***LIVING WORDS***

*[compiled by Martin Tunnicliffe under the auspices of the FCP Council]*

*Issue Number 13*

*November 2014*

***A Rare Archive***

At the July meeting of our FCP Council this year, I produced a precious document to add to the Fellowship archives. It has an unprepossessing appearance: a small, pocket-sized cheap notebook showing signs of much fingering, grey and grubby. Inside, most of the pages are covered in small, spidery but legible handwriting, a hand very familiar to me. Each double-page spread is numbered in sequence 1 to 31, representing days in the month. Each ‘day’ contains about fifteen Biblical quotations. This means that there are about 465 quotations in all. Reading them, it becomes apparent that they are all Dominical Sayings, words from God cast in the first person.

This little book was given to me by our founder Robert Coulson when I took over as General Secretary of the Fellowship in 1987. “This is my Divine Vocabulary,” he told me. Then he added disarmingly, “My eyesight isn’t much good these days so you may as well have it. Anyway (he added) I know them all by heart.” I found myself at a loss for words (in a manner of speaking!).

At the July meeting, the Council members were fascinated, as I had been, not only at the book itself as a kind of window into the heart of Robert’s spirituality, but at the selection of Sayings that he had made. In among the many familiar ones are some that we personally would find challenging, of not impossible, to use in our contemplative prayer time: for example:

*I will visit upon you the evil of your doings (Jer 23.2 RV)*

*I groan under the burden of you (Amos 2.13 NEB)*

*I have made thee small…thou art greatly despised. The pride of thine heart hath deceived thee (Obadiah 2.3 RV)*

This led to our reflecting on the undoubted fact that we have a tendency to select for contemplative prayer Sayings that afford us a measure of comfort and security, such as :

*I am with you always (Matthew 28.20)*

*Abide in me and I in you (John 15.4)*

*I will never leave you nor forsake you (Joshua 1.5)*

*I am the Lord who heals you (Exodus 15.26)*

Yet God’s Word in Scripture is continually conveying messages that chide, challenge and disturb. God who is all-goodness is not sparing when it comes to rebuking even those whom he chooses and loves. The over-arching message of salvation which is the Bible’s principal and glorious theme is balanced by innumerable expressions of divine indignation, anger, punishment and retribution directed against human sinfulness and rebellion. Just open at random any of the books of the Prophets or dip into Revelation. We rightly rejoice to hear the “comfortable words”. Should we not also be hearing and receiving some of those ***un***-comfortable words that come from the Divine source?

Having pondered over this, I found myself being led into exploring what for me has been little-known territory in the practice of contemplative prayer. I want to share this exploration more widely with other Fellowship members and friends, not simply as a matter of information, but with the suggestion that you might join me in a journey. Perhaps also you may be able to share your experience in due course with others, in conversation or by letter or email, if you discover something that you think we may all find valuable.

I came across this Saying in the prophet Micah (6.13 NRSV):

*I have begun to strike you down, making you desolate because of your sins.*

It is a severe Saying, though by no means as strong and angry as many similar utterances to be found in the prophetic writings. I began to use it in my contemplative prayer at a time when world events were particularly distressing and at the same time I was trying to cope with various personal difficulties. This combination seemed to lay a heavy weight on my soul. I set aside my first instinct which was to choose a more positive and “comfortable” Word as a support to lean on: perhaps *My peace I give to you*, or, *I am your salvation*, or, *I am the good shepherd*. Then I began to think along different lines. When a young person feels hurt and perhaps humiliated, they may turn to a parent or other adult for consolation. But there are times when a wise adult will refuse to respond with an outward show of love and affection, but will say: “Sorry chum. Your problem. You sort it.”

At the time of writing, I am still trying to “sort it” by plodding on with the Word spoken through Micah. Reading the whole chapter, particularly verse 8, has been helpful. But I offer no further comment, hoping that others might follow this line and see where it goes. To that end, you will see that I have included this Word in *Sayings for Stillness* for March (2015). If you are going to use it at all, then Lent seems to be the right season to do so.

+++++++++++++++++

**FIAT** by Bonnie Thurston \*

There comes from nowhere

with no connection

to the present moment

or circumstance

a wave of sadness

abrupt and acute

as a paper cut,

making eyes tear,

the breath tense,

as if a telegram brought

some terrible news,

or a phone call

announced a tragedy.

This momentary mourning

is unmoored, unrelated

to personal circumstance,

one’s pain, perplexity,

slings and arrows.

It is life’s great

free floating sorrow,

the desperate keening

of a broken world,

its unborn dying,

its causeless martyrs,

all that suffers alone

and unlamented.

Perhaps aspiring

to soothe the universe,

one can accept it simply,

live it secretly,

this mysterious vocation

to help God bear

unimaginable burdens.

Unlike conscripted

Simon of Cyrene,

one can voluntarily

carry this concealed cross

and, trembling, trudge

toward resurrection.

***The uncomfortable pew***

Over the years I have come across FCP members who have parted company with their church. Up to a point, I can sympathise. In many instances, these folk have come to a deeper and clearer understanding of the life of the spirit through contemplative prayer. As a result, they have experienced a profound dissatisfaction with their local church. It appears to them that most of the other churchgoers are superficially engaged in so many things that don’t really matter. Loyal as they are in Sunday worship, the congregation by and large seem unable to grasp the value of that deeper relationship with God (I AM) which contemplatives discover and value in the prayer of silence. In some cases, the only resolution of this problem for some FCP members has been to leave the church and plough a lonely furrow, possibly compensating for the loss by attending a Prayer Group or Quiet Day or Retreat.

I think, however, that there is a danger in this. The FCP is decidedly not an alternative church. It was founded and developed well within the context of the Church of England. It is true to say that the founder, an ordained priest, did have misgivings about the church and the shallowness of its spirituality. Nevertheless, the Fellowship’s clear intention has always been to remain a servant of the Church, much as the Franciscans, or the Church Army, or the Missionary Societies are servants of the Church. Over the years, we have learnt what this means ecumenically, so that, for us, denominational labels do not count. We are also encouraged to learn the more difficult lesson of how to share our vision with people of other faiths.

The fact remains that, however trying it may be in individual circumstances, it is vital that Fellowship members should retain close and sacramental links with a church in their locality. In the old days, people routinely attended their parish church or nearest chapel. These days most worshippers have more choice, and it is probably wise to choose a church where you feel the least uncomfortable. This may sometimes be spiritually irksome, but our task is partly to strengthen and renew the Church *from within* as an integral part of the Body of Christ who are “MY People, which I formed for Myself, that they might show forth My praise” (Jeremiah 31.14 & Isaiah 43.21). The irksomeness is really part of the price we must pay as a result of our own contemplative calling. We may consider it as a test of our own faithfulness to our Lord as well as a stimulus for our intercession.

-----------------------------

*\*The Revd. Prof. Bonnie Thurston. Retired Prof. of Theology living in W. Virginia. USA. Author of books on the New Testament and of two volumes of poetry.*

*--------------------------*

*Living Words* appears under the direction of the FCP Council, but I am entirely responsible for the contents. Any comments or any queries, please feel free to write or email me:

The Revd Canon Martin Tunnicliffe, 202 Ralph Road, Solihull, West Midlands,

B90 3LE . tunnicliffe@tmartin7.orangehome.co.uk