

# Celebration LINK

November 2011

## Will of the Father

Sometimes, when writing an article for the Link, a topic will suggest itself from an item in the news or an issue being debated in the church press. At other times it seems best to try and develop a thought arising from daily reflection on the scriptures.

This is one of those occasions, the scripture in question being Matt. 7.21: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." It struck me that this is another one of those verses, like the one cited by the questioner in the piece about Greenbelt (page 2), which we are predisposed by our traditions to interpret in a certain way.

Consciously or unconsciously, we read the phrase 'kingdom of heaven' and immediately think about the life of the world to come. We do this even though we know it has a this-worldly reference often alluded to by Jesus in simple, homely parables or in sayings such as 'the kingdom of God has come upon you' (Matt.12.28).

One reason we read the scriptures this way is because of our conviction that what we do in this life determines what we will experience in the next. Ultimately we are all accountable to God, not only for our fundamental choice for or against him but also for the way we have exercised our stewardship. Closely linked with this is the notion of reward. If we do well on earth we will be rewarded in heaven.

Hence when we read that no-one will enter the kingdom of heaven except

those who do the will of the Father, all our religious training kicks in and we have a mental picture of life in heaven for those who do the will of God now.

But Jesus for the most part seems to talk about spiritual life now, which for him has both an objective and a subjective aspect. The objective aspect is easy enough to understand: the blind see, the hungry are fed, justice is done. The subjective aspect is harder to get at. Jesus makes allusions to it when he makes remarks such as 'I have food that you know nothing about'. He talks about the motivation of a merchant who sells all that he has in order to acquire a pearl of great price, and he warns people about counting the cost and being ready to take up their cross.

It seems fairly common to pursue the subjective aspect of Jesus' life in isolation from the objective. Pious devotion or the pursuit of personal growth through psycho-spiritual techniques are both well worn paths. But for Jesus the objective and the subjective are both part of a single indivisible whole, the dimensions of which are as vast as God himself. That whole has a name: Jesus called it the kingdom of heaven.

The only way to experience it is to do the will of the Father. If we do that, we enter the kingdom of heaven right now. Doing the will of the Father is not a condition for being admitted to heaven when we die; it is the means by which we find ourselves in heaven while we are still on earth.

Some people try to take the kingdom of God by force (Matt.11.11). This is

an ancient conundrum, to be sure, but one possible insight we may gain from it is a universal fact of our experience: we have a tendency to separate the objective aspect of the kingdom of heaven from its spiritual substance in our own souls. We try to establish our version of justice and good order in society – by force if necessary – without reference to the true life of God which is waiting to well up within us.

It is not enough to feed the hungry. If we have pride in our hearts, for example, we may feel self satisfied with our efforts. In which case, we have not done the will of God; we do not enter the kingdom of heaven; we have no experience or understanding of its truth and beauty. Jesus told us to be like slaves who after doing a day's work and getting the supper ready for their master to boot, said 'we are profitless servants; we have only done our duty.'

In our reward based culture we find this sort of an attitude pretty unrealistic, maybe even insulting to our dignity. But it draws our attention to a fundamental point in spiritual life. The kingdom of heaven is not a reward. It is a gift. Deep humility is not a condition or a prerequisite for experiencing heaven; it is part of the essence of it. To grasp that we need God's aid, and if we are not working at that level in our spiritual lives we will not enter the kingdom.

This way of reading the scripture also offers us a way of understanding the curious parable of the wise and foolish



Greenbelt Festival site, from Cleeve Hill, Cheltenham

## Where now for renewal?

Forty or fifty years ago (it sounds like the ice age when you say it like that) it seemed as if we were all at the dawn of a new age. Maybe we were – the age of Aquarius for those who were into ‘new age’ thinking – but for the church it was all about renewal. How simple it all seemed back then, and what a time for optimism!

Over the years renewal has diversified into various streams, some of which have flowed back into the mainstream of church tradition while others have simply got lost in the sand. Yet others still maintain a momentum of their own. Christians today live in darker times, when it is no longer clear what the shape of the church to come will be or even if it will survive at all in its traditional forms.

For those whose lives were shaped by renewal, this is a time for listening and reflecting. Where is the voice of God today? It is not to be found in any one place in the church, to be sure. This is one reason why we have made a point of going to Greenbelt in recent years. A market place of ideas, it brings together many of the elements that have impacted on our lives as we have followed our community journey.

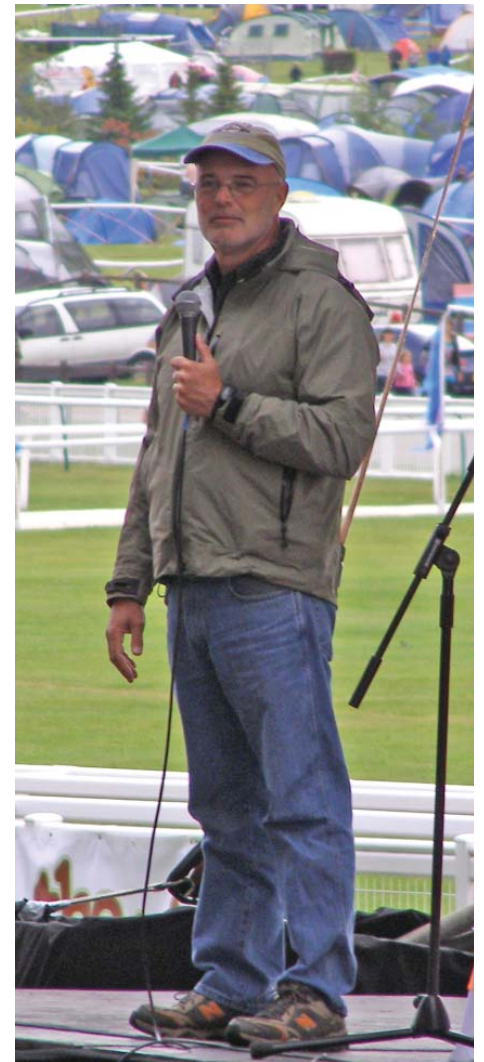
The Bishop of Reading commented that many of those who go to Greenbelt feel that the culture of the times disciplines people more effectively than the church does. We know what he means, even though the judgement is not entirely fair. In secular society issues of justice, human rights, green concerns and famine relief are held before us constantly while Christians on the other hand often appear preoccupied by consumerism and with wrangling about their own religious differences.

A speaker who particularly caught our attention this year was the well known writer Brian McLaren. His talks seemed to represent the fruit of deep reflective thinking on Christian faith in the light of the last few decades of renewal. He put words to what we have often felt instinctively about the form of religion we inherited from our tradition.

The freshness of his approach was captured perfectly by a question at the end of one of his talks. He had spoken penetratingly of the way in which all our human behaviours are governed by certain ‘narratives’. For example, the ‘domination’ narrative – that peace, security and well being can only be achieved through domination and control – is a narrative of the British empire and American influence in the world. The converse of that – the ‘victim’ narrative – has shaped the self-identity by which entire nations define themselves and view the rest of the world.

There were several other narratives – for example, the narrative that prosperity and happiness only come through the unfettered accumulation of wealth – most of which were also present in one form or another in Jesus’ day. Jesus, on the other hand, offered a radically different narrative from all of these ways of seeing the world, one which involved accepting and embracing the other, without judgement.

One questioner, perhaps sensing a problem with personal salvation or at any rate with Jesus’ exclusive status, wanted to know about Jesus’ claim ‘I am the way, the truth and the life; no-one goes to heaven except by me.’ But of course Jesus did not say that, though there is a long tradition of interpreting



Brian McLaren

him in just that way. In context he was offering *his* way to life and peace and security, as against all these commonly believed narratives.

Obviously this is just a snapshot of a particular moment in a weekend. But it is part of the mosaic of how Christian thinking is gradually evolving today. It takes time for new perspectives to emerge and settle. Perhaps genuine renewal takes longer than we think.



Margaret Bradshaw, Bill Farra, Howard Page-Clark and Dave Porter enjoy a walk along the front at Branksome Chine

## Sharing our lives and journeys

The fellowship group of former community members got together again in October. Originally it had no clear focus and an important element of what we were about was processing past history, which had led us (sometimes painfully) in different directions. Later, the group developed deeper bonds of affection and commitment which now have a momentum of their own.

The sharing of stories is not simply a matter of general interest, but part of our concern for each other and for building relationships. This leads naturally to any form of ministry that may be appropriate, such as prayer and anointing for healing in the the context of the Eucharist that we share on each occasion.

Undergirding all this is the sense of calling that was once powerful enough to lead us into community and still inspires life today. The mutual recognition of that calling in each other supports and encourages us in our current journeying. It allows us to be open, without any sense of trying to make things happen, to whatever God may be saying to us today. One example is the story below.



Patricia Allen

## Patricia Allen

Patricia came to Britain from Houston in the 1970s to be part of the Fisherfolk. While at Cumbrae she received a call to solitary prayer. In time she moved to Israel and lived as a solitary with the sisters of St Joseph at Abou Gosh, near Jerusalem. She has continued to pray regularly for all of us, including our children and, now, grandchildren.

Very recently she fell ill and was eventually diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumour. At the time of writing she was being cared for in a hospice run by the sisters. When we heard the news Dave and Jane Porter went out to be with her and minister to her for a short time, and Howard and Jodi Page-Clark are also in Israel as we write.

We have no means of knowing how much time Patricia has left, but our desire is to support her to the end of her journey with our love, prayers and in any practical way we can.



During a break in our meetings, Jodi Page-Clark found Betty Pulkingham's new book irresistible. See the back page for more details about this.

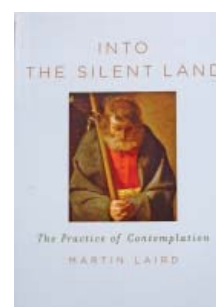
### A useful book

One thing we do in the group is recommend any good books we have read recently. This is one.

Into the Silent Land  
Martin Laird  
DLT  
(Amazon £7.36)

Phil Bradshaw commented:

This is one of the best modern introductions to contemplative prayer that I've come across - both a history and a 'how to'.



It's very readable but it isn't easy. The author makes virtually every sentence count. You may get the best out of it if you already know a little and have put a toe in the water of contemplative prayer.

virgins. The five who allowed their lamps to run low because they hadn't thought to stock up on oil were told by the bridegroom, 'Go away. I don't know you' A bit harsh, we might well think today. But it illustrates the point. We often see the parable as a picture of what may happen when we finally arrive at heaven's gates – and maybe it is; parables usually have various nuances and levels of meaning. But another and perhaps more immediately relevant meaning is, again, an illustration of our universal spiritual experience.

In addition to its objective manifestation in human life, the kingdom of heaven is also a profound interior experience, an encounter with the living God. But this is not automatic, subject to fulfilling the right conditions. Spiritual life requires regular tending. It needs constant loving attention to God, dealing with interior matter mostly invisible to others. Even the greatest saints say that failure to deal with hidden faults is like a cloud that comes between us and God. It is as if God has withdrawn. Like the virgins in the parable, we have neglected to tend to the lamp of God's

spirit within us, and it feels as if we are left on the outside looking in at the party.

Fortunately the situation is not irreversible, but its solution will involve doing the will of God. 'The will of God' is clear enough in terms of scriptural principles, but it always has an intensely personal reference which goes to the heart of our relationship with God. The will of God for me today may simply lie in refusing to judge someone who annoys me, in volunteering for some simple task, or in making a larger time to pray. Such thoughts may easily pass us by forgotten in the press of life, but the essence of doing the will of God is not to harden our hearts once we hear the still small voice.

When the community first began years ago, I used to feel that this was our way to create the objective kingdom of God. Of course it was not perfect, any more than our subjective interior experience could ever reach the heights of spiritual perfection. But the attempt, the commitment of lives to be available for whatever God wanted to do, was what was really important. If that was

present, then the chief characteristic of the kingdom of God was imagination. The possibilities of love seemed limitless.

Such a life was perhaps only ever intended to be a signpost, the value of which should not be judged by its longevity – or success for that matter: even a dilapidated signpost is still a sign. But every manifestation of the kingdom of heaven, whether interior or exterior, needs constant renewal. If this is not happening, things become too familiar. Boredom sets in. We relax our expectations of what God can and will do. We know each other and our faults so well that we gradually cease to believe in the importance or efficacy of the inner life of the kingdom.

To enter the kingdom of heaven is no guarantee that we will remain in it. It depends, as Jesus said, on whether we continue to make the choice to do the will of the Father. The will of the Father is not some trivial current whim of a heavenly monarch. It is the life of God eternally poured out for us, reaching both to the ends of the earth and into every nook and cranny of our souls.

Phil Bradshaw

## A new book by Betty Pulkingham

Betty's long awaited book has finally been published! Her amazing story-telling gift puts it in the 'can't put down' category for all those who have been touched by her life and ministry.

This is not the history of the Community. As she says in her acknowledgements, she has left that to others. This is her personal story, the story of her walk in faith beginning as a young woman setting out for her first major job after graduation and continuing to the present, where she concludes, 'Let the record show - my life has been abundantly blessed.' Of course, it does also include an inside account of life in community with its highs and lows.

You can get it on Amazon.co.uk for £11.76 - currently quoting 4-7 weeks delivery time - **or** you can get it from [www.communityofcelebration.com](http://www.communityofcelebration.com) much quicker for \$18 plus p&p **including** a free CD featuring samples of Betty's music over the decades. Go online and visit the Community store!

**Also available** from the CCCT UK address (not through the website) is *Following the Spirit* by Phil Bradshaw, an account of how the Community evolved over the years into the religious community that it is today at Aliquippa, including reflections on its life. Price: £13 including p&p (send cheque to CCCT).

