

Vocal Ministry and Other Obstacles to the Spirit

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When Anne Buttenheim and I first talked about this lecture, I proposed several topics that interested me, but they were all in one way or another covered by other speakers. An offhand remark I made intrigued her, and the result is the topic and title “Vocal Ministry and Other Obstacles to the Spirit.” I was moving from Chicago to Richmond, Indiana, my toddler was not sleeping at night, and I was working three jobs. I really didn’t give the matter too much thought until August when the list of speakers arrived in the mail. Reading it was a sudden and horrifying revelation: Good gravy, I’m the slated crank.

This is not a role to which I am accustomed. I like people to get along. I like to find common ground. I flee conflict. I like Jesus’ words about peacemakers being blessed far better than his words about not bringing peace, but a sword. I am staunchly and unapologetically Christian, but I like being in a diverse theological environment. I am not, generally, a crank.

But then I realized that I have a tremendous opportunity here. All the crankiness that I store up over the years on Quaker subjects I can unload here, before a group of anonymous listeners in a place where I do not live, and then I can hop a plane back to Richmond tomorrow and return to my irenic, conflict-free life. What an opportunity!

But that’s not really fair, either. So to take my responsibility seriously and be responsibly serious about this event, I propose to you to explore ways in which vocal ministry itself stands in the way of openness to God’s life-giving and liberating Spirit. First, as we center down, we get distracted by ourselves on the way to God and never make it to God, but don’t figure it out. Second, we Quakers as a lot are congenitally timid and assume God is, too. And third, our desire for spiritual comfort and safe space is a mirror image of our desire that our material security not be threatened, so we are unable to hear the voice of the outward Christ – which, I am convinced, is the new and most pressing challenge to all Christians today, and (with the terms properly altered) the challenge for all people of faith.

Here’s my first place to unload stored-up crankiness. I have spent ten years as a Quaker hiding, modifying, dulling, translating, and making palatable to others my Christianity in the face of immense pressure to do so. I have gradually come to realize that I left the orthodoxy of Roman Catholicism only to encounter a more subtle but no less powerful one among unprogrammed Friends. This new orthodoxy says that we’re fully open to all religious experiences and perspectives, but *that* one better be kept in check.

I no longer play this game of pseudo-tolerance. I am who I am; I name and claim Jesus of Nazareth as my redeemer and will not betray that for the sake of saying “peace, peace, where there is no peace.” So I speak in plainly and unapologetically Christian terms. I invite you to translate – because I think translation is possible – but just as the particularity of any religious tradition is at least as important as its universal appeal, I invite you to wonder with me whether the particularity of Christian faith might have something to contribute to those who do not share it.

I take the particular genius of other faith perspectives seriously, inside and outside the Society of Friends, and I have come to the place where I must ask that same stance of others. I hope, I desperately hope, that being plain and open about my commitments will not be understood as insisting that others share them or go to hell. But nor will I compromise them merely to help others feel “comfortable.” On the other hand, I refuse to yield up the experience of knowing Christ as Teacher and Lord to the monopoly of right-wing Christian politics and theology, and to give in to their demands that Christianity be synonymous with patriarchy, latent racism, American nationalism, and membership in the Republican party.

One final prefatory remark. As I outline the ways in which vocal ministry as Friends practice it can be an obstacle to the Spirit, I must be perfectly clear that I am not at all free from what I feel plagues our Meetings. If what I say is critique, it is also confession. I’m caught up in this web, too. I speak with you not as one who claims to be liberated from our vocal ministry mess, but as one who is struggling to be liberated from it. I share with you tonight some fruits of my own struggle, and of my struggle with others, toward that liberation. Nor do I mean to suggest that I am the only Friend to have figured any of this out; rather, I hope to vocalize some currents of thought and feeling that are rising elsewhere in our Religious Society and that will not be entirely strange or unfamiliar to Friends.

When we come to Meeting for Worship, we settle into silence and seek to let go of all the noise and clutter in ourselves in order to become open to the movements of God's Spirit. The story we Friends tell ourselves and others says that this process is open, available, and accessible to all. The sub-text – the message that is not spoken aloud but is heard clearly nonetheless – is that this process is easy. It's more or less comfortable. The Inner Light resides peaceably in each individual heart and is there just waiting to be discovered, latent but present in all our endeavors.

In our more candid moments we may admit that coming into relationship with God in silent waiting is not always so easy; but we say this only by way of refining the more fundamental message. Friends of earlier generations, though, did not understand it to be easy at all. Hugh Barbour's magnificent book *The Quakers in Puritan England* includes a chapter called "The Terror and Power of the Light." Let me read you two passages:

The Lamb's War began for most early Friends with a hard, slow, inner conflict; only afterward could they call themselves the children of the Light. This opening struggle shaped the meaning of their new lives and gave color to all they thought or felt about the inward Light and the Spirit of God. The end of it was peace and joy, a sense of power to conquer kingdoms and demons, and a deep unity of love with other Quakers. (p. 94)

The essence of pain was to know one's sins and self-will, but the source of the pain was the Light itself. To modern Friends it is startling to find the inward Light described in terms of such fierce judgment. The Light that ultimately gave joy, peace, and guidance gave at first only terror. (p. 98)

Margaret Fell herself wrote:

Now, Friends, deal plainly with yourselves, and let the Eternal Light search you . . . for this will deal plainly with you; it will rip you up, and lay you open . . . naked and bare before the Lord God, from whom you cannot hide yourselves. . . . Therefore give over deceiving your Souls; for . . . all Sin and Uncleanness the Light condemns. (p. 98)

Friends in the eighteenth century likewise understood that coming into God's presence and being encountered by God's searching Light was a painful, difficult, and lifelong affair. They used the language of crucifixion to describe it – not because they were sadists or masochists or myth-drenched and unsophisticated poets, but because they knew that the encounter with the self in God's Light can be painful. They spoke and wrote about living under the Cross, crucifying everything in us that is of the world, crucifying our own desires in order to be subject to God's will.

Let me offer an axiom. When we center down in Meeting for Worship, the first thing we meet is not God; the first thing we meet is ourselves: our own projects, agendas, passions, histories, wounds, talents, pet peeves, our sin, our goodness, our thoughts, our distractions, our lack of sleep, our bad back, our mortgage. We meet that massive complex of relationships and histories and events and deeds, hopes and dreams and disappointments, failures and successes that we call our self. Now the self is massively interesting, especially to, well, ourselves. But the self is self-ish (as it is proper for selves to be) and demands attention. Like all the other fascinating things in our world, as the theologian Paul Tillich taught us, the self wants to be the center of our existence, the content of all our attention, the object of our ultimate concern. The self wants to become God, the thing that we worship and to which we devote our most committed energies.

Now because we are such interesting and complex people, and because most of our selves need a lot of work, in meeting for worship we tend to stop at the level of the self. The current theological atmosphere among unprogrammed Friends encourages this (and among pastoral ones, too, but that's a different problem). Because we tell ourselves that God's Light is somehow constitutionally part of ourselves, we can justify adoring ourselves in meeting for worship in the hopes that whatever light we possess – and we possess a great deal – is identical with God's Light. So as we contemplate our fascinating selves in meeting for worship, we may learn something. We may be inspired. We may even be transformed. And what's going on in ourselves may be interesting enough to us that we feel moved to speak. The problem is, we don't ask *what's* moving us to speak, and we don't ask whether we've penetrated to the root of our lives, which is not ourselves but God. Others may in fact find our speeches about ourselves interesting and helpful, which compounds the encourage-ment we have to stop with ourselves and be moved by ourselves to speak about ourselves. And with 30,000 people dying daily of starvation and millions undernourished, their lives devastated by war and oppression, the self is a much more safe and comfortable subject of contemplation and vocal ministry; but I'm getting ahead of the story.

The worship of the self – of which we are all at some time guilty – produces a kind of vocal ministry that can be an obstacle to feeling the pure motions of God’s spirit within. Such ministry is not the perfectly ordinary and really excusable message which most people who have spoken in worship have succumbed to, the personal insight about oneself that might apply to others. That’s inevitable. What is more worrisome is a culture of such ministry, a culture of self-worship, that begins to shape our understanding of God and to distort our ability to hear clearly what Friends of earlier generations said about how God works. “That of God within” becomes “the god within” as if each one of us has our own little private god inside that we carry around like a wallet or a pacemaker or an undigested lunch. This demanding, jealous god within produces some forms of vocal ministry that arise from and then compound two deep problems.

First, narcissism, which is really what I have been talking about: navel-gazing, obsession with ourselves, treating our own selves as if they, not God, were ultimate and infinite, the center of the universe. Narcissistic vocal ministry always has Me as its subject, its object, its source and norm. It is willing to hear very little from any other Me except “sharing” or “expression.” This Me is isolated behind impenetrable walls which defend it against anything which might change it, anything which might transform it into something different, anything which would do anything other than entertain it and make it into more of what it already is. And this Me prefers that all the other Me’s in the room build similar walls behind which to contain themselves and thereby protect my Me from their influence.

This is the Me that protests vocal ministry that threatens the integrity and solidity of its walls. One member of my Meeting is fairly outspoken and traditional in the Christian character of his vocal ministry, and at least twice I have heard Friends object that they cannot listen to such ministry because they need a “comfortable and safe space.” How often does this become the criterion for judging others’ vocal ministry, and our own? If it doesn’t make me feel safe and comfortable, then it’s impermissible.

Let me offer a second axiom: Jesus came to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable, but much in contemporary Quakerism is about comforting the comfortable. A culture of vocal ministry that is permitted only to comfort the comfortable stands in the way of God’s calling us into the New Creation, to become New Creations ourselves. It stands in the way of God’s calling us to descend deeper than ourselves and to know ourselves and one another in that which is eternal. Real and authentic vocal ministry descends below the self into the unplumbed depths of God. From that source, that root, that “living water” as Rufus Jones loved to put it, authentic vocal ministry will come.

If we are to be opened to the power of God’s life to produce such ministry, we need a corrective to the culture of narcissistic vocal ministry. That corrective is, I think, a more historically responsible notion of the Light. Fox and the first several generations of Friends often said that the first function of the Light was to convict us of sin, second to liberate us from it. I think we’ve learned enough about the human psyche to put it a little differently but still faithfully to Fox’s meaning. The Inward Light of God’s presence shows us the truth about ourselves, truth that we would rather not see or are otherwise incapable of seeing. The Light reveals to us the things that enslave us and hinder us from a transformative communion with God. For some this will indeed mean sin; we may have a far higher opinion of ourselves than is warranted by the facts, and God shows us this. For others, being steeped in a sense of guilt or shame or unworthiness may block us from understanding our worth and preciousness in God’s sight. We may be enslaved by our histories and the damage that they have inflicted to the extent that we wall up the wounded self and will not let God in to heal. What the Light will show us then is not sin but the goodness with which God endowed us when we were created. In either case – and here I offer a third axiom – the Light shows us truth about ourselves that we are otherwise unwilling or unable to see, and it also accomplishes the gradual, painful, but often redemptive work of liberating us from what enslaves us.

This Light is the power and presence of God; it is good news. As Paul says in Romans, “The good news is the power of God unto salvation.” Fox loved this line. But the Good News is not a constitutional part of ourselves. It comes from outside, from beyond, from deeper than the boundaries of the self. It is fleeting and unbidden yet always available and often abiding. But we have to open the door to let the search Light of God’s Truth shine into the cobwebbed corners of ourselves.

Notice, now, that opening to the pure motions of divine love in silent waiting does not destroy the self. If we have been able to free ourselves of the bonds of the god Me and to come into the presence of the living God, we may repeatedly be led back to some aspect of ourselves. It is after all our Selves that the searching Light shines into and onto. It is aspects of our Selves we do not wish to see that the Light illuminates for us. It is our Selves that need reformation and transformation, that become New Creations by virtue of God’s liberating power, by what Teilhard called the “slow work of God,” a phrase that eighteenth-century Friends (though perhaps not seventeenth-century ones) would appreciate. Some of the most profound insights that come will be about ourselves, and sorting these out from the insights that the Inner Me wants us to know and worship can be perilously difficult. Further, passing beyond the Me which lies like a rock in the middle of our road to God is no mean feat, and often we and God simply have to deal with the fact that we’re too tired, too bored, too depressed, too distracted, too elated, or too busy. The first act of worship

may be offering all that to God. We truly have to meet and encounter the self before we pass on to God. As Douglas Steere put it,

A service of religious worship that is not able to take [people] where they are and draw them into an awareness of what they seek has a place only on the drawing boards of religious romanticists. "Come unto me all ye who are weary and heavily laden and I will give you rest," Jesus declared, and if the place of religious worship is not a place to bring the rucksacks of care that are strapped to our backs, we are not likely to appear there often. (*Where Words Come From*, p. 29)

The confused and burdened self will inevitably be the first object of our attention, and we may need to give it lots of attention in worship. What Steere tells us is that this is profitable and fruitful when the Eternal Listener is listening. This changes the dimensions of our attention to ourselves, because if we can remember that we are always in the presence of the Listener (even when we defy it), it is the Listener and the divine listening that become the focus of our attention. As so often happens in human relationships, Steere says, the presence and care of the divine Listener often melts away what burdens us and threatens to block us from the Listener. The authentic and powerful minister is the one who can accept the divine Listener, shift attention from the speaking self to the Listener, and then listen in return.

Lo and behold, much of what will then come in vocal ministry will be about the self and its relationship to God, but it will have an entirely new ring, because authentic ministers, as Woolman says, "minister of that which they have tasted and handled spiritually." But Woolman adds another term: he writes that "from an inward purifying, and steadfast abiding under it, springs a lively operative desire for the good of others." (*Journal*, p. 31) Vocal ministry that obstructs God's Spirit, on the other hand, is ministry that has no value for others. It is true that worshipers are enjoined to search for value in even the least helpful spoken ministry; yet we need to be more courageous in saying that some vocal ministry is truly without value for others, and that such ministry is often deeply damaging to a meeting.

One of the truest tests of *authentic* vocal ministry is that the minister has a sense of the condition of others, as Bill Taber always reminds us. Such sensitivity is a gift; the minister who has it is able to speak a word that is truly revelatory and truly transformative to others because she has tasted and handled God's revelation and transformation herself. Samuel Bownas argues this point when he says that it's useless to engage in ministry for the reformation of others if we are not first reformed ourselves.

II

The second form of vocal ministry that the demanding, jealous God within produces is the ministry of projection. In short, the little god within projects itself onto the creator of the universe. It tells us that God looks like us, is predictable and manageable and can have only the effect upon us that we choose to let it. Such a God is interested in our material welfare, shares our political orientation and interests, and is remarkably similar to us. Reading the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin's magnum opus which, I confess, I often find helpful, I am nonetheless struck by the similarities between God's administration of the creation and Calvin's administration of Geneva.

Quakers often do no better. It's not that we're not on the right track, because we often are. Rather, we are timid, afraid of a powerful God who can work immense changes in ourselves and our world. We'd prefer to keep the job ourselves so the details remain in our control. We read John Woolman and note how subtle and fragile the work of God is, but we forget that the God of whom Woolman writes brings about massive, if gradual, transformations in people's lives, transformations that are often conflict-ridden and painful. This is all the more true of Fox; he and his contemporaries knew that the encounter with God is a struggle of often titanic proportions, one that leads us into and through the abyss of despair.

We Quakers in many ways mistake gentleness and tenderness for timidity. And we project this timidity onto God. As in any culture, we have our ways of announcing this cultural value of timidity publicly to ourselves and to the world; our native ritual in which we hold up this cultural value for absorption and imitation is often vocal ministry. Listen to the story we most often tell one another about God: Elijah, bruised from his confrontation with the powers and principalities (specifically a queen named Jezebel whom I secretly admire for her intelligence and political savvy), runs away into the desert to wait for God. An earthquake and a whirlwind both come along, but God is not in them. Then Elijah heard a still, small voice and knew God was in it.

This still small voice becomes like a mantra to us, one that we chant in unison and loudly, loud enough to drown out the God who comes at Pentecost, or the God who touches Isaiah's lips with burning coal, the God whose face we cannot look directly upon without dying (Quakers are pretty sure that's true, so we're pretty glad it's never happened to us!), whose power made Moses' face so radiant that even he had to wear a veil so as not to overwhelm the people (we,

too, like our vocal ministers to be well-veiled so that the luminosity of their contact with the Face of God doesn't disturb us too much).

Our vocal ministry as an institution is a major vehicle for enforcing the Quaker cultural value that God's voice is *always* still and small. The sub-text here is, "if the voice of God you hear is big and powerful, then find another church." And I have heard this subtext announced loud and clear on a few occasions. The tone, the tenor, the symbols we use, the matters we speak of, all serve to reinforce the timidity of our God. We restrain, constrain, constrict the power of God to move in people and to change them, to move in and change us.

Friends look to speakers in vocal ministry as authorities, as ritual actors (as we say in anthropology) who, by what they do as much as by what they say, reinforce the dominant values of our little culture. The style which develops is a medium, and the medium is often the message: think small, feel small, be still and know that God is small.

This diffused but still very powerful culture of divine timidity is as orthodox and as authoritative in its way as any pope, any mullah, any Southern Baptist mega-pastor. People hear the message. And the message too often blocks our way to God, and blocks God's way to us. Quakers affirm that God not only listens, but speaks; Christ is our inward Teacher, and we have told him very politely not to shout in meeting for worship.

How tame our God is – how domesticated! How lame our Spirit is, how lame our Light! How incapable of moving us, changing us, transforming us, turning us! How easily managed, manipulated, controlled! How impotent! God has become a constituent power of our own private souls, our servant, at our bidding, at our beck and call!

Is this timid God of the Quakers the living Creator of the universe, the Logos, the creative power behind all that lives and breathes? Is this the Spirit of Pentecost that can teach thousands to hear and speak one another's languages? Is this the overpowering spirit that consumed the

Christian mystics, enraptured Muhammad, touched hot coals to the lips of the prophets, annihilated the Sufis' sense of separation and distinction from Godself, broke the glorious dawn of one's "original face," one's utter nondistinction from all of being for the masters of Zen? Is this that which Carter Heyward calls "God's Fierce Whimsy"?

I think not. The god who is the projection of our own timidity is the god who gives a snake when we ask for a fish and stones when we ask for bread. It is not the God who shakes the earth for ten miles around. Could Quakers withstand such an earthquake? I think we'd die keeping the china balanced on the hutch.

Can we loosen the bonds we have tied God up with? Are we capable of being open to what Woolman called the "refiner's fire," after the words of the prophets? Are we capable of opening our meetings for worship and our vocal ministry to a God of life who could, through us, sweep into and transform a world that is in love with death? Can we open ourselves to the requirements of the Truth of God in a world that loves ignorance and denial?

III

This brings me to a third point, which I have hinted at before. Woolman, as I said, adds a third term to vocal ministry: not just me and God, but others. For him, others did not only mean his listeners in worship, but the whole world of human and creaturely others that an excess of selfishness and a love of material pleasure and gain blinds us to and causes us to oppress. He writes, "Where the heart was set on greatness, success in business did not satisfy the craving, but . . . in common with an increase of wealth the desire of wealth in-creased."

The overriding theme of his essay, *A Plea for the Poor*, is that some members of the human community live in harsh, laborious, and oppressive conditions precisely because others do their utmost to live in conditions of luxury, ease, and excess. Friends in this country live largely in conditions of luxury, ease, and excess, in comparison with God's people elsewhere in the world. To be middle-class on an American scale is to be upper-crust on a world scale. Our desire for cheap and abundant goods in ever-increasing quantities, quite simply, keeps wages of those who make our cheap goods immorally low.

We are implicated in this. The evangelical sociologist and preacher Tony Campolo – who lives in this neighborhood, more or less – likes to say to church groups, "30,000 people died of starvation yesterday, another 30,000 did today, another 30,000 will tomorrow, and the church of Jesus Christ doesn't give a shit. In fact, you're more shocked by hearing the word 'shit' in church than you are by hearing that in three days, ninety thousand people died of starvation." It's not clear to me that collectively the church doesn't care; but the other half of his point is right on target.

Imagining a world where this might be different is dizzying and inventing it seems a crushing burden. Our way of life would change drastically. Most Americans cannot, or choose not to, think about such a change, much less work to bring it about in any substantial way. We worry instead, constantly, about security. Not even prosperity anymore, but security. People worry about security when they're threatened; I think we sense, at least subconsciously, that the condition of the world threatens our way of life.

Friends are often more deeply tuned into these problems, and more involved in the minuscule attempts at their solution that this country countenances, than are members of at least some other religious societies. But not as much as

we often tell ourselves we are. We talk about these issues, and we often allow ourselves to imagine more radical solutions than others do. Certainly our vocal ministry is often quite overtly political (though such political ministry is, I fear, often a projection of our political desires onto God, or worse, a vaunting of them in the absence of a credible and capable God). But how, in this situation, is vocal ministry an *obstacle* to hearing the voice of God rather than a *channel* for it?

Vocal ministry is an obstacle to the voice and will of God when it abides by the Quaker orthodoxy of comfort and safety. I've heard vocal ministry of different sorts (including the more political type) rejected because Friends feel they need "safe space" and a place in which to feel "comfortable."

I am suspicious of comfort. I have learned from Marx that when people talk of a spiritual value, a material one often stands behind it. Much of American Christianity is about comforting the comfortable, not comforting the afflicted and certainly not about afflicting the comfortable. At best we comfort the afflicted who can pay.

It is no accident that the fastest-growing church profession is pastoral counseling and pastoral psychotherapy. It pays. It also takes advantage of, and sincerely tries to heal, the spiritual diseases that rot our nation from within, the diseases of excess. It is no accident that the starvation we most worry about is the starvation that affects young women who refuse to eat food or who spew it out. What a powerful metaphor for rejecting the excesses of our culture which are fattening and choking us materially and spiritually! And, of course, those who enact these metaphors are treated as diseased and abnormal rather than prophetic.

This is common to all cultures: the deviant are treated as diseased when they expose the corruptions of a culture. We are only now beginning to understand how anorexia and bulimia bear witness to a culture that values unlimited sex and demands that young women be as sexually enticing at age eleven as boys and men want them to be, a culture that prints this message in four colors on larger-than-life billboards and brighter-than-life magazines and faster-than-life television. We are only now beginning to understand how these diseases – and they are only one example – are a form of suppressed rebellion against a culture that craves material excess, measures people (especially women) by what they own and wear, and yet demands that they not look bodily like people from a fattened and luxurious culture might be expected to look. We are only now beginning to see that these powerful metaphors that combine both radical acquiescence and radical refusal, grow from a real spiritual hunger that, as Woolman knew, is the only predictable fruit of excess and luxury.

If you haven't read Mary Pipher's book, *Reviving Ophelia*, on this subject, please do so. Anyone who's ever known a female or been a female ought to read it.

Vocal ministry is itself, in perhaps less dramatic ways, a metaphor of our culture's excess, both of radical acquiescence and radical rebellion. In this society of noise, where everything is judged by its entertainment value, where words are meant to obscure truth and dull communication, to sit in silence and wait for encounter with the only Word that matters is a revolutionary act. To listen for Truth is a rebellion. To communicate that Truth to others because the source of Truth impels us to strike a small blow against the culture of images, of electronic smoke and mirrors.

But our vocal ministry often enacts a radical acquiescence to this culture as well. When it propounds and models the culture of comfort and safety, of "peace, peace when there is no peace," when it imposes the timid god upon our spiritual lives and crowds out the living God, it stands directly in the way of revelation. In this culture, in this time, and, I am convinced, in this Religious Society, a new moment of revelation is upon us; but it is a very old one, too. Let me frame it in terms furnished by the history of Quakerism.

The old battle between the Hicksites and the Orthodox was a battle between two very different understandings of Christ and his saving, redemptive work. The Hicksites championed the older Quaker idea that Christ is inward and present and redeems us by a work he does inwardly and in the present. That work is to save each tender and receptive soul from the bonds of sin and self-worship, gradually, one by one.

The evangelical leaders from England who, historian Larry Ingle argues, fomented the rebellion against this conservative Quaker tradition, emphasized that the decisive moment of Christ's saving work was his outward and historical death on the Cross. Whatever Christ does in me now, they said, he did way back then. Christ saves by a work that he did outwardly and in the past.

This conflict is still alive today, though I would argue the terms have become reversed; it was a conflict between the outward, historical Christ and the inward, present Christ. Each group defended a privileged form of the direct revelation of God's power in Christ to redeem people from what enslaved them.

I would propose that in our day we are called to witness and appropriate a different form of the direct and immediate revelation of God's power in Christ. I take as my text the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, which tells us of the outward and present Christ:

But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. And the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left.

Then the King will say to those on His right, "Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

"For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me."

Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, "Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? And when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?"

And the King will answer and say to them: "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me."

Then He will also say to those on His left, "Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me."

Then they themselves also will answer, saying "Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, and in prison, and did not take care of You?"

Then He will answer them, saying, "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me."

And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. (Matthew 25:31-46)

Remember, the first option was Christ inward and present, the second outward and historical; what I take from Matthew points to God's redeeming presence in Christ *outwardly* but in the *present*. In this passage, those who expected redemption emphatically missed the decisive and direct revelation of Christ because they looked for it in the wrong place. They would have fed and clothed the incarnation of God if they had known where to find him. They would not have fed or clothed the hungry and naked human being, and in fact did not do so, because they were busy looking for Christ. They missed what we Quakers like to call unmediated revelation. Indeed they were probably looking for the day "when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him," only to miss the fact that he was present in the flesh all along.

Those who are redeemed had no idea they fed and clothed the hungry and naked Christ, and probably did not care. They, too, in a sense, missed the revelation – they didn't know it was the revelation of God's power precisely as weakness – because they were too busy feeding the hungry fellow human being. Yet they received not only the decisive revelation of the incarnate God, but they received the decisive redemption of God. If you don't like last-judgment language, remember that it usually is used to point to what is essential and decisive about a religion, what matters most and matters ultimately.

God is present, visible, in the flesh, living, and available as redeemer here and now – but not where most Christians are looking. The hearer of this text is, in theory, one who has the means to feed the hungry, and is probably therefore implicated in their hunger; the hearer of this text is also assumed to be looking for redemption, looking for revelation, looking for union with the divine spirit.

Matthew's tale of the last judgment points to where that revelation and redemption are decisively to be found. The message is a powerful one for Quakers: immediate revelation, direct mystical contact with God, is to be had in direct human contact with those who suffer, especially those who suffer precisely because of our excess, those who lack what we have too much of. This text says that they are the direct revelation of the incarnate God, and they are the redemptive presence of that God. This should make us think twice about paying others to do our "good works" in our behalf.

But something else is bound up in this story. To respond to the desires of the suffering for what they lack, it says, is to respond to the desires of God. The desires of God are directly tied up in the desires of the suffering and the oppressed of the earth. Christ yearns for bread, clothing, shelter, freedom, and companionship along with human beings who do so. The Risen Christ is not to be sought in the clouds – neither the clouds of the heavens nor those of the ivory tower. He is outwardly real and present and incarnate and living in the bodies and the desires, and probably the hopes and dreams, of those who suffer.

The vocal ministry of comfort and salvation, the one that encourages us to come to meeting for rest and quiet and refreshment once a week, stands directly in the way of this revelation. Encounter with the living and Risen Christ, in this definitive form, is not easy. Anyone who's ever worked in a soup kitchen or spent an hour with a panhandler or a dope addict, anyone who's ever experienced first-hand the lives of those who suffer hunger and poverty, know that it turns your sense of what the world is all about upside down. "Guilt" is often the word we associate with the experience, though I think it's one that should be banned from the English language. Let me draw on another biblical story to illustrate what contact with the Risen Christ is like.

Remember doubting Thomas? The one who said he'd never believe that Christ was risen until he could put his hands into Jesus' wounds?

My dad likes to tell a joke about this. The apostles are all gathered in the upper room on Easter Sunday. Suddenly Peter bursts in (substitute Mary Magdalen, if you like; it was probably her anyway) and shouts, "I've got good news and I've got bad news."

"What's the good news?" asks Thomas.

"Jesus is risen! He's alive! I've seen him with my own eyes!"

The apostles rejoice, and then Thomas asks, "What's the bad news?"

"The bad news," says Peter, "is that he wants to know where the hell you went on Friday afternoon."

Try to imagine what Thomas' encounter with Jesus was like. I think it was neither comfortable nor safe. The upper room may have been safe space, but it was a hiding place. Most safe space is.

John's Jesus still bore the wounds of torture and execution on his body; the Risen Christ today bears the wounds of torture and execution still. Do you suppose that Jesus could enter that room having completely forgotten what the Cross was like? Why do you suppose Thomas was absent from that room? I think he knew what was coming and, prudently, was terrified. He knew it wasn't safe! He was not afraid of revenge, but of the truthful and honest encounter with Jesus. Thomas cannot have an encounter of trust with Jesus until he confronts the truth, the results, of his abandonment of Jesus at the moment Jesus most needed him.

To know the immediate revelation of the outward, present Christ today requires this kind of personal encounter with those in whom he lives, an encounter that will involve putting our hands into their wounds, confronting our implication in their suffering. This source of immediate revelation can and must become of equal importance with the immediate revelation Friends seek and know from the inward and present Christ, and from the outward and historical Christ. The authentic minister must have access to this form of revelation and redemption in order to communicate it to others.

Are we up to that challenge? Can we know God incarnate in this way? If we can, we may have a new (or perhaps not so new) and fresh purchase on what Friends' ministry might become, in all its possible richness.

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