

Thought for the month, May 2021

The silence of a Quaker Meeting might seem a strange thing to people who haven't experienced Quaker worship. It was certainly alien to me before I first started attending. What is the point, I wondered, of a gathering where there are no words or prayers, no songs, rituals or symbols – all the things that make other religious events meaningful?

So when I first attend a Meeting for Worship, I expected to be bored and frustrated throughout. I quickly found that the reality was quite different.

After noticing how quickly the time passed, I began to sense something powerful in the fact that people who may or may not know each other would choose to sit together without first having to be introduced or without working through a liturgy that would otherwise make that seem purposeful. The simple sharing of space stripped away the protection of ritual in a way that represented complete acceptance: modelling everything that I understood Christian community to be about.

Acceptance implied equality, as did the fact that it didn't matter how much you knew or didn't know about Quakerism before you could make a spoken contribution to the gathering. And the contributions people made were sometimes moving, sometimes challenging and sometimes welcome distractions from my own swirling thoughts. Instead of walking down the familiar corridor of religious rituals to arrive at a sense of meaning predetermined by liturgy and preaching, it was like being on a boat on the sea. You might end up anywhere and the journey could be thrilling.

As well as not knowing where Quaker worship would lead, it also meant you could come from anywhere: any philosophy, faith or non-religious perspective. The thing which connected people in a Quaker Meeting was not what they *believed* but what they *intended*: to accept one another, to look for wisdom together and to use the energy that generated for their work in the world. It's not the only way to achieve that, but in my experience it's been a powerful one.

Over the centuries since Quakers first gathered, their patterns of worship and community have tended to shape shared values: equality, justice, peace, simplicity. But the basis by which individuals reason is unique to each. I believe that's the same for any movement, religious or otherwise; but the silence and space within a Quaker Meeting make freedom of thought an explicit part of that reasoning.

So when I think of meaning in worship now, I don't think about prayers and songs, though these of course hold meaning of their own specific design. I think instead of the significance of being human alongside other people, how we might share the world with each other and how, once we emerge from the silence of the Meeting, we might make as much noise as we can about that.