

## Stratford-upon-Avon Quaker Meeting



## Newsletter – June 2018

## Diary: June 2018

Sunday 3 June	Preparative Meeting – 11.15 am after Meeting for Worship
Saturday 9 June	Experiment with Light – 10.00 am, Stratford Meeting House
Sunday 17 June	Adderbury Gathering – 3.00 pm, Adderbury Meeting House
Saturday 23 June	Experiment with Light – 10.00 am, Stratford Meeting House
Tuesday 26 June	Study Group – 7.30 pm, Stratford Meeting House
Saturday 7 July	All Day Area Meeting – 10.00 – 4.00, Sibford Meeting House

## “The Quakers are right ...”

On Friday 4 May, as Britain Yearly Meeting gathered in London, *the Guardian* published an article by one of its regular columnists Simon Jenkins entitled “The Quakers are right. We don’t need God”. The article began by saying that “at their annual get-together this weekend, [the Quakers] are reportedly thinking of dropping God from their ‘guidance to meetings’”. A short news item along similar lines had also appeared in the *Times* a couple of days earlier.

Two days later, after Meeting for Worship in Stratford, we had a lively discussion about the article, which some Friends had found worrying. Simon Jenkins was complimentary about Quakers, saying he had occasionally attended Quaker Meetings and found them “deeply moving”. But his article took the Quakers’ “plans” as the starting point for a reflection on contemporary religion – or the lack of interest in religion nowadays. But why had we, as ordinary Quakers, heard nothing about these “plans”? The simple reason was that no such “plans” existed.



The major item for discussion at this year’s Britain Yearly Meeting was the possible revision of *Quaker Faith & Practice*. *Quaker Faith & Practice* is revised roughly once a generation: the last revision was completed in 1994, while the previous revision dated from 1963. In 2014, Britain Yearly Meeting considered whether the time had come to revise *Quaker Faith & Practice* again.

That year it was decided to launch a process to consider the case for revision, involving as many British Quakers as possible. A programme to encourage the reading and discussion of *Quaker Faith & Practice* was put in place: over an 18-month period, we used it as the basis for discussions in the Stratford Quakers Study Group. It was on the outcomes of this process that Britain Yearly Meeting deliberated at the beginning of May. It was decided to start the formal process of revision, and a process will be put in place to do this. It will be several years before Britain Yearly Meeting is asked to approve the final version of the new text.

So no new “guidance” was being considered at Britain Yearly Meeting – and no questions raised about “dropping God”. Indeed British Quakers do not issue guidance to meetings or to individuals.

Quakers do not subscribe to a creed, and the closest thing to guidance for modern Quakers – *Advices and queries* – makes clear in its title that it is not issuing instructions or setting out required beliefs.

Quakers were about to banish God, said Simon Jenkins, “because the term makes some Quakers feel uncomfortable”. It is true that some Quakers do have concerns about using the word “God” – and this reflects a wider movement within Christianity in which traditional views of “God” are being questioned. Most Quakers nowadays have previously been members of another church and may bring with them from that background ideas about or views of “God” which they no longer find satisfactory. As Quakers avoid theological statements, people can be left unsure what the word means “God” means for Quakers or whether the values and approach of Quakerism are compatible with their understanding of the word.

The American theologian Marcus Borg used to say to people who told him they did not believe in God: “Tell me about the God in which you don’t believe”. The point is clear: we can have a conception of God which we find unsatisfactory – but that does not mean there are no other ways to think of God, ways which are more compatible with our deeper sense of religion. For some people, a different word or image may be the way in which they can conceive what others are happy to label “God”.

Quakers have traditionally placed more emphasis on experience than on words: hence the silence at the core of our worship. But words are needed to communicate our religious experience. When we speak, for example, of “that of God in everyone”, we may all have differing senses of what this means, but there is a core of shared understanding that helps us work together to do things in ways that are shaped by that understanding.

A group of British Quakers has recently produced a book *God, words and us* in which different authors explore the ways in which we speak about our deepest religious and spiritual experiences. This may be a text which we could explore in future meetings of the Stratford Quakers Study group. What do you think?

## Experts by experience?

This year’s Adderbury Gathering will be held on Sunday 17 June, when Quaker Tom Shakespeare, Professor of Disability at the University of East Anglia and a regular broadcaster, will be talking about the idea that everyone has something important to contribute to our health and social care, and that lived experience matters. He will ask how we can achieve a true partnership between expert and lay person.



Adderbury Meeting House dates from 1675 and is one of the oldest in the country, with original seating and furniture. Situated in a village just south of Banbury, the Meeting House is no longer used for weekly Meetings for Worship, but it hosts the annual Adderbury Gathering on the third Saturday in June each year – a well-attended lecture by an outside speaker followed by refreshments and the chance to meet and talk with a wide range of Quaker visitors.

The lecture will start at 3.00 pm. If you would like to go but need or can offer transport, contact Roger Matthews on 01789 298503.

## Swallowed by a whale

Since the beginning of the year, we have been publishing every month a short extract from the daily meditations published online by Franciscan writer Richard Rohr. In the last week of May, Richard's daily meditations explored the idea of "vocation". On Wednesday 30 May he began by quoting from *Let Your Life Speak*, an exploration of vocation by the American Quaker Parker Palmer, before reflecting on the story of Jonah and the whale.

*"Vocation does not come from wilfulness. It comes from listening. . . . That insight is hidden in the word vocation itself, which is rooted in the Latin for "voice." Vocation does not mean a goal I pursue. It means a calling that I hear. . . . I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity". —Parker Palmer*



I believe that the Book of Jonah can best be read as God moving someone from a mere sense of duty or career to a sense of personal call, vocation, or destiny. Notice that this vocation is almost thrust upon Jonah. It sometimes takes being "swallowed by a whale" and taken into a dark place of listening and discernment to let go of our small, separate self and its private agenda. Jonah had to be shoved out of the boat, or he would never reach Nineveh, the place to which God had called him. *Eventually, we must allow ourselves to be drawn by our soul's desire rather than driven by ego needs.*

The motivating energies of ego and soul are very different. The soul's impulse comes quietly and generously from within; we do not look for payment, reward, or advancement because we have found our soul gift, our inherent gladness. To be an oblate—someone who is offered—is quite different from seeking security, status, or title.

Listen, wait, and pray for your unique gift, your True Self. Meditation should lead to a clarity about what you are and, maybe even more importantly, what you are not. I have found it difficult over the years to tell people when something is *not* their gift; it is usually very humiliating for the person to face their own illusions and sense of entitlement. One sign that something is your vocation is that you would do it for free, even if there is no reward or social payoff. This clarifies a vocation quite quickly.

Parker Palmer writes:

*"How much dissolving and shaking of ego we must endure before we discover our deep identity—the true self within every human being that is the seed of authentic vocation. . . .*

*"Today I understand vocation . . . not as a goal to be achieved but as a gift to be received. Discovering vocation does not mean scrambling toward some prize just beyond my reach but accepting the treasure of true self I already possess. Vocation does not come from a voice "out there" calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice "in here" calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfil the original selfhood given me at birth by God."*

## Make a day of it!

Area Meeting on Saturday 7 July will be held at Sibford – but will be a meeting with a difference! Details are still being finalised, but the day will start with welcome and refreshments at 10.30, and will mostly be given over to activities including arts and crafts, music and local walks. There will also be a shared lunch. You will be welcome to come for specific activities – or make a whole day of it. Plenty of home-made cooking is promised – and all we need is good weather.

There will be more details in July's newsletter.

## Get involved with Fairtrade Stratford

The movement for fair trade had its origins in the recognition that millions of small farmers and producers in less developed countries were living in poverty because they were not being paid a proper price for the goods they produced. Powerful organisations based in rich countries like Britain and the United States dictated the prices that were paid for internationally traded goods – and those prices were rigged in their favour.



So Fairtrade is not about charity: it is about ensuring a fair deal. Producers of goods that are traded under the Fairtrade mark are guaranteed a minimum price that is not below the cost of production; if the market price is above this minimum, then the producers receive the higher, market price. Fairtrade producers also benefit from a “Fairtrade premium” – a payment they can use to improve their business or invest in community facilities like schools and health centres. In return, Fairtrade businesses agree to pay employees properly and to meet health, safety and environmental standards.

The idea of a “Fairtrade Town” – a place where local residents and businesses actively promote Fairtrade – started in Britain some 20 years ago. There are now over 1,000 Fairtrade Towns around the world. And one of these is Stratford-upon-Avon, which has been officially recognised as a Fairtrade Town since 2007. Stratford Quakers have been active supporters since then.

Fairtrade Stratford will be holding its 2018 Annual General Meeting at the Quaker Meeting House on Wednesday 27 June, starting at 7.30 pm. This will be an important meeting, as new members are needed for the steering group and a new Chair will be elected, as Roger Matthews is standing down after 7 years in the job. It's also an important time for Fairtrade generally, as a number of large business are seeking to undermine the approach by launching their own “fairly traded” schemes. By and large, these schemes do not guarantee fairer trade: instead they propose to make charitable donations to producers, replacing rights with handouts.

If you are interested in Fairtrade and want to find out more about ways to help protect and promote the scheme, then come to the AGM on 27 June.

## Study Group

The Study Group meeting in June will be later in the month than usual – on Tuesday 26 June, starting at 7.30 pm.