**LIVING WORDS**

*compiled by Martin Tunnicliffe*

Issue Number 16 Summer 2016

**SILENCE IN CHURCH!**

*Canon Angus Ritchie is the Executive Director of The Centre for Theology and Community. The Centre’s task is described as “equipping churches to transform their communities through the practices of community organising, theological reflection and prayer. We also help them to use their resources more effectively for this mission”. What follows is taken from an article which Canon Ritchie wrote for the Church Times in 2013, exploring the tension between contemplation and action in the Church. What he says will probably awaken an echo within the experience of many FCP members.*

Churches struggle to meet two human longings, each of which is placed in us by God. On the one hand, people long for community, with all its energy and messiness. On the other, we long for stillness in an ever more noisy and distracted world. It is hard to reconcile these longings, and thus it is tempting to tailor one kind of church to the “contemplative” types, and another to the noisier “activists”.

The practice of Jesus calls us beyond this separation. There can be no doubt that Jesus was a “contemplative”. Again and again, he leaves the noise and confusion of the crowds to be alone with his heavenly Father. He is sceptical about the excessive use of words in prayer, whether they are liturgical formulae or free-form intercessions.

For all that, the Gospels depict Jesus’s ministry as one that is full of urgency. He is unafraid of activity and noise. He is criticised for being a “glutton and a drunkard”. He welcomes children when the adults dismiss them as a distraction. Jesus challenges our stereotypes of contemplative prayer, but he challenges us not to treat it as the preserve of a particular personality type, still less as a means of escape from the realities of life.

Silence is not an evasion of the world around us. To be silent before God is a profoundly counter-cultural act. It is to prioritise communion above output and achievements, and to recognise that mission is first and foremost God’s activity (teaching us) that, before we act, we must first discern how and where God is at work.

It is Jesus’s communion with his Father which enables him to know when to act, and when to refrain from action: to see into the hearts of those he meets, and to recognise the Father speaking through them . . .

*Angus Ritchie describes his own church as “an inner-city church with a growing children’s ministry, a noisy and extensive sharing of the Peace, and a long tradition of lively parish socials. “Silence will not happen here by accident, but needs to be pursued intentionally”. He then gives three pointers: teaching, the inclusion of children, and the Eucharist.*

(1) Jesus’s teaching on prayer is for all. It is not aimed at a contemplative élite. This is a challenge for the Church. We need to offer teaching on prayer which is equally accessible . . (2) Jesus’s example challenges us to include children fully in the life and worship of the church (which) involves more than simply their silent presence at worship designed for adults. Equally, it surely means more than allowing them to be noisy in such worship . . . Stillness in worship tends to happen when it is also cultivated elsewhere. In one parish, silent prayer is taught in the church school, and children pray quietly with their Sunday-school teacher after receiving communion . . . (3) Jesus gives his Church the Eucharist, something that moves our worship beyond words. There is a deep connection between silence and the Eucharist. Both remind us that discipleship begins with God’s activity, and not our own. In an increasingly busy Church and world, this may explain why growing numbers of Christians are being drawn to the practice of silent prayer in the presence of the Sacrament, and why we need to cultivate times of stillness within our celebration of the liturgy.

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**A just rebuke**

Having read in the last issue (15) of *Living Words* the article “God’s Purpose for Man” a correspondent (referred to below as ‘S’) wrote about her . . . “sadness on reading *God's Purpose for Man*. I understand, of course, that what was meant was his purpose for ***mankind*** . . . Difficult, however, to read in paragraph 3 and 4 of the purpose of human creation attainable by all ***men***, the pattern for all ***men*** to follow in order to attain their supreme destiny ....etc. It is a shame that you consider this document to be a kind of FCP manifesto, one in which women are so manifestly excluded”.

What follows, briefly, is not just the slice of humble pie that I felt obliged to consume, but part of the exchange which followed, and which I think is worth sharing for reflection.

***Martin*** You are right to rebuke. I should have added a covering note to the effect that Robert Coulson did most of his formative thinking about half way through the last century, and definitely before we became (rightly and properly) gender sensitive. I could quote you other passages from his writings that explicitly emphasise the female aspect of the Deity, which at the time of writing was quite innovative in Western theology (see for example the final book *I AM: the exercise of supreme sovereignty* page 168: after using the form ‘He-She’ in referring to God, Coulson writes, “It will be simpler to refer to (God) henceforth as He, provided one always remembers that He is equally She.”)

Now: just to redress the imbalance. While I was thinking about the female aspect of the Divinity, it suddenly occurred to me that we were probably only paying lip-service to the concept, rather than entering into the mystery, if we only follow the traditional language-pattern of liturgy. So, reciting the first Canticle for Morning Prayer (Psalm 95), I began “O come, let us sing unto the Lady . . . let us come before her presence with thanksgiving, and show ourselves glad in her with Psalms. For the Lady is a great God, and a great Queen above all Gods: in her hands are all the corners of the earth  . . .  etc. I tried it with other Psalms. It produced an odd feeling of unrest, perhaps of excitement, redressing the balance and highlighting the almost ruthless ‘male-ness’ of the Bible. Psalm 23: “The Lady is my shepherdess, therefore can I lack nothing: she shall feed me in a green pasture . . .” Psalm 24 “The earth is the Lady’s, and all that therein is . . . for she hath founded it upon the seas” . . . “Glory be to the Mother, and to the Son . . .”   “Our Mother, who art in heaven . . .

***S***. We have perhaps overlooked the nurturing aspect of God through the Church's history - this may be why we need the figure of Mary the mother to supply what we perceive as lacking in God. Is Marian devotion more evident in harsher cultures than our own, I wonder?  As mother she had no responsibility in the crucifixion and like Christ she was a victim, like us she suffered the loss of her child.

Many years ago I remember Bishop Freddy Temple talking about his time in Southampton, where life was tough and to talk of a loving Father made no sense to the little boys who feared their own fathers who beat them.

God is Spirit and we take him/her too literally, which is why, for me, 'Our Mother' doesn't really work either, because it becomes as limiting as Our Father.  This is why, although I do pray conventionally (and I do say my 'Our Father' and 'Hail Mary', too) I find contemplative prayer so rewarding.

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**THE GLASTONBURY RETREAT**

The compilers of our current 2016 Annual Newsletter would like to apologise for having omitted details of the September Glastonbury Retreat. This will take place from Monday 5 September until Friday 9 September at

**The Abbey Retreat House, Glastonbury, Somerset BA6 8DH**

Witness: Neil Macdonald

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*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:*

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