

The Christian Community

MOVEMENT FOR RELIGIOUS RENEWAL

Forest Row Congregation

Newsletter for Sunday, 21st June, 2020

Letter

Tom Ravetz

In ancient times, initiation was reserved for the few. Aspiring initiates left home and trod a lonely path, passing through many trials. They gained knowledge of the spiritual world which allowed them to understand the world they had left behind. Their own soul-life became clear to them. Then, they gained insight into destiny of their tribe and their people. Then their souls were filled with vivid pictures of the spiritual beings at work in and behind all earthly phenomena. They learned to receive inspiration from these beings and – as the culmination of their initiation – they experienced that they became one with them.

Through all of this, they brought a second human being to birth within themselves. They returned to their old home as strangers. Only in this way could they gain the insights they needed to become leaders of their culture.

The Christian church was founded in a time when the old temple-culture was fading away; indeed, once the church became a part of the Roman state, it played a part in bringing this about. For over a thousand years, the leading cultures of the west have lived from the memory of spiritual wisdom, but they have not replenished the source.

The twentieth century brought an historic change. If we read *How can one attain Knowledge of Higher Worlds*, first published in 1905, we may form the impression that it was addressed to people hearing about the worlds of inner experience described there for the first time. The descriptions may have interested them and stimulated their desire to become pupils on the inner path; however, they were firmly rooted in the world of experience given by the senses.

Now, when we read descriptions of how the powers of the soul split off from each other and challenge us to reintegrate our thinking, feeling and willing, or how a monstrous being holds up the mirror to us, showing us what we have not yet transformed within ourselves, we may feel that we are hearing about experiences that

What is happening at The Christian Community?

All public events have been cancelled because of the new Coronavirus. However, we are permitted to open the church for private prayer. Please check the noticeboard and online for more details.

The priests are celebrating the Act of Consecration of Man at 9am on Thursdays and Fridays and 10am on Sundays. Please join us in spirit. There will be an additional Act of Consecration of Man for St Johns on Wednesday, 24th at 10am.

The priests are available by phone or email for pastoral conversations or to give advice about where to find practical help.

We are sending out a weekly newsletter with spiritual guidance and study material.

For more information about The Christian Community, please see our website.

we know very well. All of the learning about the inner life that went on in the last century, the understanding of group dynamics and the concern with universal human rights, and the concern for the planet as a living organism: these show that the desire to achieve a higher perspective is at work. When on the other hand we look at the challenges we face: violence, polarisation, deceitfulness – we recognise that humanity is facing its double or shadow side, just as the initiates had to. The whole of humanity is going through the same processes of initiation that once were reserved for the tiniest minority.

In the Act of Consecration of Man we tread a path as community that is similar to the ancient path of individual initiation. The Epistles and the Gospel reading help us to understand the spiritual realities at work in time. In the Offering, we move into the world of images: the cup is revealed; the smoke ascends; we imagine the fire of love aglow on the altar. Here, we may also confront those parts of ourselves that are not yet transformed. In the Transubstantiation, we may experience that we are drawn into the presence of Christ when the priest kneels and speaks the words that come from the Last Supper. Finally, in the Communion, we unite with Christ. We return to the world renewed, with tools to understand and help our world in its becoming.

Which priests are binding our joys and desires today?

Luke Barr

As I was looking at the William Blake poem, 'The Human Abstract' a couple of weeks ago, I opened the collection of poems up on the page of another poem which had long resonated with me, 'The Garden of Love'. I first encountered this poem over 30 years ago. This poem meant something to me for many years. However, I was never quite sure what exactly. Its meaning was in many ways, quite clear - and yet I always had the feeling that some part of it eluded me.

Blake is a bit of an English institution. I marvelled when I visited the exhibition of his work last Winter at the Tate, to see so many people interested in him. He is clearly the craziest spiritual poet and artist we have ever produced. He is our equivalent of some demented zen master. And the public love him. Even though we live in the most materialistic of cultures, people want and need to regularly breathe in some Blake. They feel intuitively that this man has something; some antidote to the dull dreariness of our modern western spirit-less experience. He cared little for



convention; and the establishment sickened him. He seems to resonate with many.

We know that he was seen as deranged during his lifetime. And yet, the Tate Blake exhibitions are always sold out and overcrowded. The madman has his audience at last: the modern

Briton. I sometimes wonder if he were alive today, would we flock to him? Or ignore or ridicule him? Would he visit our church?! I like to think that he wouldn't be disinclined to...

Here is the poem:

*I went to the Garden of Love,
And saw what I never had seen:
A Chapel was built in the midst,
Where I used to play on the green.
And the gates of this Chapel were shut,
And Thou shalt not. writ over the door;
So I turn'd to the Garden of Love,
That so many sweet flowers bore.
And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tomb-stones where flowers should
be:
And Priests in black gowns, were
walking their rounds,
And binding with briars, my joys &
desires.*

Blake appears to be saying that our natural human joy, our true being has been replaced by something artificial, represented here by 'the chapel'. 'The chapel' is the purveyor of values oriented towards death ('graves') and negativity and prohibition ('thou shalt not'). It is anti-life. It restrains and limits the freedom of the human soul ('the joys and desires'). And those ominous dark figures of the 'priests in black gowns': I ask myself, is this religion? Is this me?

I think it important to say that I believe that the joys and desires that Blake refers to are not some libertarian manifesto of doing whatever one likes, to the detriment of others. Rather, it is a freedom which takes joy in the natural world and in truth and beauty. It is a freedom which is responsible and moral, and cares for the earth and for one's fellow human beings.

I have no doubt that at that time, conditions in the late 18th century, the era of the Enlightenment, were such that revolutionary proto-Romantic freethinkers like Blake could

see in the complacent institution of the church, an institution which was part of the establishment. The church and religion as they were then had little to offer the future, and to those like Blake who held revolutionary ideas about what the human being is or could yet become. All of society was radically changing (exactly as it is now), and the church, in so far that it held on to its established form, was becoming superfluous. They were guardians of a form of petrified truth; a truth which had grown stale and stagnant. They erect monuments to death ('tombstones') where life ('flowers') should be.

Well, this may still be true for certain religious institutions in our time. It is a danger that I believe, religion is always susceptible to. Therefore, it is a danger which also presents itself to us, The Christian Community. We also have to be aware of when we are lacking critical judgement, and too much aligned with the establishment, and not with our true bearings towards the spiritual world. I think this is true for me as well as for all of us who make up The Christian Community.

But I think that The Christian Community is -or certainly should be - aligned with life, or what Blake calls, 'flowers'. The 'flowers' that we have in our garden are the sacraments, because they are truly imbued with positive and healthy life forces. What other flowers of life do we have? Oscar Wilde would say: 'the children' - 'the most beautiful flowers in our garden are the children'! And he was right. But all of us are potentially beautiful flowers in the garden of love, even if we feel that we wilt a little for lack of the right conditions to grow.

But I wonder if Blake were writing today, would he still rail at the church? Perhaps. Where the church is stale, establishment oriented, overly conservative where unnecessary, dogmatic - then yes, he would.

So, I try and observe if I or we are ever veering in this direction and unnecessarily 'thou shalt

not'-ing where we needn't, or its none of our business to. But, on the whole, I don't think we (the Christian Community) do.

So who are the modern priests of our day who 'walk their rounds' in a devil's circle of thought? Who are the ones who are creating a culture of fear? A culture where death forces predominate in nourishment (McDonalds anyone?), soul experience (sitting for hours in front of a TV or the internet), spirituality (atheism, agnosticism, indifference)? Perhaps Blake's perfidious priest is not to be found in any particular vocation, but is rather more a tendency in us as individuals or in our professional life - when we lean back on dogma, general consensus, or the power of law to back up our arguments.

To me, where sloganeering and thinking based on statistics, as opposed to genuine human experience of reality, predominates - there we have those 'priests walking their rounds' imposing dogma, creating a sterile social existence, and seeking whether by accident or by design, to bind our 'joys and desires', our true spiritual legacy - our freedom.

What would the madman Blake say today?

Evening Primrose

What golden threads

Gently break open your heart?

What light longs to shine,

Fragile as breath,

In the night air?

You awaken to the stillness and quiver,

Remembering light

In some deeper darkness.

Sarah Lett

Supporting us

The Christian Community is funded by contributions by members and friends. In this time of crisis, when the priests' work is needed more than ever, we are facing a fall in our income through reduced collections and fundraising events.

If you are able, please consider taking out a standing order or increasing your existing one.