

CARING FOR OUR HOME – A QUAKER PERSPECTIVE(2)

My title for this introductory part of this morning's programme is 'Caring for our Home – a Quaker Perspective. Water and the Sea constitute our theme for the day so that too has been with me when preparing what follows.

Here we are this morning, a gathering of people from different faith backgrounds, Christians of different denominations, perhaps some people of no faith, but what unites us this morning, what has brought us together at this point is, I understand, a concern for our planet.

This planet, our home. The Apollo 17 crew caught this breathtaking view of our home planet as they were travelling to the moon in December 1972 – nearly 44 years ago.

Writing in 1980, astrophysicist Carl Sagan gave this caption to one of the earth-from-moon images:

'The home planet of an emerging technical civilization, struggling to avoid self-destruction. This world is observed from a temporary outpost near its lone natural satellite.'

This beautiful planet, this fragile ecosphere which nurtures life in all its myriad forms is an awe-inspiring mystery. We are learning more about it every day. Water covers just over 70% of the planet's surface and water is essential for life – no water, no life. Every living organism has water as a constituent part. This extraordinary substance comes in three guises, three forms: liquid, solid and vapour/gas – and it's never used up – it is, in fact, continuously recycled. It's the nearest you get to an eternal substance existing in time. And yet, I imagine

I'm not alone in taking it for granted – a commonplace; water, just part of our world. I find it no surprise, as I delve into these matters, that water is often used symbolically in the spiritual domain. I will come back to this later.

So, we are brought together today by a shared concern – perhaps also by a desire to share insights, to pool resources and skills; perhaps again by the sense that, working together in Faith, mountains can be moved. I believe they can. Firstly, then, we need perhaps to spell out, to recognise together what gives rise to our concern.

There is now a consensus amongst all experts in the field that the climate is changing and a consensus amongst virtually all experts (97%) that climate change is being caused by human activity. I think that we need to be clear here that when we talk about climate change what we're actually referring to is not just any old change but a change in the climate which is detrimental to the survival of life on earth in general and our species in particular. A big deal.

And yet, we have governments who are behaving as if this consensus didn't exist. Our Prime Minister has just abolished the Department for Energy and Climate Change; a potential leader of the United States of America is a climate change denier. And the Paris Agreement signed this year is not binding – and anyway settles on a 2 degree global warming target by 2100 which falls far short of what is needed.

A visiting alien might be forgiven for believing that we are lemmings, and not, as we like to think of ourselves, intelligent, thinking, reasoning creatures capable of ensuring our own survival and that of our children.

Why? that's the big question. Why? Why are we as a species in denial? Studies have been done on how human beings react to threat. How they cope better if the threat is immediate or near at hand – there's a tsunami on its way, grab your stuff and run to a high place. Broadly speaking, we do just that. But when the threat is of something happening years hence, and particularly when one or two voices question the claim anyway, we're much less likely to run.

While this is, I'm sure, true, there is a bigger picture and one which accounts more fully for our unwillingness to believe the threat. The economic systems of the West are wedded to a lifestyle based on unbridled capitalism and the consequences for this planet, our home, are disastrous. We are treating the planet on which we depend for our existence as an infinite resource – something to be used to further our own selfish ends. We are behaving as if the earth and all creatures upon it are ours to do with as we will. The crisis is a spiritual one. To quote the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, we need to be asking ourselves questions about Life, the Universe and Everything!

But to do so means changing our value system; our economies are built on the assumption that growth can continue unabated. We are encouraged to throw things away and buy new. Our oceans are being used as a rubbish dump. So much plastic is getting into our ocean that in some places these plastic particles outnumber plankton by a ratio of 26:1. The planet's seas are choking on our junk: Plastic bottles, plastic bags and tons of cigarette butts. Distant spots in the ocean — called garbage gyres — have become vortexes where humanity's rubbish floats on the water for miles on end.

What can individuals like ourselves do? What can we do as groups of individuals? What can we do as Faith Communities? Faced with the enormity of the challenge before us, how do we proceed?

Well, I have been asked to talk to you about where we Quakers stand on all of this. A little bit of history: Quakers came into being at a time of social unrest during the Civil War in the middle of the 17th Century. It was a radical religion; it was a revolt against the way religion was practised at the time; when George Fox, considered the founding father of Quakerism, had come to a point of despair, having sought answers from all the different religious authorities of his time, and not found what he was looking for, he tells us in his journal, that a voice spoke to him saying: *‘There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to your condition.’* He gained increasing numbers of followers. Many became itinerant preachers, travelling both in the British Isles and abroad. Their message was that religion was primarily an inward matter. That each of us is equal before God; that we each have the capacity to commune with our Maker and be taught and led directly. There was therefore no need of a ‘priesthood’; there was no need for outward ritual or special buildings for ‘God does not dwell in buildings made by hands.’

The Religious Society of Friends – Quakers – has evolved and adapted over the intervening 350 plus years. But the central tenet is alive and well: we each of us have the capacity for direct experience of the Divine. Further that when we gather together in Meeting for Worship or in Meeting for Worship for Business, when we are specifically seeking for guidance as a corporate body, that guidance will come. This is the faith that leads us, whether in small local

meetings, in area meetings or, once a year, when representatives gather together at what is called Britain Yearly Meeting.

A further surviving tenet is that, if we are faithful to the guidance given us, this will lead to action in the world. William Penn, Quaker and founder of Pennsylvania, writing in 1682, said this: *'True godliness don't turn men out of the world but enables them to live better in it and excites their endeavours to mend it....Christians should keep the helm and guide the vessel to its 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.'*

These leadings, this guidance received from the God of Love or, as Marcus Borg would say, from the Ultimate Reality that underlies all things, this teaching was, little by little, seen to conform to clear principles and these principles were formulated as Testimonies; testimonies because, in putting each one into practice, Quakers would be testifying to the truth of them in our lives. Each of us is equal in the sight of God; has equal worth; we, therefore, are led to treat all people equally. Thus, we have the **Testimony to Equality**. God is the God of Truth so we will never be led to lie. Hence, the **Testimony to Truth**. The whole of creation is sacred: if we are following Divine Guidance we will never be led to damage or kill anyone. As George Fox famously told the Commonwealth Commissioners: 'We are called to live 'in the virtue of that life and power that takes away the occasion of all wars.' Hence the **Peace Testimony**. Further, we are called to use as little of the world's resources as possible: plainness of dress, of buildings and of lifestyle ensued and we get the **Testimony to Simplicity**. As an aside, there's an article on the Testimony to Simplicity and its implications for the Environment in *The Friend*, a Quaker Weekly Magazine of which there are copies for you to take on the table.

In 2011 at our Yearly Meeting, Friends were led to add the **Testimony to Sustainability**.

Although this appears, on the surface to be a new testimony, it can be seen, in fact, as a modern formulation of the testimony to simplicity. It is also implied by the peace testimony extended beyond how we deal with our fellow human beings to how we deal with the whole of the created world. And, indeed, spiritually speaking, all these testimonies are ‘of a piece’, the one implied by the other. The whole of life is sacred; the whole of creation is sacred; we are called by the God of Love to care for each other and the whole of creation of which we are a part.

So, what are we Quakers doing, what have we been, so far, led to do to promote more sustainable living?

It says on the Quaker website: ‘in 2011 Quakers in Britain made a corporate commitment to become a low-carbon, sustainable community and we support each other to live out this commitment. We campaign for climate and energy justice, and to build a fairer economy which is not powered by fossil fuels.’ And, at the level of the institution, that is what is happening. And a range of initiatives are being taken about which there is some information available here. A lot of work has been done by groups of Quakers on building a new economy and what that economy would look like. There’s information on that available on the table. There’s a free course organised by our central office at Friends House in London on 19th November calling itself a ‘skill-up day for climate campaigners. There are free training days offered by a Quaker Group called Turning the Tide on how to bring about change by nonviolent means. There’s a

printout entitled Energy Justice giving lots of facts and suggestions about what we, as individuals can do.

All of this is good, as far as it goes but I feel sure we are being called and led to do more.

In the last paragraph of the printout on Energy Justice, it says: it's going to take a MASS MOVEMENT OF PEOPLE using a variety of tactics to transform the energy system....'

At the moment, the situation doesn't look promising – but let me come back to this extraordinary substance we call water. Remember I said earlier, it's never used up – it's the nearest you get to an eternal substance existing in time. It's essential to life. It's a universal solvent. No wonder it's used symbolically in the spiritual domain. And here's an example:

In what Christians call The New Testament, in John's Account of significant events in Jesus' life, there's a conversation between Jesus and a woman. It's an extraordinary conversation at every level. Jesus, sitting alone by a well, asks her for a drink of water. She can't believe he, a Jewish Man, is asking her, a Samaritan woman, for anything. That he's speaking to her is amazing enough. He then takes the conversation to another level and suggests that if she knew what God had provided as a gift and if she knew who was talking to her, she would have asked him for a drink and he would have given her living water! He goes on to describe this 'living water' as something God supplies in us which develops into a spring rising up into eternal life. I understand him to be saying that there is, potentially, in each one of us, a source which provide us with all that we need to live and flourish as our Creator intended us to. My experience

tells me that it is also an enabling power; if the God who is Love is asking us to do something then that living water is the power enabling us to do it!

Perhaps the time has come for people of faith, to humble themselves before the Spirit, beneath the Mighty Hand of God, put aside their perceived differences, seek that deep centre, and when we hear that Still Small Voice asking: Who shall I send? We will be enabled to say, together, Send Us!