In this series of Explorations we have been struggling to express, in ways that people in this 21st century can understand, what Jesus Christ lived and taught.

The first began with a story about a Jewish rabbi and led us to the punch-line that “God dwells wherever we let God in!” Baptism can thought of as aligning ourselves with God’s Way as lived out by Jesus. Being baptized is taking aim, like announcing our personal Vision Statement.

The second with the title “The Spirit of Truth will teach you” asked the questions:
(a) Where do we see the Spirit of God, that was active in Jesus the man from Nazareth in Galilee 2000 years ago, at work today? and,
(b) How should you and I respond to the challenges we face today?

The third wrestled with different ideas found in the Christian Bible [the Old and the New Testaments] about how God influences what happens in this universe. I shared my own conviction that continuing to use hallowed language or implying that God from time to time “intervenes” on behalf of some people but not for others, makes it impossible for more better educated people in this 21st century to believe in God at all. Also, such language and prayers cruelly adds to the suffering of people.

In this fourth Exploration I am using the story of one man who lived in the 17th century at a time similar in many ways to ours today. Massive political changes had been occurring, and were yet to be understood. The people who had traditionally benefitted from being able to control the use of land, farming and agriculture, who made the laws and determined who could mix or marry (the mores around ‘social class’) continued to resist the changes that were inevitable.

But this man, part of whose story we are hearing today, had little to say about the political issues of the C17th century. Like Jesus and those who began monasteries and religious orders, Francis of Assissi and countless others, he was no politician. Nor did he like the reformers a hundred years earlier (Luther, Calvin or others) allow himself to be co-opted into supporting a too cozy liaison with kings, queens and courtiers, bishops and ecclesiastical dignitaries, often referred to as ‘the First and Second Estates’.

Jesus told stories that required people to think for themselves and expand their vision. Let us hear now a piece of “narrative theology”. With permission I quote extensively from an article by a contemporary David Purnell on George Fox.

George Fox, the founder of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), was born in Leicestershire,
England, in 1624 and lived until 1691. He kept a journal of his experiences. He was shocked by the failure of those who claimed to be Christian to live up to Christian standards. He became disillusioned and searched for spiritual help from many different people for four years. He turned inward and heard a voice telling him that Jesus could speak directly to his condition. He also saw a vision of an ocean of light overcoming an ocean of darkness.

For several years George Fox travelled widely around England, at a time of great upheaval when the monarchy had been replaced by Oliver Cromwell, and found many people who were in unity with his message. In 1652 he went up Pendle Hill in Lancashire and preached at length, attracting many followers. His message was that God spoke directly to people without intermediaries like priests.

Other significant parts of his message were:-

- there is that of God in everyone
- peace and holiness go together
- God's power is over all creation
- it is the inward life that is most important: outward ceremony and creed are not sufficient
- personal integrity and truthfulness are essential
- the leadings of the Spirit are more vital than the words of Scripture
- men and women have an equal place in the movement.

George Fox was imprisoned for several years for his unorthodox views, and many other early Quakers had a similar fate. During one such time in prison, George Fox wrote to others in the Quaker movement as follows:

"Keep in the wisdom of God that spreads over all the earth. Spare no place, spare not tongue or pen, but be obedient to the Lord God and go through the world and be valiant for the Truth upon earth; tread and trample all that is contrary under. Be patterns, be examples in all countries, places, islands, nations, wherever you come, that your carriage and life may preach among all sorts of people and to them: then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one."

The Quaker movement grew rapidly. Some Quakers, notably William Penn, went to the American colonies and set up Quaker communities. George Fox visited them, and in his Journal records the experience of a trip in Virginia:

"In this voyage we met with foul weather, storms, and rain, and lay in the woods by a fire in the night. Here lived a Friend called the widow Wright. Next day we had a great meeting in Nancemum, of Friends and others... After the meeting, we hastened towards Carolina, yet had several meetings by the way... a very good meeting we had at William Yarrow’s at Pagan creek, which was so large that we were fain to be abroad, the house not being big enough to contain the people. A great openness there was, the sound of truth spread abroad...."

Later he speaks of another meeting:

"The governor, with his wife, received us lovingly; but a doctor there would needs dispute with us. And truly his opposing us was of good service, giving occasion for the opening of many things to the people concerning the light and spirit of God, which he denied be in every one, and affirmed it was not in the Indians. Whereupon I called an Indian to us and asked him whether when he did lie or do wrong to anyone there was not something in him that did reprove him for it. He said there was such a thing in him... so we shamed the doctor before the governor and people."

These extracts from his journal give something of the flavour of George Fox's amazing commitment and determination to engage with others about the truths he had discovered for himself. He continued as an inspiration to the Quaker movement through-out the rest of his life, and he shared some of his
remaining years with his wife Margaret Fell, another vital contributor to the early Quaker movement. David Purnell concludes with a comment from William Penn about George Fox:

"He had an extraordinary gift in opening the Scriptures. He would go to the marrow of things and show the mind, harmony and fulfilling of them with much plainness and to great comfort and edification. But above all he excelled in prayer. The inwardness and weight of his spirit, the reverence and solemnity of his address and behaviour, and the fewness and fullness of his words have often struck even strangers with admiration, as they used to reach others with consolation."

Each of us here would have been struck by different points. Those that stirred my attention were:

- George Fox being shocked by the failure of those who claimed to be Christian to live up to Christian standards
- his message, “God spoke directly to people without intermediaries like priests”
- “peace and holiness go together”
- “it is the inward life that is most important: outward ceremony and creed are not sufficient”
- “personal integrity and truthfulness are essential”
- “the leadings of the Spirit are more vital than the words of Scripture”
- “a great openness there was”
- the racist doctor who denied that there could be “that of God in an [American] Indian”
- George Fox’s extraordinary gift of opening the and going to the marrow of the bones of the Scriptures
- the reverence of his life, the fewness and fullness of his words, and how those who listened went out to reach others and console them.

The Society of Friends has over the last 357 continued to be a distinctive part of the Christian Church. Unlike most Christian denominations, they do not have fixed liturgies of the Anglicans, Catholics, Orthodox or Protestants, nor “speaking in tongues” like Pentecostals, but they meet for times of Silence during which anyone, if they feel the Spirit moving them, can speak or lead in prayer.

I have had the privilege of working alongside many Quakers or “Friends” as they are often called, and have been humbled by their dedication. They give priority not to outward forms but quietly and intentionally allowing the Spirit of God to guide them so that they may give themselves more effectively and generously in serving those in need, promoting non-violence, justice and peace all over the world.

Quakers I have known from time to time join in worship with other Christians and churches that do have fixed liturgies and elaborate music, art and architecture. Although Quakers do not sing hymns in their Meetings, I don’t think most would find difficulty with appreciating the deep significance, for us in the Anglican tradition, of that 20th century hymn we sang before the Gospel reading, with its second verse:

Here are symbols to remind us
of our lifelong need of grace;
here are table, font and pulpit,
here the cross has central place;
here in honesty of preaching,
here in silence as in speech,
here in newness and renewal
God the Spirit comes to each.

Quakers are committed to working ecumenically with other parts of Christ’s Church, but are rightly not willing to abandon the distinctiveness of their way of being in prayer together, practicing the faith
and stressing the principles that were forged through the fires of persecution and their commitment to non-violence over three and a half centuries.

We have I think much to learn from the Society of Friends, particularly in their disciplined and self-sacrificing commitment to making peace possible and opposing recourse to war.

I close with the words of U.S. President Barack Obama ending his speech in Cairo 4th June 2009:

“All of us share this world for but a brief moment in time. The question is whether we spend that time focused on what pushes us apart, or whether we commit ourselves to an effort – a sustained effort – to find common ground, to focus on the future we seek for our children, and to respect the dignity of all human beings.

“It is easier to start wars than to end them. It is easier to blame others than to look inward; to see what is different about someone than to find the things we share. But we should choose the right path, not just the easy path. There is also one rule that lies at the heart of every religion – that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. This truth transcends nations and peoples – a belief that isn’t new; that isn’t black or white or brown; that isn’t Christian, or Muslim or Jew. It’s a belief that pulsed in the cradle of civilization, and that still beats in the heart of billions. It’s a faith in other people, and it’s what brought me here today.

“We have the power to make the world we seek, but only if we have the courage to make a new beginning, keeping in mind what has been written.

“The Holy Koran [Islam] tells us, ‘O mankind! We have created you male and a female; and we have made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another.’

“The Talmud [Hebrew] tells us: ‘The whole of the Torah is for the purpose of promoting peace.’

“The Holy Bible [Christian] tells us, ‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.’

“The people of the world can live together in peace. We know that is God's vision. Now, that must be our work here on Earth. Thank you. And may God's peace be upon you.”

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David Purnell, GEORGE FOX, from Canberra Quakers, May 2009, printed in Quakers Australia NSW Regional Newsletter June 2009. Grateful thanks to David Purnell, and editors Mary Westbrook and Mary Pollard for permission to use the article. Subscriptions for the monthly Newsletter: $14 p.a. by cheque to ”NSW Regional Meeting”; send to John Dundas, 29 Bushlands Ave, Gordon, 2072.