and work for change. Anti-racism

work was essential. Recently, turning out old papers I found an appeal from a Quaker friend for others to join her in discussions with senior police officers. She identified the problem early and played a leading role in the establishment of the Lambeth Police Community Relations Committee, on which I sat in its first years. However, I would argue that the 1981 uprising in Brixton, some years after that first dialogue initiative, played a major part in making it possible for those in power to hear the truth. The patient groundwork done earlier then formed the basis for the creation of a public forum for dialogue.

Dialogue was necessary but not enough. I am not advocating riots, which have been described by Martin Luther King as the 'language of the unheard'. But we do need to make a visible challenge to organisations fomenting hatred. When I was working at Christian Aid and we took the Christian Aid banner to Lewisham to show global solidarity at a demonstration against the National Front. Some colleagues were not happy with this, and I remember uncomfortable conversations. Today, at a time of widening political divisions and overt racism, islamophobia and xenophobia, we see again the need for difficult conversations. A Friend described to us how the Northampton Globe project which is a creative model.

Evil in plain sight

Braithwaite also says we can identify evils that have been hidden, when they come into plain sight and, in his words, 'their insolent power visibly threatens human welfare'.

There is no doubt in my mind that the 'insolent power' of the state threatens the human welfare and rights of those who seek safety on our shores. They are repelled and criminalised in the name of national security, backed up by a toxic media. This evil has come into plain sight. The plight of desperate people on the borders of Europe has evoked a great surge of compassion and action; many Friends are working with others in support and advocacy.

This is in the tradition of our long history of welcoming refugees. Over the ten years since the Quaker Asylum and Refugee Network was set up, this has grown to be a concern shared by Quakers throughout Britain. A dedicated post in QPSW has been created in support. We are challenging an official policy of creating a 'hostile environment', which is broadening all the time to encompass those who have arrived irregularly and also our fellow Europeans, resident and working here for many years.

Identity and belonging are under siege. I was at an immigration tribunal hearing in May for a friend who was appealing for leave to remain. He and his partner have two small children. The Home Office representative said 'These children are not British'. That is the law. But the children were born here, this is their home, English is their first and only language. What happens if the father is deported – he comes from a different country from their mother. Where will the children go? Where do they

belong? His appeal has been refused. The lawyers are looking at the decision, but this is expensive, and he does not have the right to work. This has been going on for four years. It is important to stay alongside the family in support, and to bear witness to the failings of the system. Accompaniment of people in their struggles is a model for Friends both at home and abroad, such as in peacebuilding in East Africa, and Ecumenical Accompaniment in Israel/Palestine.

In standing with others we need to have our own deep foundations, to ground ourselves in prayer. As we hold in the light all those in the darkness of fear and oppression, we also seek the infinite goodness and love that are there to strengthen and sustain us. How do we allow the positive power of the spirit to work within us? I saw this power at work some years ago when I was with refugees from South Sudan, looking at the violent conflict in their country. We were using a tool called the ABC triangle. The points of the triangle are A for Attitude, B for behaviour and C for context. All are connected. One refugee said, 'I cannot change the context, the war is still going on; I cannot change the behaviour of those who killed my family; but perhaps I can change my attitude. Perhaps I can forgive them.' This tool helped him to engage his mind, and, despite the horrors he had known, he was able to open his heart to a painful but deeply empowering experience. Are there griefs and bitternesses which hold us captive? How can we open up to the spirit to set us free?

Hands : what can we do?

The theme for this session is 'hands' and there will be workshops where we can work through useful tools. So I will talk here more broadly about what Friends can and do do. Friends bring many skills to the table and there is something for everyone. I would suggest a portfolio approach. Power resides not just in individuals and groups but in the channels that connect them and the systems that maintain their dominance. Government, the corporations, the military, the media, all have close relationships with one another. We should aim to be similarly connected, as we identify entry points for our work and witness.

I have felt, and I see today great and positive power in this gathering - the power within us, the power among us and the power of the holy spirit to move us and guide us in action.

Silence and Voice

We seek the movement of the spirit in the stillness of Meeting for Worship. And we take that silent witness out of our meeting houses and into difficult places. I think of the Meeting for Worship I once attended at Faslane, which Friends hold faithfully every week. Silent vigils can say more than words.

But we must also speak out, and make it possible for those for whom we have a concern, to speak their truth.

What can we say?

We can only say what we know, so listening to others, informing ourselves is a starting point. When I first visited someone in immigration detention I knew I must speak out. It is one of the darkest corners of our asylum system and not widely known. It is against our testimony to equality and must be brought into the light and brought to an end.

How do we speak? Language is not neutral and there are no value free words to describe those who flee violence, repression and life threatening poverty. There is hate speech - the language of invasion and threat, the images of swarms and swamps. No human being should be described as illegal. Let us talk of forced migration and of seekers of sanctuary. Steve called stories a tool. Let us use art and story, music and drama as tools of transformation.

What can we do?

Our tradition offers quiet ways and noisy ones. Some years ago a member of the Quaker United Nations Office told me that they had been able to incorporate a phrase into a document on prisons to ensure that those in immigration detention were also included. This dedicated and detailed work together with quiet diplomacy is a strong and continuing feature of Friends work internationally. The QUNO offices in Geneva and New York provide a safe space for diplomatic conversations. Here at home, our Meeting Houses can also offer a safe space.

I mentioned noisy ways too. Once a month I join a demonstration outside Campsfield House detention centre to show detainees they are not forgotten. We shout 'Refugees are not criminals' and 'Close Campsfield down'. They respond, 'Thank you for your solidarity' shouted one, another held up a paper with his name, room number and the simple message 'Please visit'. This has been going on for 23 years. We continue because there is a constantly changing population in the Centre, and each month new people will hear us.

But it's not all noise at the fence. A group of us meet management twice a year for dialogue inside the gates. The centre is run by a private company for profit. Some of us have bought a few shares so that we can attend the AGM and ask questions. At the AGM last week the outgoing Chairman introduced us to the incoming one and the new CEO was keen to meet us. That is a conversation we shall continue. I am the one Quaker in this campaigning group. It is good to find allies and work with them.

There is not really time to talk about the many different ways in which we, as Friends, can and do work for a transformed world, in what has been described as ministry of presence – being in the difficult places, doing and saying the difficult things, and being tenacious, not giving up. Our tradition includes prophetic acts of witness. Today that is more likely to be trying to disarm a warplane than going naked for a sign. Friends called to bold, law defying witness for peace need our prayerful and practical support.

At the heart of all we are and do is relationship. We don't need to do everything ourselves, and we do need to work with others. But we can choose the place on which we will stand and work together to try and move the earth. I was once told that the desert does not spread like a tide, but is more like a rash of spots, of arid places that expand and eventually join up. This is not, perhaps, the most positive image, but I sometimes feel that movement building is like this. Points of resistance and action grow and come together. We see it locally in Refugee Week, we saw it in the national Refugee Welcome turnout last September, we see it in the creation of cities of sanctuary, sanctuary schools and theatres. Now we are planning Sanctuary Quaker Meetings – an outward and visible sign of a culture of welcome, hospitality and challenge. I believe this contributes to the overarching peace for which we strive in what some Friends have described as a time of war.

Friends are familiar with William Penn's words telling us that true godliness doesn't turn us out of the world but enables us to live better in it and 'excites our endeavours to mend it,' but how often do we look at what he went on to say...'Christians should keep the helm and guide the vessel to port; not meanly steal out at the stern of the world and leave those that are in it without a pilot, to be driven by the fury of evil times upon the rock or sand of ruin.' How do we, today, face the fury of these evil times?

Can we acknowledge the positive power we have within us, releasing our creative energies so that we can grow, make connections and, collectively, bring that power to be purposeful for justice and peace.

Bridget Walker
1st August 2017