



Newsletter – February 2017

Diary: February 2017

Sunday 5 February	Preparative Meeting – 11.15 am after Meeting for Worship
Saturday 11 February	Experiment with Light – 10.00 am, Stratford Meeting House
Sunday 12 February	Area Meeting – 2.00 pm, Evesham Meeting House
Tuesday 21 February	Study Group – 7.30 pm, Stratford Meeting House
Saturday 25 February	Experiment with Light – 10.00 am, Stratford Meeting House

Syrian families in Stratford: an update

The first of the Syrian refugee families to be resettled in Stratford arrived in the town a month or so before Christmas. The first family – mother, father and four children aged from 8 to 6 months – arrived at the end of November. The second family – mother, father and three daughters aged 21 to 7 – arrived in early December. The father of the second family has health problems and uses a wheelchair.

Welcome Here, the community group which is welcoming the families, helped to prepare their houses ahead of arrival and has provided regular Arabic-speaking contacts for the families to supplement the official – but part-time – help from the support worker. Welcome Here helped to purchase or procure a range of items which were not on the official Home Office supplies list, such as a buggy for the family with very young children and toys for the children. Welcome Here also organised, with support from the Royal Shakespeare Company, a small welcome tea party at The Other Place in mid-December, and Stratford Methodist Church invited both families to its Christmas Day lunch, when a good time was had by all.

With the start of the New Year, the adults have started to attend English classes at Stratford College. These are being supplemented by support at home from Welcome Here volunteers with expertise in teaching English as a second language. Welcome Here volunteers have also been providing lifts to the College and one volunteer, who speaks Arabic, is attending the beginners' classes to help with interpretation. One child has been found a school place, and the local Soroptimists have paid for school uniform and basic equipment such as pens. The other two school-aged children have now been offered places, though the school is some distance from their home and they would need to travel by taxi each day.

Although it has not to date asked for funds, Welcome Here has received over £1,000 in donations, over half of which has been spent on various items for the families. It has also been offered funds by local churches. With the arrival of more families, funding will become a greater issue.

The next phase of arrivals in Warwickshire is due towards the end of March. It was hoped that one family would be coming to Stratford, but this has fallen through because of problems with securing a house. After March, the next arrivals will be in June, and the District Council is keen to hear about possible houses to rent from this time. Contact Roger (details below) if you hear of anything.

Much help has been given to the families in the two months since their arrival, but ongoing help is clearly needed as different issues seem to arise every day! And further help will be needed as more families arrive in the town. Both the local councils and Welcome Here have been learning about the first families' needs and devising ways to meet them on a day-to-day basis. But in the future, arrangements are likely to become more organised: the councils, for example, are asking that volunteers helping the families on a personal basis sign up as "befrienders" through a scheme run by Coventry & Warwickshire Mind. Welcome Here is also looking to formalise its organisation.

There are now over 160 people on the Welcome Here general mailing list, and more people are getting in contact as they hear about the families and the work of Welcome Here. Welcome Here holds regular meetings, usually hosted by Stratford Quakers; the next will be at 7.30 pm on Monday 6 February. Any interest or questions - contact Roger at roger.matthews@phonecoop.coop or phone him on 01789 298503.

Speaking Christian about ...forgiveness

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

As Borg notes, like sin and because of sin, forgiveness is also a dominant theme in many traditional views of Christianity: "wherever sin is emphasised, forgiveness invariably is as well, for it is the antidote to the most common understanding of sin". And often an emphasis on our need for forgiveness goes with a punitive image of God's character: God will punish if we have not sought and received forgiveness.

But what happens, ask Borg, if we understand forgiveness in a different Christian framework – one that emphasises the gracious character of God? If God is gracious and forgiving, compassionate and loving, what does forgiveness mean?

In the Bible, the yearning for forgiveness sometimes comes as the result of violating God's commands. When a strong sense of guilt is felt, forgiveness seems the answer. But is being forgiven dependent on things we do? Is the forgiveness of God conditional on us meeting certain standards or doing certain things? Or are we already forgiven – that is accepted by God – whether we know it or not? This has been the radical meaning of forgiveness in the Bible, supported by influential theological voices within the Christian tradition who have said that God's acceptance of us is unconditional.



This is another layer of meaning in the story of the prodigal son. Although the son prepares a confession of sin, his father does not need to hear it – the father sees the son a long way off and, filled with compassion, rushes to meet him. The parable is about return, welcome and celebration: the son is already forgiven, is already accepted by the father.

This is forgiveness “in spite of” – that is, a sense of being accepted by God in spite of our imperfections or worse. We have been less than we could or should be – but God’s forgiveness means that we are loved by God in spite of that.

But, says Borg, it is vital that we see this and make it real in our lives – or nothing will change. “If we do see that forgiveness is unconditional and realise it by making it real, then the Christian life no longer consists of believing or doing what we must in order to be forgiven. God already accepts us and wills our well-being. See this, believe this, realise this, and your life will change.”

Whose verdict of ourselves do we accept, asks Borg. Our own? Or God’s? The Christian life is not about measuring up – it is about liberation so that we can participate in God’s passion for the transformation of ourselves and the world.

What does this mean for our relationships with other people? “Forgiveness occurs not only in our relationship with God but also in our relationships with one another,” says Borg. Think about parents, he says. Good parents do not stop loving when their children are troublesome or naughty. “This is forgiveness as unconditional love, even if it wants something better for the beloved.”

Forgiveness is also an important element in adult relationships. For people who have suffered, the ability to forgive may need to be cultivated. And forgiveness may be crucial for those who have done wrong: think of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa in the years immediately following the end of apartheid. But in a setting like this, says Borg, forgiveness is more than just saying “It’s OK”. Making one’s peace with the past means one can move into a new way of life that involves freedom from the past. “Is liberation without forgiveness possible?”

“The Lord is my shepherd”

Preparative Meeting in January decided to restart our monthly Study Group meetings in February, beginning with a session that looks at Psalm 23: *The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

The Study Group meeting will take place on Tuesday 21 February, starting at 7.30 pm. We’ll be looking at Psalm 23 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.

At the end of the Study Group meeting, we’ll consider how this session has gone and whether to continue with a series of Study Group meetings at which we reflect on Biblical (and other?) texts.

Thank you from Alice

Alice would like to thank everyone for the flowers, card and voucher given to her for her birthday just before Christmas.

Kindlers-on-the Road

At the end of last October, Stratford Quakers hosted a Kindlers-on-the Road workshop on the theme *What does love require of us?* This was a thought and faith provoking session which was greatly appreciated by those who took part. Should we host another Kindlers-on-the-Road workshop in 2017? Themes for their Saturday workshops are as follows.

- *Prayer* – Explore the concept and practice of prayer. What does prayer mean to you?
- *Vocal Ministry* – Consider the varieties of vocal ministry against the background of deep silent waiting.
- *Answering that of God* – How do we discern and answer “that of God”?
- *Deepening Quaker Worship* – Explore the simple, radical and contemporary practice of Quaker worship.

The question of hosting a workshop – and if we do, on which theme – will be discussed at Preparative Meeting on Sunday 5 February.

Helping people with money problems

Stratford Churches Together is looking at providing more help locally for people with problems with money by linking up with the charity Christians Against Poverty (CAP). CAP run a debt advice centre in Leamington Spa, and churches in the Kineton area have organised a money coaching service, provided by volunteers trained by CAP. A few years ago, Stratford Quakers organised a meeting about CAP’s work, but there was not enough interest to take things forward at that time.



CAP provides a range of different services. Money coaches offer local, non-technical courses to help people to manage money better. Debt centres provide more detailed technical help and support to enable people to become debt-free. Because unemployment is often a root cause of money problems, CAP also run Job Clubs, helping people back into work, and it also runs Release groups, helping people to be addiction free.

One idea is to set up a CAP debt centre in Stratford, employing staff with appropriate skills and experience in helping people get clear of debt. Volunteers would also be needed to help people through social contacts and support. If you are interested in this development, contact Roger Matthews, the Quaker representative on Stratford Churches Together, on 01789 298503 or at roger.matthews@phonecoop.coop.