

Celebration LINK

November 2007

Nurturing faith in individualistic times

For pretty much the whole of my life in community I have listened to talk about the privatisation of religion. I have been one of those voices myself, on many occasions.

It is not hard to see it, when you live in community. In some sections of the church, particularly at the evangelical end of the spectrum, it is almost a virtue. The strong emphasis on the need for a personal relationship with Jesus can easily lead to a 'me and God' mentality in which faith is a private matter and evangelism the business of saving individual souls.

But evangelicals are not alone in this by any means. The spirit of the age is one of individualism, in which the right of every person to do their own thing and believe what they want is not only asserted but celebrated. It is as much a feature of church life as of society in general.

As with many things, it is only when you step outside a system that you see it for what it is. In community, you develop a habit of thinking about things in a corporate way and doing things together. You acquire a sensitivity to the way life seems to operate in the wider world.

It is not simply the more blatant aspects of individualism that become noticeable. You are also aware of the spirit of it. For example, when Fisherfolk worship began to diverge from the mainstream of charismatic worship a generation ago, it was hard to put one's finger on what exactly it was that

seemed different - it was more than just a musical genre.

Fisherfolk music was the worship of a body. Through words and music charismatic worship expressed a devotion to Jesus in his exalted state that seemed essentially private even if it took place in large public gatherings. This was also reflected in the way worship was led. It was not so much the expression of a body as a performance by professionals to which individuals present could sing along as they wished.

Almost in reaction to that kind of religious outlook, communities of all kinds emphasised a more public and political understanding of Christian faith. Christ identified himself with the poor and oppressed. The imperative of passages such as Matthew 25 outweighed the preoccupation with private worship, which all too often seemed to want to worship God and forget about our neighbour.

Of course, this is only a general impression, but over time it did seem that there was something of a divide between Christians mainly preoccupied with religious activities and those who felt the public implications of faith. The one group had energy and the other commitment, but they never seemed to come together. You did not find too many 'ban the bomb' marchers in charismatic praise meetings, or vice versa.

To a certain extent this divide was evened out as churches became more aware of the social implications of faith, although energy still tended to be di-

rected more at the charity sector than into political action. But the effect of individualism has also led to the modern insistence on rights - a phenomenon from which the church cannot insulate itself, much as some might like it to.

'Rights' raise the issue of justice, which is at the heart of Christian faith. But this is not quite as simple a matter for the church as it sounds. For Christians, rights are something not to be asserted but to be given up. Christ, we are told, emptied himself of all rights, and he is the model for his disciples.

This means that, for the Christian, 'rights' are the rights of others rather than oneself. The way that is worked out in community is through vulnerability, openness to one another, refusal to allow anything to separate us from our neighbour. This is quite a different spirit from the spirit of, say, political correctness, which is ultimately based in the idea that we are all autonomous individuals with inalienable rights.

The church is affected by this in ways that were not always apparent when the struggle was to achieve justice for some disadvantaged group. Today, Christians demand their theological rights. It is common to read about some priest or other who announces they are no longer in communion with such and such a bishop, supposedly on the grounds of conscience.

'Conscience' is an overworked concept, however, which often seems to mean the absolute right to pursue one's own

Meeting with the Visitor

One of our reasons for visiting Aliquippa in August was to be there during the annual visit of the Community's Visitor, Bishop Christopher Epting. Bishop Epting is ecumenical officer for the National Episcopal Church and is deeply involved in the current discussions about future relationships within the Anglican Communion. It was good to share something of our situation in the UK. Next year the Bishop is considering a visit during conference time, which we may also attend.



Phil & Margaret Bradshaw with Bishop Epting



Enjoying a common meal on Labor Day weekend

New ministries in Aliquippa

Labor Day is the US equivalent of August Bank Holiday, and on this occasion we were able to meet with a number of visitors and some of the more recent arrivals in the town. Recent years have seen the mission to Aliquippa strengthened by the initiatives of the Church Army (particularly the cafe project and women's prison ministry); GOAL, an addiction agency; and most recently Aliquippa Impact Ministries (AIM), an organisation affiliated to the Christian Missionary Alliance which mentors young people. All these make use of the Community facilities and join in its worship. They are a great encouragement as they bring youth, energy and gifts which are desperately needed in Aliquippa.



Images from Aliquippa: (above l.) Maggie Durran; (r.) John Stanley with Bill Farra



Above: David Ritter with Jonathan and Zachary

'Blah' conference

A series of day conferences is sponsored by the CMS in London under the name 'Blah'. As its name suggests, it is a talking shop, but its purpose is to promote understanding and exchange ideas on the subject of the 'emerging church'. Speakers vary from academics to people who are or have been pioneers in finding new ways of being church in the modern world.

The most recent conference we went to was on leadership in the emerging church. For us, one of the most fascinating aspects was the feeling that we had heard it all before - despite the subject being supposedly the cutting edge of where the church is at the moment. Some principles (for example, the idea that baptism, not ordination, is the authority for doing ministry) were being taught in the Community in the 70s. It made us think perhaps we are not as old as we sometimes feel! But it is encouraging to be able to connect with current thinking.



During our trip north (see next page) we were very pleased to meet up and have lunch with former Community members Peter and Lollo Lusby Taylor in Edinburgh. Peter is doing architectural work party time and Lollo continues with her art.

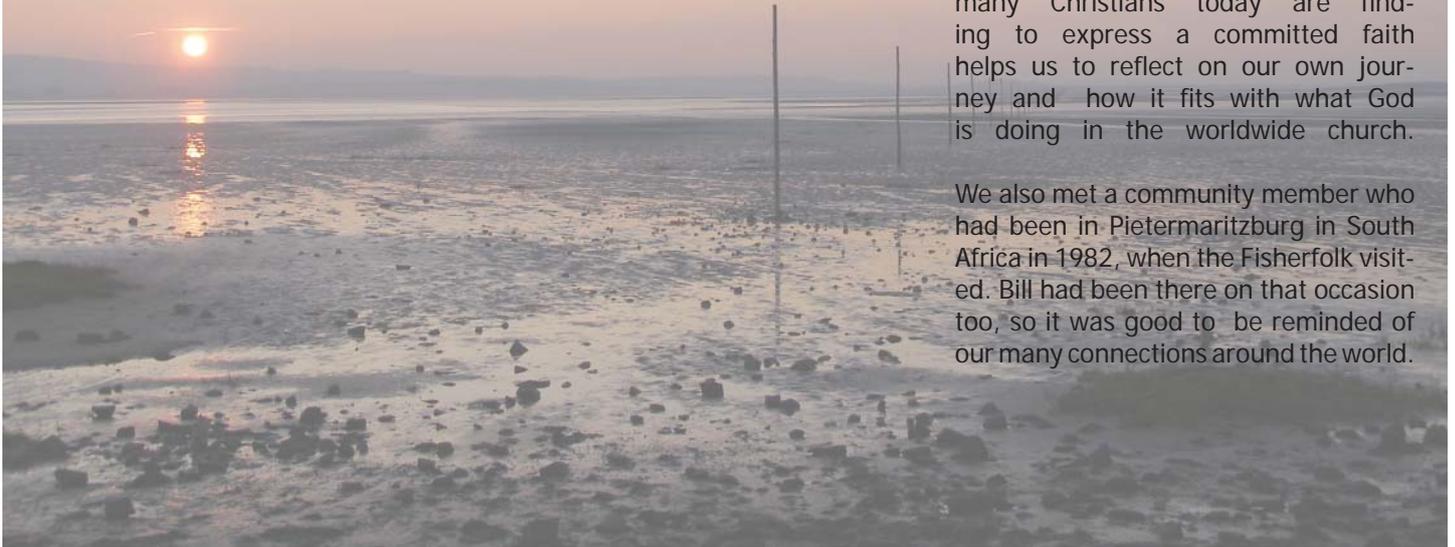
Lindisfarne

The dreamy landscape of Holy Island off the Northumberland coast was the setting for a trip to the north east with Bill Farra and May McKeown during their visit to the UK in October.

One of our aims was to make connections with others in the 'new monasticism' movement. On this occasion we were able to spend some time with Ray Simpson, Guardian of the Community of St Aidan & Hilda.

Exploring the different ways in which many Christians today are finding to express a committed faith helps us to reflect on our own journey and how it fits with what God is doing in the worldwide church.

We also met a community member who had been in Pietermaritzburg in South Africa in 1982, when the Fisherfolk visited. Bill had been there on that occasion too, so it was good to be reminded of our many connections around the world.



Left: a wooden effigy of monks carrying the coffin of St Cuthbert, in St Mary's Church, Holy Island.

Right: in St Mary's churchyard with ruins of the old priory and Lindisfarne Castle in the background.



Celebration at St John's

Nicholas Calver, Vicar of Phil & Margaret Bradshaw's church of St John's Redhill, invited Bill Farra to preach in October. Bill gave a brief overview of the history of the Community of Celebration before going on to give a challenging address from the gospel about the Pharisees who separate themselves from the poor and the sinners, thinking they are doing God's will.

Afterwards there was time for people to chat with Bill and May over coffee. A small group later went over to the local pub for lunch and an informal discussion. Bill and May have been to St John's before, but this was a chance to get to know people in a more relaxed atmosphere.



theological convictions and agendas without the inconvenience of having to work things out with people with whom one disagrees. Rights take precedence over unity, which is the one thing that the church has to offer to humanity.

Hence the spirit of community still confronts the spirit of individualism in the way that it is worked out theologically and politically. If Christian community has shown anything, it has shown that people of vastly different backgrounds can live together in peace as a body. Contrary to expectations, the needs and the dignity of disadvantaged groups are safeguarded far more effectively by the spirit of community than by an individualism which requires laws and the philosophy of political correctness to reinforce people's rights.

Individualism is essentially defensive, fearful of losing one's identity or something of value. That is the opposite of the spirit we have received from Jesus, which speaks about losing one's life in order to find it and warns against gathering to oneself at the expense of losing one's soul or one's true self.

A recent article in the Church Times commented on the overlap between theology and politics. Tony Blair saw the decision to invade Iraq to be as much theological as political, while Rowan Williams saw the decision not to oppose it too strongly to be as much political as theological. It was always so. Our personal faith beliefs are important not just for ourselves but because they have real implications for the kind of church and society that we live in.

Yet having said all this, a lifetime of community living also has a way of bringing things round full circle. Many who take that route do so as a result of personal faith and a personal pilgrimage. Faith may not be totally private, but it is personal and the question of what it takes to nurture it is becoming one of the pressing questions of the current times.

Dissatisfaction with church life is widespread, although not uniform everywhere. People are frustrated with institutional controls, or they simply have

a feeling that 'there must be more to Christian life than this.' They want to develop their faith in a way that is meaningful for them, but all too often feel they would need to leave the church in order to do it.

From the church press it seems that many find meaning in fighting theological battles, but that is surely a blind alley. At the end of one's life the fact that you have fought and separated from others over a principle is unlikely to provide comfort or a sense of meaning.

Of course, there are para-church bodies such as Spring Harvest or New Wine to provide a dimension that cannot be met by the institutional church. There has even been talk of these forming an alternative church structure if the Anglican Church is unable to hold itself together in the current climate. That, again, would surely be another blind alley, merely reinforcing division.

Yet the role of para-church bodies is important in nurturing personal faith. Traditionally, communities have always fulfilled that role, especially in times when the institutional church has been in decline. Today, the combination of secularism and aggressive religious factionalism makes it hard not to be pessimistic. In spiritual terms, it often feels as if we are on the edge of another dark age.

This is why today many people are turning to religious communities. By 'community' I do not of course mean only residential religious communities like the monastic orders or the Community of Celebration. Increasingly popular today are the dispersed, non-residential communities such as Iona, Northumbria or the community we visited this autumn, the Community of St Aidan & Hilda based at Lindisfarne.

In one way or another, such communities make promises or vows and adopt a lifestyle based on a set of principles. Prayer is normally a central aspect and members are encouraged to make retreats. Like traditional orders, there are distinctive differences between them, but the general concept of religious

life is broadly similar. Such communities recognise the need of Christians in secular life for intentional ways to develop their faith.

Other movements, often linked with such communities, go by various names such as 'new monasticism', 'emerging church', or 'fresh expressions'. These are not necessarily to do with religious life; they are more often related to mission. One of our aims is to try and stay in touch with all that is going on. Despite feeling like dinosaurs at times, it is remarkable how the same principles of common life that we learned in our early days in the 1970s keep coming up again and again.

Tellingly, the Community of St Aidan & Hilda were told in their early days by a bishop that they would be better off outside the church. Celebration made the decision to stay within it (which shaped much of its development), but even for us it has been important to be affiliated to the national church rather than to the diocese. Pittsburgh is one of those dioceses currently threatening to secede from ECUSA.

What we are finding is that being a long term, stable Episcopal presence is now at last beginning to attract reinforcements in the shape of other ministries to the town. Rather like the biblical tree in which the birds of the air nested, the Community is becoming a hub that provides worship, facilities and in some cases accommodation for other organisations. They have more gifts and energy for mission than we have, and they also contribute to our life.

What we have in common with other, different communities is the recognition that faith and mission ultimately depend on lives given to God and shaped by God, a certain core appreciation of what that means and a recognition that we are all part of one another. Individualism assumes we are autonomous and responsibility for developing our faith is ours alone. That is a recipe for division and frustration. We need each other and we need committed bodies that can offer a focus of support.

Phil Bradshaw