

I Kings Chapter 19, verses 1 – 12

“ ... after the fire came a gentle whisper” – v.12

Today we are invited to celebrate George Fox, Founder of the Society of Friends (The Quakers) who died on this date in 1691.

Others in the congregation are more qualified to lead this, since I have never been to a Quaker meeting. I only can recall one mention of him in a sermon. This was in 1976 when a new Rector was instituted to the benefice of Fenny Drayton and Higham on the Hill in Leicestershire. Bishop Ronald Williams preached on two initials : G F. These referred to George Fox who was born in Fenny Drayton on 1624, and Geoffrey Fisher who was born in Higham rectory in 1887 and was Archbishop of Canterbury from 1945 to 1961 – two completely different personalities.

George Fox was a grave and thoughtful boy, early-noted for his honesty. He was also spiritually troubled and sought help. One priest suggested smoking and singing as a cure; another would have bled him, and a third became enraged when George accidentally trod on his flowerbed. George gave up on priests in disgust and came to see that he could find God for himself without recourse to churches ('steeplehouses' he called them) or ministers. In triumphant certainty that God was in every person, and spoke to each directly, he began preaching. He would sit in silence for an hour before a crowd until he felt he had a message to give.

He was imprisoned at Nottingham when he was 24, after he had entered a church and denounced the preacher's views. The next year, at Derby, he bade Justice Bennett tremble at the word of the Lord, and the magistrate retorted by calling Fox and his friends 'quakers'.

Fox moved north to Lancashire where he met a widow, Margaret Fell, who married him and shared his sufferings. Persecution did not stop him gaining supporters who accepted his opposition to the established churches, to paid ministers, to military service, to capital punishment and to the taking of oaths. In all, he was imprisoned eight times and often beaten and stoned by angry crowds. He could endure all this once he had heard the voice. 'There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition'; he went on develop the theme of the continuing presence of Christ in his doctrine of the 'inner-light'. He held that all men everywhere were capable of receiving the light and Fox said 'may not the Spirit of Christ speak in the female as in the male'. Quakers met the light in the silence and sharing in their meetings and were called to witness to it in life, no matter what suffering this entailed.

In the following century and afterwards their standards became the basis for high standards in business. When you next eat chocolate, visit your bank think of Cadbury, Fry, Rowntree, Barclay, and Lloyd; remind yourself of the contributions of Huntley and Palmer, Bryant and May, and Allen and Hanbury.

During the last half-century opportunities for silence have been granted in public worship, albeit for a very few minutes. Please read the story of Elijah at Horeb. Sing 'Speak through the earthquake, wind and fire' if you must, but better by far:

*“Never in the whirlwind found,
or where earthquakes rock the place.
Still and silent is the sound,
The whisper of Thy Grace” .* Charles Wesley

Geoffrey.