

## **The Times They are a-Changin'** **Roy Searle**

Unlike King Canute who denied reality and suffered the consequences, we need to face up to the state of the Church in Western culture. Revival may be longed for but the reality is one of decline. Post Christendom causes us to learn to sing the Lord's song in a strange land and ask how we live out the gospel in an emerging exile.

As Thomas Kuhn noted, crises are a necessary pre-condition for the emergence of novel theories; and with the emergence of new monastic communities there are some signs of hope, by God's grace, in a movement that is evidencing a call to repentance, renewal and the re-imagining of life, faith, church and community.

Many monastic communities have emerged during periods of significant social change when either the church or society experienced crisis, conflict, struggle or decline. For some they carried a sense of unease with what was and a desire to explore what could be. Many began life, and brought their influence, from the margins of the church and society. Common to both established and emerging monastic movements has been a summons to return to the values expressed in Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

One of the key foundational texts for the Northumbria Community came from the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

"The renewal of the church will come from a new type of monasticism which only has in common with the old an uncompromising allegiance to the Sermon on the Mount. It is high time men and women banded together to do this."

A Community of approximately 2,500 believers from Protestant, Catholic and unchurched backgrounds, we covenant together within the love of Christ and embrace a Rule of Life ~ Availability and Vulnerability.

As established forms of church are waning, renewed fresh expressions are being explored by communities like ourselves. Drawing inspiration and wisdom from the past in exploring a new monasticism, we are not advocating necessarily 'joining' a religious order or the renewal of 'old' religious orders but essentially a commitment to the heart of monastic spirituality and its application to contemporary society.

The new monastic communities are essentially dispersed groups and many have dispensed with the traditional vows of poverty and chastity. The Abbot of Ampleforth Abbey defined a monk as, "A rebel on two fronts": someone who challenges society about its accepted norms and at the same time challenges themselves about their relationship with God and their neighbour.

New monasticism is essentially non-conformist with some prophetic insight that critiques and offers some constructive criticism of aspects of contemporary culture.

New monastic communities challenge the Church to re-examine its priorities. For example: where there is little sense of community; where 'running the church' and maintaining buildings has become more important than relationships and service; where narrow and judgemental attitudes preclude welcome and hospitality; where prescribed programmes, anaemic worship, dead institutionalism and a disconnection from ordinary life leads to a lack of connection with humanity; where money, sex and power dominate and damage and where superficiality, reputation and image displaces depth, risk-taking, authenticity and integrity.

The Northumbria Community has grown as people of all ages and backgrounds have responded to God's call to intentional monastic and missional living. The call to seek God, to find a way for living that transforms the human heart and serves the kingdom of God; to counter the individualism of consumer culture with a commitment to covenant and community; that values rootedness, ordinariness and hiddenness; which embraces hospitality, servanthood and a rhythm of life that subverts the frenzied activity, celebrity culture and drivenness that damages relationships with God, self and others, is a call that we are seeking to embrace in following Christ.

In offering a description of who we are and what we are about in the Northumbria Community, we could borrow the words of the writer William Stringfellow as he observed the emergence of a new spiritual movement in America:

"Dynamic and erratic, spontaneous and radical, audacious and immature, committed if not altogether coherent, ecumenically open and often experimental, visible here and there, now and then, but unsettled institutionally. Almost monastic in nature but most of all enacting a fearful hope for human life in society."

From the pioneering and prophetic early days back in the 1980's, when there was never any intention to become a community, we have nevertheless grown from our beginnings in Northumberland to a network of Companions and Friends across the world. We witnessed a spontaneous emergence of community without any advertising, marketing or recruiting as the Lord has brought people to journey and join with us.

Questions not answers informed the Community then, as now: Who is it that we seek? How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? How then shall we live? Values rather than vision guarded and guided our ways.

The Community has a Mother House, Nether Springs, which is relocating this year to its new home, still in Northumberland. Other Community Houses are being established across Britain, France, Holland and North America expressing the heart, home and hospitality of monastic establishments. A Novitiate Process leads many to become Companions, who with Friends covenant together, renewing their 'vows' - their "Yes" to Availability and Vulnerability - each Easter. Our Daily Office, Celtic Daily Prayer, provides a pattern for the day and has been a source of inspiration to thousands beyond the Community. Together with our Rule, the Office and accompanying

spiritual disciplines, all of which have been formed on the anvil of experience, have informed our core values, ethos and calling.

The phrase "alone and together" reflects intentional aspects of our vocation. The place of the cell, alone before God, listening in solitude, being exposed to our hearts before God are key disciplines that are embraced and which inform and contribute to our life together in community. Being made in the image of God, we find our identity in relationship to others. Moving from the idealism about community to the reality of living with one another and all the diversity that comes with broken lives, requires the transforming work of the cell!

The emphasis upon the monastic and the missional provides a healthy balance between enclosure and wandering, being and doing. The raggedness of our life, where we are committed at the core but loose at the edges, is seen in the hospitality of our Mother House and other Houses and the connections made in our missional living which meet with untidy situations and with people who are unable to relate to narrowly defined church programmes and boundaries.

We recognising the challenges and opportunities for living out the gospel in a culture that is distancing itself from the church but are also encouraged by the growing interest in spirituality. Walter Brueggemann suggests that God uses times of exile not only to call us back to himself but to find a new way to be human in the world.

Perhaps new monastic communities, clothed with humility and the courage to embrace the radical call of the gospel, might contribute something not only to the renewal of the church but to realising hope for society. *f*

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