

Sunday 3A. 25.1.26

There's a lot going on in my mind at the moment: the ending of the week of prayer for Christian unity, the conversion of St Paul, br. Herbert's birthday – he would have been 105 today – and still the meeting with the Quakers which began the week and their practice of finding unity through silence but, as one commentator wisely notes, a unity which is not necessarily the same as unanimity. And I think of br. Herbert's battle with authority, always allowing mercy to prevail over "law", always kind – which could at times be hugely disruptive of community – and I also think of his uniqueness in this regard, he was himself and we loved him for it, and this battle between group and personal conscience is there for us all. Somehow we have to find a way of living together whoever and wherever we are, which transcends our necessary differences, necessary because they make us who we are and give us something or, better someone, to offer to others. And so back to the Quakers struggling with this necessary tension just like the rest of us but doing so in a way that has a lot to tell the rest of us, their necessary difference for others. When they meet for business, that is to find a way forward over some particular issue, they follow their usual format of waiting in silence and

*“as with any meeting for worship the procedure is subject to the welcome reversals and happy surprises that bubble up when any group of people open themselves to the teachings of the spirit” (p59)*

The important point being perhaps that rather than coming at something full on with our usual opinions, and sense of being right, we take a step back and allow another voice to emerge which is “new” for us all or, as the Quaker commentator notes:

*“What frequently happens in the Quaker silence is that participants who are not of the same mind none the less recognise clearly what must be done.”(p62)*

What saddens Paul is that the Christians of Corinth have not allowed themselves to fully enter into this mystery but have stayed with the antagonisms which necessarily accompany issues and opinions unaccompanied by “prayer”. This is prayer as a sort of cross, a surrendering of one's own will to that of another – not necessarily an elder and better in the group but to the God of us all. It's subtle and easily mistaken but worth trying – it demands a certain innocence, a certain naivety, a purity of heart which may find us suddenly responding to a voice impossible to ignore. We have no record of Peter and Andrew, James and John, debating whether they should follow this mysterious voice – they simply do so. Just like Paul and br. Herbert and all of us at our best. Start there and unity, though not necessarily unanimity, may follow. We set aside a week for this attentive listening but it's a perennial task, a habit to be practised until we don't realise we are practising it at all – now there's unity for you, a unity that doesn't even have to be named - that interminable naming of parts. *“I am for Paul”, “I am for Apollos”, “I am for Cephos”, “I am for Christ”.*

It's like love, you know it's there but don't necessarily have to name it.

Br John Mayhead

Monastery of Christ Our Saviour