

# The Chapel of the Holy Spirit

## A vision of possibility

It seems a bit platitudinous to describe the dedication of the Community's chapel as a milestone. We talk about milestones all the time, when often all we really mean is the latest twist in life's journey. This event, however, marks the climax of a journey, which, for some, has been not far short of 40 years. If anything qualifies for that description, surely this is it.

It's a story, which has involved hundreds of people, at one stage or another, from all over the world. It's been an epic journey, in the sense that there have been adventures, struggles, triumphs and disasters, in equal measure. It's been a romance, in that the commitment of lives to one another has generated an enduring feeling of comradeship rather like that of soldiers in a war. It's been a marathon, in that those who remain feel more like survivors than conquering heroes.

Why is the chapel so significant to us? Probably because the story is so impregnated with Old Testament symbolism.

Abraham went out not knowing where he was going. That was the experience of so many who left 'normal' life and family to join the Community. The people of Israel followed God with Moses across a desert, all the while living in temporary living quarters and using a tent for their place of worship. That too was our experience, always moving on, always using a borrowed church or a room in a house or office for our chapel.

After 40 years the Israelites reached their promised land, and in course of time built their permanent temple. It became the focus for Jewry everywhere, not just in Israel itself, but also for those scattered abroad. So we too have at last found our permanent place of worship, and we like to think that the Community is, in a way, only its guardians. In a wider sense, it belongs to all those whose lives were given to fulfill a vision, and whose service of God in many places across the world is still enriched by it.

What is it all about, this movement, which began in the sixties, and is now a small group so far as its residential component is concerned?

It was part of the roots of the modern charismatic movement. 'Roots' rather than 'stem', because the charismatic movement subsequently developed in ways that were often quite different from the spiritual history of the Community. In early days there was an openness to God across the board, which led to the rediscovery of spiritual gifts in many different traditions. Later, the use of gifts became, for many, almost an end in itself, with a theology and style of worship to match. It became as exclusive in its own way as any of the other major traditions of churchmanship in our time.

But the spiritual impulse that led to community living was never about the gifts of the Holy Spirit per se. It was about a response to God from the heart. It was indeed a rediscovery of the Holy Spirit, but it was in the broadest sense of what we mean by the Spirit of God, not a narrow definition of the function supposedly characteristic of the third person of the Trinity.

This has always been true for us. Hence, even though on the surface life today may seem quite far removed from some of the groups who walked with us in early days, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to call our permanent place of worship the Chapel of the Holy Spirit. It simply encapsulates what we have always been about.

If the heart of our life is a response to the Spirit, what does that involve?

The first thing, perhaps in a sense the *only* thing, it means is worship. The worship of God is the center of all that we are and do. Everything else stems from that. It has often been a difficulty for communication that 'worship' today is almost universally understood as a religious act, liturgical or otherwise. For us, worship is closer to its meaning in the old marriage service: 'with my body I thee worship', something which goes far beyond words and music or even the feelings evoked by them, something that is always present, in the mundane as much as in the sublime.

Worship is the givenness of our lives to God, in faithfulness: for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, in the joy and in the pain. The religious act of worship is the verbal expression of a substantive reality already known and accepted, capable of being described in concrete non-religious terms. Worship in the conventional sense is the means by which this freely chosen gift to God is externalized and given objective meaning.

The characteristic style of the Community's worship has had many imitators, often in the hope that by so doing those who participate may be inspired to give their lives to God. However, without denying the inspirational value of an act of worship, for us this inevitably puts the cart before the horse. It is as we give our lives to God that our worship feeds our souls. All human beings, religious or secular, have the capacity to worship, but even at its most inspirational it will tend to reinforce life choices already made rather than impel us into new ones.

If the center of our life is worship, which at its root means giving our lives to God, it follows as night follows day that our lives are given to each other. That's because God is love, and while you may be able to worship a person, you cannot worship love in the abstract. To worship God is to love, otherwise you are not worshipping God. So a key part of our spiritual journey has been to give our lives to one another.

This is why our music in worship made such an impact when it first came to public notice. Giving ourselves to one another meant giving ourselves to worship in a public event no matter what – no matter how we were feeling or what our relationships were. It meant that worship was not an individual, albeit collective, event; it was a corporate act. Everything from the words of songs to the manner of singing and the way music was played combined to convey the underlying reality of the worship of our lives.

At a secular level, that's to say at the level of ordinary life as opposed to religious activity, giving ourselves to God and to one another had to have a reason that was a bit more specific than a general concept of loving one another. It was in order to be the tangible presence of Christ wherever we happened to be located.

To worship God meant to be the presence of Christ – something that necessarily involved others. Since according to Paul we are all *members* of Christ's body, this was a goal that was difficult to make visible in any specific location as independent individuals. More importantly, as soon as our worship led us to a corporate imitation of Christ, we found ourselves having to deal with Jesus not as an exalted figure with titles such as Savior of the World, but as an historical figure who said some concrete principles about what it means to love God.

Loving God means dealing with relationships, the complex interactions between human beings, which bring out both the best and the worst in all of us. It also means dealing with economics. Not just frowning on world trade systems, but dealing with the reality of money,

personal ambition, security, lifestyle, inequality and so on in ordinary secular life, in the way we manage our personal affairs and in our relationship to our neighbor. It meant faith in God that our real needs would be met even if not in the way that we would have chosen.

This was often where our biggest struggles lay. Many community members were quite capable of holding down well-paid professional jobs. Many had abilities and gifts that could never be fully realized in the limited setting of community. Many had longings and desires which were perfectly healthy and legitimate, but which would never be fulfilled unless they separated and moved away. Gradually, over a period of years, we began to realize that while the vision could be held by many, the structures we developed to contain its visible expression would require a specific calling.

But the vision of responding to the Spirit remains. Most of the sayings of Jesus are so radical when set against the way life is lived in a modern industrial society that it seems impossible that anyone could fulfill them. Maybe this is why a lot of religious enthusiasm nowadays concentrates on the person of Jesus rather than his sayings, as if his 'lordship' could somehow be separated from what he said. At any rate, when we give ourselves to God and to one another, all of a sudden the sayings come within the realms of possibility.

That too is what the vision entails – it's a vision of possibility. All those who for whatever reason were unable to remain within the limited confines of structure as we developed it nevertheless experienced something that can never be unknown. They have tasted a vision and know about possibility.

And it is a vision of the possible that is perhaps the Community's most significant legacy to the church. In the early years we frequently found ourselves teaching about the principles of corporate life, as if Christianity could somehow be reduced to some sort of technique, capable of being acquired with a bit of training. It never worked, because it was never like that even for us. Not that we had no principles of corporate life, but faith, for us, was always a matter of the heart. We were always 'following the Spirit', as the saying goes.

So we didn't learn principles and then attempt to live them out. We lived life and then reflected on what God was doing among us, drawing out principles in order to cement and build up our understanding. It meant that there was always an openness to the possibilities of God.

It is that holding open the door to possibility that makes us feel closer to Jesus than what we experience in much of 'brand name' Christianity in the modern church. A lot of modern religion is not open to anything outside the very narrow limits of dogma (which is not even necessarily theological; it can be any kind of sacred hobby horse). Alternatively, where there seems to be an openness, the source of it often looks too much like an agenda other than God as revealed in Jesus.

'Openness to possibility' should not be confused (as it often is) with infidelity to revealed truth, or with an assumed position (either for or against) in issues of political correctness. It is an openness to God, sometimes referred to as 'following the Spirit', not in the sense of merely drifting with the tides of theological fashion, but rather as a spiritual mode of being, as opposed to a dogmatic or political one, the ultimate source of which is scripture and in particular the sayings of Jesus. The word 'spiritual' does not refer to a mental state but to the whole person, and there is nobody like Jesus for making one face reality with all its possibilities and unresolved dilemmas.

Implicit in the life and teaching of Jesus, and explicit in Paul's commentary about them, is the struggle between spirit and law. For both Jesus and Paul law is death, because it not only judges but also defines the limits of goodness. Yet much of what we have in the church today is law. Dogmas, rights and policies are insisted upon. People are condemned for believing or not believing, for condoning or not condoning, for conforming or not conforming. In Jesus, the spirit was above the law and he often set it aside. Yet he also claimed to fulfill the law. That is a very hard line indeed for us to walk with integrity, and we can only come close by sticking close to Jesus himself.

So, why do we live in community? Not because scripture enjoins it as God's will for Christians. Certainly not because it is the politically correct thing to do. Why then? Simply because we can. Because it is possible. Because it is a way – a creative way – of 'following the Spirit', which is just a term for exploring, in practical secular life, the meaning of the sayings of Jesus.

Those sayings are themselves a reflection of the spirit of Jesus. They are not laws, nor are they comprehensive in the sense of a systematic code, which is capable of being fleshed out with case law. They are the sayings of a man who has internalized the law – that is, who has already given himself to God – and has, as a result, caught a vision of possibility. How else do you explain the oft repeated 'You have been taught one thing, but what I say is...?'

Possibility goes beyond requirement. It also goes beyond dogma. Possibility opens the door to creativity, which is the very nature of God. Possibility is not rootless, exploring innovation for the sake of it, or simply to satisfy convenience. It is based in what is already known of God by us all, and accepted. In that spirit, non-Jews were admitted to what would otherwise have been a very exclusive club, and we believe the same Spirit is freely available to transform human life and relationships today.

In one sense, the Community of Celebration has a limited vision – necessarily so, in order for anyone to grasp it. It is a vision of ordinary lay Christians putting their lives together to be the presence of Christ where they are. The enduring relationships that have resulted are in themselves sufficient to commend the vision to many. But if one reflects on the deeper meaning of the vision, it opens the door to possibilities that are limitless.

For those trapped in dogma it offers freedom. For those seeking transcendence as a way to salvation, it offers more down to earth (and equally godly) remedies. For those in despair at systemic injustice and the tyranny of private economics, it opens up ways to rise above the insurmountable. For a church locked into division over social and religious issues, it holds out the possibility of unity based on the Spirit of Jesus rather than definitions of right and wrong.

The Chapel of the Holy Spirit echoes with these possibilities. From one point of view there is nothing special about it: it is just an ordinary little chapel fulfilling an ordinary function as a place of worship for a few who live daily life in one small corner of America. But it's our hope that the spiritual history that brought it into being will continue to produce echoes that find a place in many hearts around the world.

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