



Diary: December 2017

Sunday 3 December	Preparative Meeting – 11.15 am after Meeting for Worship
Saturday 9 December	Experiment with Light – 10.00 am, Stratford Meeting House
Saturday 23 November	Experiment with Light – 10.00 am, Stratford Meeting House
Sunday 24 December	Themed Meeting for Worship – 10.30 am, Stratford Meeting House (details below)
Sunday 7 January 2018	Preparative Meeting – 11.15 am after Meeting for Worship

Newsletter – December 2017

What is the meaning of Christmas?

This month we will hold a themed Meeting for Worship on Sunday 24 December - Christmas Eve – and the theme will be Christmas.

The gospels of Mark and John make no reference to the birth of Jesus. Matthew and Luke have lengthy accounts – but with major differences! Matthew describes the visit of the three wise men, while Luke's account focuses on local shepherds. Neither say when the birth took place: what time of year. But for a long time now, the birth of Christ has been celebrated close to midwinter in the northern hemisphere (though with some differences in dates between churches).

In Britain there is a longstanding tradition of a celebratory meal on Christmas Day 25 December and the exchanges of small gifts. But nowadays, Christmas has been turned into a major exercise in consumption. It gives great pleasure to many, but others can find the period distressing, especially if they are living alone or are homeless. Initiatives such as Crisis at Christmas or locally the Stratford Methodist Church Christmas Day lunch are important in helping those who might feel left outside at Christmas.



But if Christmas is about celebrating the birth of Jesus, what is its religious meaning? Much will depend on how people see Jesus. But at its most basic, Christmas is about the *incarnation*: the appearance of God in a human form. There has been much disputing between theologians over the centuries about this, but definitions are perhaps less important than the understanding that in Jesus we have our best view of what God's presence might be like on this earth. We are reminded of the Lord's Prayer: *Your kingdom come on earth as it is heaven*. Jesus challenges us to see how we can follow him in bringing this about.

From their beginning, Quakers have not formally marked Christmas – or other elements of the traditional church calendar. Nowadays, it is difficult – even impossible! - to avoid Christmas, and we take a more relaxed view. But *Advices and Queries* asks: "How does Jesus speak to you today?" (A&Q 4). This is a question we can ask every day, but at Christmas, especially in its modern consumerist version, we can take time to pause and consider the challenge.

What is the meaning of Christmas? At our themed Meeting for Worship on Christmas Eve, we will start with our usual silent worship. Then, after about twenty minutes, everyone is invited to speak: perhaps with a reading or by offering a thought about Christmas. And as usual, we will hold each piece of ministry in the stillness and allow it to deepen our worship.

Deepening Quaker Worship

Following the Kindlers-on-the-Road workshop that was held in Stratford on Saturday 21 October on the theme of “Deepening Quaker Worship”, the Study Group in November discussed Quaker worship in Stratford and how we might deepen and develop it.

From an initial starting point of reflection on our personal experience of worship, we asked how our mainly silent Meetings for Worship in Stratford helped us and how newcomers to the Meeting might be helped to experience the strengthening power of Quaker worship.

We started without preconceptions or ideas about what we should discuss, but as our conversation went on, a sense emerged from the group that more vocal ministry would be valuable to the gathering together of Meeting for Worship. We recognised that our experimental themed Meetings for Worship are one way in which to encourage vocal ministry, but we felt that other ideas should be explored and more people should be involved in seeking direction.

In the meantime, those who took part in this discussion decided to take the initiative and introduce something new to our regular Meeting for Worship. Can you see what it is and does it make a difference for you? This conversation will continue.

Speaking Christian ... about the Lord's Prayer

Last month, in our series based on American theologian Marcus Borg's book, *Speaking Christian*, we started looking at one of the foundational texts of Christianity: the Lord's Prayer.

The Lord's Prayer is a text that most Christians know by heart – though as we saw last month, there are three different early versions – in the gospels of Matthew and Luke and in an early Christian text called the *Didache*. And none of these are the same as the version included in standard liturgies! But whatever its origin, it tells us the gist of what early Christians thought mattered most to Jesus. “To be committed to Jesus meant to pray for, to yearn for what is in this prayer,” says Borg.

Last month we looked at the opening of the Prayer, with its address to “Our Father”. Borg writes that this opening says “God is like a dear, intimate parent and those that use this prayer belong to the same family”. We also looked at the request that “*Your kingdom come*”. We pray for the coming of God's kingdom on earth. “The kingdom is God's passion for the earth,” says Borg: “a world of economic justice and peace”.

The prayer then asks: “*Give us this day our daily bread*”. Bread here means food – food for the day. For those of us who have plenty of food, this may sound like a reminder of our dependence on God. But for the peasants to whom Jesus talked, food was an issue of survival. Many lived at subsistence level or worse, vulnerable as many still are today to lack of food. So the coming of the kingdom of God is about food – about the material basis of life. It is about bread for the world.

The Prayer continues in Matthew's version: "*Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors*". Luke's version talks about "sins", while some English translations use the word "trespasses". What do these differences mean? Borg comments: "*Sins* suggests that the primary issue in our life with God is that we have sinned, and because we have been forgiven we should forgive those who have sinned against us. ... [But] most likely the original wording was *debts* and *debtors* ... [and] the fact that this petition follows the bread petition suggest that actual debts are meant ... Debt was the main peril in peasant life ... failure to repay debt could lead to the loss of land ... or temporary slavery until the debt was repaid."



Like the request for daily bread, the request for the forgiveness of debts follows the petition "*Your kingdom come*". This is what the kingdom of God means, says Borg: everybody is to have enough and no one is to be enslaved because of economic misfortune. Debt forgiveness is release from economic impoverishment. This is not to say that the forgiveness of sins is not important: examples of Jesus's attitude can be found elsewhere in the Gospels. But this prayer is about a vision of the kingdom of God.

Finally, the prayer asks: "*Do not bring us to a time of trial, but rescue us from evil*". A familiar alternative version says: "*Do not lead us into temptation*" – but this is not about taking a second chocolate biscuit! The gospels of Matthew and Luke both tell us of the three great temptations of Jesus while he spent forty days in the wilderness. The Greek word translated here as "time of trial" is the same translated as "temptation" in these accounts. These are situations that put us to the test.

We return to the first petition: "*Hallowed be your name*". What does it mean to ask God to make God's name holy? Because God is "Father" says Borg, he can also be considered the head of household – of the entire world! "How does one judge whether a father, a householder, is a good householder? By how the household is run. Are children well taken care of? Does everybody get enough? Are some pampered and others neglected? ... Is this household in good shape? To ask God to make God's name holy is to ask God to make the world into a good household ... *Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven*".

"The Lord's Prayer is a summary of what mattered most to Jesus," concludes Borg. "When we pray this prayer, we are praying for what he was most passionate about. And because Jesus is the decisive revelation of God's passion, we are praying for what God is passionate about. We are praying for God's dream for the world. To pray this prayer is to be invited, enlisted, into participation in God's passion and the passion of Jesus."

Sanctuary Meeting update

Stratford Quakers have written to local MP Nadhim Zahawi about reforms to immigration detention. The decision to write was taken at our November business meeting, when we discussed the new *Sanctuary Everywhere* campaign to seek changes in the law on immigration detention.

Our letter put the case for setting a limit on the length of time that anyone can be detained in line with recommendations made by a cross-party panel of MPs and peers in 2105.



We also asked Mr Zahawi to write to the minister for immigration to ask what steps the Government was taking to reform immigration detention – and more specifically, when the Government would bring into force the legal requirement in the Immigration Act 2016 to review cases of detention over four months?

Mr Zahawi's reply has been disappointing. He says he has made enquiries and is encouraged that the Government plans to make changes. Two are highlighted: a new policy on adults at risk and the ending of the practice of detaining children. But the letter makes no reference to the implementing the Immigration Act 2016 and says that introducing a time limit for detention could lead to the release of foreign criminals.

We have forwarded Mr Zahawi's letter for comment to Tim Gee, the *Sanctuary Everywhere* co-ordinator at British Quakers. Depending on his response, we may want to write again to Mr Zahawi to follow up some of the gaps in his letter. This will be for discussion at a future business meeting.

Meanwhile, Stratford Quakers continue to provide support for Welcome Here, the local group that seeks to co-ordinate a community response to the resettlement of refugees from Syria in our town. A third family arrived in Stratford at the end of November, and plans are being made to welcome and support them. We are also just approaching the first anniversary of the arrival of the first two families. Official support for these families will probably be reduced after the first year, so Welcome Here wants to know what extra help it needs to provide to cover any gaps.

For more information about Welcome Here and the *Sanctuary Everywhere* initiative, contact Roger Matthews on 01789 298503 or at roger.matthews@phonecoop.coop.

Listen to the Silence

Do you ever feel the need for time out from your hectic life? Time to be quiet, to reflect, to listen, to be?

The Elizabeth Brown Fund, a project of Golders Green Quakers, was set up by Elizabeth's children to honour her memory and life. A main objective of the Fund is to encourage people to discover the value of just being.

There are opportunities at Quaker Centres to experience a time of quiet contemplation, a retreat or a course to introduce you to one of the many ways of finding stillness and clearness within. Quaker Centres are places where practices that share a focus on stillness from many faiths can be discovered. There are six Quaker Centres in England: Woodbrooke Study Centre, Birmingham; Charney Manor, Charney Bassett, Oxfordshire; Bamford Quaker Community, Bamford, Derbyshire; Claridge House, Dormansland, Surrey; Swarthmoor Hall, Ulverston, Cumbria; and Glenthorne Quaker Guest House, Grasmere, Cumbria.

The Elizabeth Brown Fund can offer financial help to those who want to attend such courses. In particular, the Fund aims to support those who are trying this for the first time. For more information, contact elizabethbrownfund@gmail.com.