

# Celebration LINK

November 2009

## The lure of deep waters

I have been thinking recently about what it means to live a vowed life. Not particular vows: not marriage vows or ordination vows or even religious vows as such, but vows in general. What does it mean to understand yourself as a vowed person?

It is always possible, of course, to make a list of all the things one is supposedly committed to, either implicitly or explicitly. That kind of exercise might be helpful on occasion, but it is also likely to have the opposite effect. Given that the process of taking stock in itself implies there is some sort of question about it, a list of duties may well do no more than reinforce the feeling that one has run out of spiritual steam.

In truth, the real question is at a far deeper level than duties. It is actually a question that faces all those who profess Christ, but I am thinking particularly of those who have made vows because they have made some sort of public statement that their lives are given to God in a special way. Our tendency to measure all reality by visible, concrete results can often obscure the essentially spiritual nature of this commitment.

I find the metaphor of deep water quite helpful in this respect, and as it happens it is also biblical. In retrospect I would guess that most of us, most of the time, live our lives quite close to the surface, where peace depends on how calm the water is. If a storm is raging we are tossed about; if there is a flat calm our lives are tranquil. Here,

our experience of God does not seem to make any appreciable difference to how we feel or relate to life.

Christians who live their lives close to the surface are nearly always unhappy. If their ministry or witness is unsuccessful, they are unhappy and feel they are a failure; if their Christian work is successful they are still unhappy deep down and feel they have to maintain a front. The vowed person at least knows that true joy and peace come from a deeper place, even if the reality is that they allow themselves to live far too close to the surface for their own spiritual health. They know too that the 'deeper place' holds the source of what made them vowed in the first place.

As a clergyman in the Church of England, I know only too well the frustration of dealing with certain church authorities who seem concerned only with what work you are doing and what tasks you are performing. The essence of vowed life, whatever its context, is not about tasks but about a commitment to life in the Spirit. And although 'life in the Spirit' must have some form of concrete expression, fundamentally it is about seeking God, and seeking God as He is.

In terms of our 'deep water' metaphor, that means plumbing the depths. The depths are a place where few other creatures live. The depths are a still place, unaffected by what is happening on the surface. They are a dark place, darker even than the night. In one

way or another all these realities are reflected in spiritual experience.

This is about as far as I can go in speaking generally, for each individual is led by God in an intimate spiritual journey that is unique to them. For me, however, to say that the depths are a place where few creatures live is to say that at a certain point in spiritual life the normal contingencies of life fail to make any impact. It is not that you stop going about your everyday business, but there is a kind of withdrawal to a solitary place inside where you know that 'home' does not consist either in what you possess or in what you do.

Of course, it is easy to recognise that 'home' or 'happiness' are not to be found in what we own or do, but when we live lives close to the surface we find ourselves in practice spending all our energies chasing this or avoiding that. We think this is reality, and we react with amusement if not disdain to those who speak as if there were some deeper truth that needs to claim our attention. But those who get in touch with genuine reality soon find that all the things we acquire or do – even 'spiritual' things like a ministry or a vocation – fade into relative insignificance. Very few things touch us with their importance and the deeper we go the fewer they are.

But what does it mean to 'go deeper' or 'get in touch with genuine reality'? Near the surface life is all about movement. The chase is everything. When we get what we want, we don't feel happy or satisfied. We want more, or we want



### The Four Gospels Celebration's summer conference

The Rev. Ann Paton was the speaker at the Community's summer conference this year, her subject being 'The Four Gospels: Four Portraits of Christ'.

She led us through a sketch of each Gospel in turn, bringing out some of

the distinctive features of each one, a clue to which was contained in the opening sentence.

Matthew has a strong 'kingdom' theme, reflected in the birth narratives and in repeated references to the messianic title 'Son of David'. It has several sustained teaching sections, the best known being the Sermon on the Mount. In the final chapter there is an unmistakable claim to kingship over the whole world.

Mark, the shortest Gospel, has as its theme the suffering servant. His messiahship is hidden, yet his identity is constantly recognised. There is little teaching in Mark, but people are always reacting with amazement to Jesus, as if Mark wants to establish Jesus' authority.

Luke is written for a Greek audience, the emphasis being on Jesus as universal saviour. It has more emphasis on the marginal people than any other Gospel, and its teachings are in dialogue (rabbinical) style. It stresses the real meaning of hospitality.

John's theme is the Incarnate Son. Jesus is the Word made flesh who brings light into the world. There are several sub-themes in John: the 'hour', the 'signs', the sevenfold witness, the 'I am' statements. Jesus is portrayed as the



Father's only Son. The 'Lamb of God' title is distinctive to this Gospel.

As always, there was plenty of time for discussion, fellowship over meals, relaxing, socialising and catching up with old friends.



### Images of Greenbelt

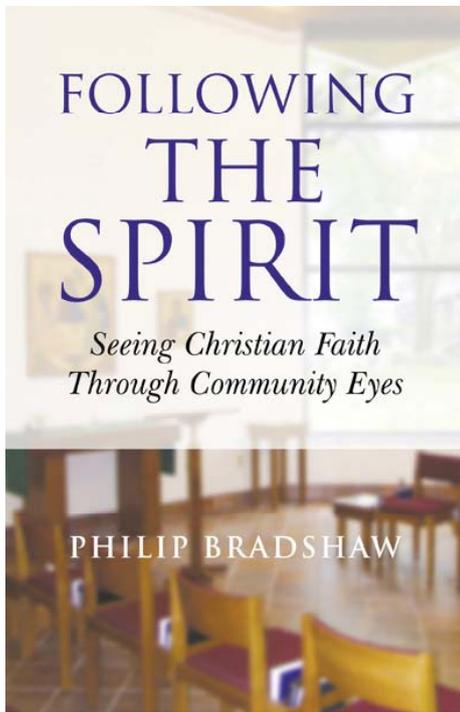
One reason we enjoy going to Greenbelt is that it has excellent speakers and keeps us in touch with what is going on in the church worldwide.

One of this year's personalities, Rob Bell, the charismatic pastor of Mars Hill church in Grand Rapids USA, was so popular we couldn't get in, but plenty more were on offer. Professor Alister McGrath was on top form, demolishing the atheism of Professor Dawkins. Bishop Gene Robinson gave a very good address on human sexuality, which was well received. Douglas Alexander, the Secretary of State for International Development, and David Lammy MP spoke of their vision for the renewal of local communities.

We also attended a number of more specialist events, such as one on bereavement featuring Sr. Frances Dominica, founder of Helen House, and an address by the Cambridge theologian Maggie Dawn exploring the meaning of the Christian theme of 'giving it up'.

Being an arts festival, there is lots to see and hear. We were especially taken with the Christian Aid exhibition this year, which by using a grain of rice for each person vividly depicted some of today's realities.

**Pictures clockwise from top left:** Professor Alister McGrath; Bishop Gene Robinson; Sister Frances Dominica; Maggie Dawn; the book store; the Rt Hon. Douglas Alexander MP and David Lammy MP; **lower pictures:** grains of rice depicting (left) the number of people in sub-Saharan Africa suffering from HIV; (right) the number of millionaires in the world.



Phil's book, 'Following the Spirit', is due to be published on 28th May 2010.

It has three main sections. The first is a factual description of the development of the Community of Celebration, from a large charismatic community to the small Benedictine style religious community that it is today. Although it contains a little of Phil's personal story, it does not generally focus on personali-

ties or the various individual communities but concentrates on the strand of Celebration history through which the idea of a religious order developed.

The second main section deals with various aspects of community life. In the early days particularly, there was often a distinctive 'community' way of seeing or doing things that was in marked contrast to the way in which most of its members experienced normal church life.

In the third section Phil reflects on the sense of theological journey involved in living community life for many years. In its origin the Community came out of the charismatic movement, whose theology emphasised the reality of God as a transcendent presence willing to intervene miraculously in the natural world. Community living, on the other hand, led to a deeper appreciation of the Incarnation and its implications for spiritual life. The two perspectives are not opposed but can often seem so because of their different language and outlook.

Some comments on the book:

'Philip Bradshaw has made an enormous contribution to the documentation of the spiritual, liturgical and mis-

sional renewal that has been taking place in The Episcopal Church...by focusing on one manifestation of this, the Community of Celebration, he has provided a clear lens through which to view the larger phenomenon' (Bishop Christopher Epting, Ecumenical Officer for TEC and the Community's Visitor).

'In this perceptive and well written book, Phil Bradshaw brings a participant's perspective to the Community's story...he is able to see the big picture, and his assessments of the Community's experiences and contributions are fair and fresh' (Alan Kreider, Professor of Church History and Mission, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Indiana, USA).

'Phil Bradshaw's account brings back many memories...the Community's ministry had a huge impact on St Michael-le-Belfrey in David and Anne Watson's time. It was the source of the core vision which inspired me as David's successor. I warmly commend this account of Following the Spirit' (Bishop Graham Cray, Archbishop's Missioner and Leader of the Fresh Expressions Team).

The book will sell at £12.95 and can be ordered from the CCCT office. More details in the next issue.



An informal gathering in the lounge at Green Pastures

The group of old Community friends featured in previous newsletters met once more at the Green Pastures centre in Poole during October.

The format included updating one another's lives, worshipping together and relaxing (drinking home made wine and reviving an old community custom of playing charades). We also attended an outdoor event. October 24 was an international day of climate ac-

tion sponsored by 350.org, highlighting the need to keep CO<sub>2</sub> to 350 parts per million. The local event invited people to form the number 350 on the beach near Bournemouth.

We also began planning a day event for 25 September 2010, when we invite old friends to join us at Lytchett Minster to renew relationships and worship together. More on this later - but book the date in your diary.

## A weekend of fellowship and planning



Braving the elements to join in a climate change event on the sea front near Bournemouth.

a repeat experience, or we chase after something else. Life is never perfect. This is because created things, and even sublime experiences based on created things, are finite. We are creatures ourselves, to be sure, but the fact that we are also spiritual beings means that we can never be satisfied with anything less than the infinite. 'Spirit' finds its natural home in the realm of eternity, of infinity, of God who is both love and ultimate reality.

To begin to find that home it is necessary in some sense to get away from the surface world of constant movement, of preoccupation with all the things of this world, in order to discover the God who cannot be known through those things even though he may be reflected in them for those with eyes to see. While for some this may mean renouncing 'the world' in a very literal sense, for all of us it should mean living from a very deep place that is necessarily a place of stillness and solitude, because it is the only way to predispose our souls to receive the knowledge of God who is Spirit.

Stillness and solitude are a kind of interior detachment, from things and from people. It is not the kind of detachment that makes people feel you are inhuman; on the contrary, the love you have, for your nearest and dearest for example, seems much clearer and more profound because it is less self invested. I think that may well be the spiritual basis for the kind of relationships that meant so much in community life, even if that was not always clearly understood. To the extent that relationships acquired some degree of exclusivity or selectivity they became less than divine, more based on natural feelings and therefore less life-giving or memorable.

Yet despite all this the fact remains that we are human beings. We cannot escape the reality that we all have human emotions and desires. To achieve interior solitude is work, there

is no doubt about that, and to achieve it we have to refocus our desire from delight in things to the desire to know God. This is what vowed life is about. We don't promise to be heroic; we simply say that by God's grace and as far as lies within us we want our lives to be disposed towards knowing God and being united with him. Vows are a way of embedding that desire so we don't give up too easily.

The other aspect of deep waters, the darkness, is far harder to talk about. I can only do so by analogy. Should anyone ask me how I know that God exists, I sometimes say that God is simply a fact of my existence. I know that God exists in the same way that I know that I exist. Indeed, there are times when it is hard to distinguish between God's existence and my existence. Paul's descriptive phrase, 'in whom we live and move and have our being' seems to sum it up. Hence, in terms of our metaphor of deep waters, to 'go deeper' is to simultaneously go deeper into myself and into God.

This doesn't sound very scientific, but it is real truth. Spiritual truth, that is. The way in which direct knowledge of God is communicated to us is in the Spirit, which is devoid of intellectual concepts. We know things without really knowing how we know. But we do know, and thus I can say, 'I know God exists.' By extension, to speak of the darkness of the depths is simply a way of saying that when we get away from the surface of life, we don't only find it to be a place of stillness and solitude; we are also led into an encounter with God that is wordless. Unlike the surface, where we are constantly being stimulated by all kinds of happenings, we are now in a world where there are no distractions and no signposts, only the infinity of God who seems indescribable and unattainable.

But God can be known through the Spirit: we have already experienced this in the earliest stages of spiritual

life. So how can we go beyond that? The key is that God is love, and to live in God is to live in love. To know God is to love him; to love him, to know him, not with sophisticated intellectual knowledge but with true knowledge that is spiritual. These are waters so deep we cannot plumb their depths, but this is what is calling us to leave the shallow surface life. And because God is love, to penetrate the depths of God inevitably affects and informs our actions – it is not that there is a stand off between activism on the one hand and some sort of navel gazing spirituality on the other.

God's love is like a magnet: it draws us to seek after him, but just when we think we have found him we find we are being drawn further. It is as if God is never satisfied. So the call that originally led us to want to give our lives to God, the call that perhaps was no more than an invitation to follow, turns out in the end to be a call to explore the depths of love which are unfathomable. Deep calls to deep: the depths of God call to the deepest place of our souls and lure us into an ever increasing desire to be united with him in our spirit.

This then is the ultimate meaning of vows. The particulars are like a plant cut off from its roots if there is no depth beneath them. Conversely, the depths make all the particulars relative in their differences from each other. The most sacrificial vows in the world are not significantly different from ordinary baptismal vows, seen in their true perspective. A sixty foot wave is no different than a ripple, when you are at the bottom of the ocean. The fact is that most of us have made vows to God if we would only but think of it. Living in the consciousness of those vows, and their spiritual meaning for us, is what Christian life today must surely be about.

**Phil Bradshaw**