



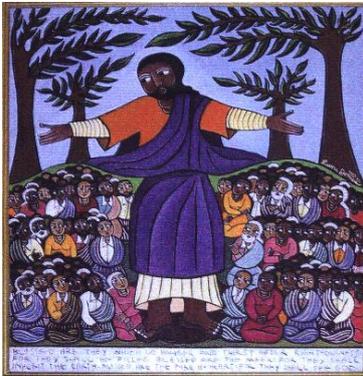
Newsletter – February 2018

Diary: February 2018

Sunday 4 February	Preparative Meeting – 11.15 am after Meeting for Worship
Saturday 10 February	Experiment with Light – 10.00 am, Stratford Meeting House
Sunday 11 February	Area Meeting – 2.00 pm, Stratford Meeting House
Tuesday 20 February	Study Group – 7.30 pm, Stratford Meeting House
Saturday 24 February	Experiment with Light – 10.00 am, Stratford Meeting House

Blessed ...

Over the next few months, Stratford Quakers' monthly study group will be looking at the Sermon on the Mount – probably the most concentrated collection of thinking about God and life in the presence of God to be found in the Bible! It's unlikely there was a single occasion when Jesus preached as Matthew suggests, sitting down on the side of a mountain. It would be too much for any audience to take in! More likely, the Sermon on the Mount is a collection of individual sayings, perhaps spoken many times, which are brought together to summarise much of Jesus's teachings.



For our first session on Tuesday 20 February we will look at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount as it is set out in Matthews' Gospel: the Beatitudes at Chapter 5, verses 1-12. As we saw at the end of last year, when we looked at Marcus Borg's presentation of the Lord's Prayer, for Jesus, the kingdom of God is about bread for the world and freedom from debt. It is good news for the poor. The Beatitudes, too, connect the kingdom of God and well-being for the poor: God's kingdom is a kingdom on earth which transforms life for the poor and hungry.

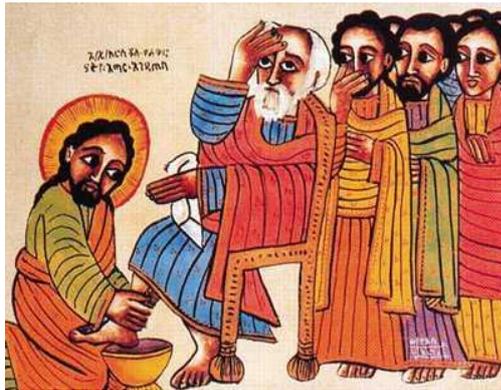
But Jesus is not simply a social prophet: he also proclaims a path of inner transformation. Inside and outside, of course, go together: we cannot be changed spiritually without changes to the way we see the world and act within it. We will be exploring these ideas together when we meet on 20 February. And below is a reflection on the first of the Beatitudes "Blessed are the poor in spirit ..." by Richard Rohr. A short meditation by Richard Rohr is being included in the newsletter each month in 2018.

Blessed are the poor in spirit

The Sermon on the Mount is the very blueprint for Christian lifestyle, and most scholars see it as the best summary of Jesus' teaching. But we can't understand this wisdom with the rational, dualistic mind; in fact, we will largely misunderstand it while convinced that we got it on the first try. Jesus taught an alternative wisdom—the Reign of God—which overturns the conventional and common

trust in power, possessions, and personal prestige. To understand the Sermon on the Mount, we must approach it with an open heart and a beginner's mind, ready to have these normal cultural beliefs and preferences changed. Most people were never told this and tried to fit the Gospel into their existing cultural agenda.

The Gospel of Matthew sets the stage for the Sermon on the Mount: Jesus sees the crowds following him and heads to "the mountain" (symbolic for the new Moses giving a new "law") with his disciples. This is his opening line, which necessarily must be central to his entire message; it is a key to everything else: *How blessed (or "happy") are the poor in spirit; the kingdom of Heaven is theirs.* — Matthew 5:3



"Poor in spirit" means an inner emptiness and humility, a beginner's mind, and to live without a need for personal righteousness or reputation. It is the "powerlessness" of Alcoholics Anonymous' First Step. The Greek word Matthew uses for "poor" is *ptochoi*, which literally means, "the very empty ones, those who are crouching." They are the bent-over beggars, the little nobodies of this world who have nothing left, who aren't self-preoccupied or full of themselves in any way. Jesus is saying: "Happy are you, you're the freest of all."

The higher and more visible you are in any system, the more trapped you are inside it. The freest position is the one I call "on the edge of the inside"—neither a "company man" nor a rebel or iconoclast. The price of both holding power and speaking truth to power can be very great. You ricochet between being offensive and being defensive, neither of which is a contemplative or solid position. Further, you are forced to either defend and maintain the status quo to protect yourself and the group or to waste time reacting against it. Cynthia Bourgeault, calls this "pouring empty into empty."

The "poor in spirit" don't have to play any competitive games; they are not preoccupied with *winning*, which is the primary philosophy in the United States today. Jesus is recommending a social reordering, quite different from common practice. Notice also how he uses present tense: "the Kingdom of God *is* theirs." He doesn't say "*will* be theirs." That tells us that God's Reign isn't later; it's now. You are only free when you have nothing to protect and nothing you need to prove or defend. Trapped people *have* to do what they want to do. Free people *want* to do what they know they have to do. Admittedly, it takes a while to get there.

Ekhnath Easwaran writes that "the joy we experience in these moments of self-forgetting is our true nature, our native state. To regain it, we have simply to empty ourselves of what hides this joy: that is, to stop dwelling on ourselves." As we forget our false, floating self, we rediscover our substantial and anchored self—which is not very needy at all.

Internally Displaced Persons

There are around 40 million Internally Displaced Persons in the world – people who have fled their home but are still living within the borders of their home country. This is almost twice as many as those who have managed to cross a border and thus become refugees.

In 2018 Christian Aid will be focussing on the situation of Internally Displaced People – an often-forgotten group, which is why Christian Aid has chosen to highlight their situation this year. An exhibition about Internally Displaced Persons will be travelling round the country all year. It will be launched in Warwick at the end of February, with a further public meeting in Coventry on 28th February. It has also been invited to Evesham for the end of the week before the late May Bank Holiday, with a lunch event planned there on Friday 25th, and there is the possibility of it coming to Stratford in September. Watch this space!

Helping the homeless: the Weekend Meals Project

Every November, local authorities across the country try to count the number of homeless people sleeping rough in their area. In Stratford, that number has hovered around 12 for the past few years, but the latest count, carried out just two months ago, found 17 homeless people in the area.

Stratford Churches Together has been looking for some time at ways to help the homeless in Stratford. The initial focus of this work was on setting up a night shelter during the winter months, but this is proving more difficult than expected. So another idea is currently being explored: providing a warm meal at weekends for the homeless.



Peter Horrocks from Stratford United Reformed Church (URC) is leading this project, and he explains: “The Link Project helps the homeless, and provides them with a meal, during the week, but the homeless say that they don't have support at weekends and no access to free food. We thought we might be able to open the Link Project on Saturdays and Sundays, providing warmth, food and advice, but Stratford District Council would have to apply for planning permission to use these premises at the weekend - which might take two-three months. The URC has offered premises in the meantime. The intention is to open the church from 12.00 – 2.00 with teams of volunteers helping with the catering.”

Churches in Stratford are being asked to provide a team of 4-5 volunteers, who would provide and cook the food, serve the meal, and clear up afterwards. Stratford Quakers have already said they will provide a team, and Arnid Wood has offered to act as team leader. We already have about six volunteers, but the more the merrier, as there will always be times when individuals cannot make the date when the Quakers will be providing the meal. If you would like to help, or want to find out more, contact Arnid on 01789 414743 or at arnrid@hotmail.com.

Apocalypse Now?

This is the title of the Lent Course on the Book of Revelation that Rev Canon Andrew Dow from Holy Trinity will be leading for Stratford Churches Together. Andrew writes:

“We are living in troubled times. The threat of international terrorism on our own doorstep, and nuclear conflict in the Far East; the rapid spread of internet fraud, and concern over the implications of Brexit; the current social and ethical revolution bewildering in its pace – these are just some of the issues raising the level of fear and insecurity in our nation.

“Pressing questions, and fortunately for Christians, there is one book in the Bible that was penned specifically to address them: the Book of Revelation.

“In just five sessions, we cannot hope to cover the whole book in detail, but we shall explore some of the major themes.”

The course, to be held at St Andrew’s Shottery, runs for five consecutive Wednesdays from 21 February to 21 March inclusive, beginning at 7.30pm. There will be a course fee of £10, to cover expenses and course materials. It is essential to book by contacting the administrator at St Andrew’s, Margaret Spencer, on 01789 293381 or by e-mail at st.andrewschurch@btinternet.com

Area Meeting

Area Meeting in February will be held in Stratford and will be a meeting for learning.

The speaker will be Lyn Smailes, manager of New Hope, a counselling service that operates in south Warwickshire. New Hope is a Christian based counselling service that is non-denominational and has volunteer counsellors from several different religions and none. They provide very low-cost counselling to those most in need - supporting people with a wide range of issues including the bereaved, survivors of abuse and people with mental health issues.

Stratford Foodbank – can you help?

December was the busiest month on record for Stratford Foodbank, which gave out 251 food parcels, while the generous people of Stratford donated almost 6.5 tonnes of food– keeping its warehouse volunteers extremely busy.

Last year 2,163 people were fed by the Foodbank, compared to 1,375 in 2016 – an increase of nearly 60 per cent. While single people are still the typical client, there has been a steady rise in the number of families using the Foodbank – they now represent 15 per cent of those helped, up from 9 per cent the year before. The number of children reliant on the Foodbank continued to grow: in December 38 per cent of those fed were children, the highest proportion on record.

The Foodbank is also supporting an initiative at Meon Vale. A number of children were found to be going to school with no breakfast and a number of families were struggling in the area. Now food from the Foodbank is supporting a mother and toddler group and a breakfast club for school children. This will be an ongoing project which the Foodbank plans to support.

The Foodbank is still offering a lifeline to many people in our town and district – and it is only sustainable through the support of volunteers and donors. How can you help keep this vital project?

You can donate food at Morrisons, Tesco and Waitrose, where there are collection baskets. There is also a collection basket in Holy Trinity Church, and many other churches and business collect food. Cash donations are also extremely welcome to meet essential overheads. You can donate online – see the Foodbank’s website for details. And finally, volunteers are the life blood of the Foodbank – and there are lots of ways to get involved. Whatever job you choose, you will make a real difference to the life of someone in crisis. You’ll be part of a friendly team and will get full training. For full details check out the Foodbank’s website at <https://stratforduponavon.foodbank.org.uk/>.