

Trinity United Reformed Church
St Albans

April 2011



Grapevine

Helen Ogilvie celebrated her 98th birthday at Trinity with a cake (of course).



Marching towards Easter

The Monday after the protest march in London, organised by the unions, I had an appointment with the chiropractor. "How was your weekend?" he asked. "It was good; I went on the march in London" "What march?" he asked. "The march against cuts" I said. "What cuts?" I was wondering what planet he was living on but I replied "The government cuts." As he knows that I am a church minister he asked "Are the churches being cut?" "no, but the churches stand in solidarity with those who are affected by the cuts. And, besides, the churches run or host a lot of community projects that are affected by the cuts." That ended the conversation as my chiropractor was, obviously, not interested!

It was good to walk along in the march; I nearly didn't - because of my painful back - but Janet phoned the evening before to say that she would be going and could we meet up at Trafalgar Square. And Michael also planned to come so, while some of the Trinity folk would walk under their union banner, the three of us would be there to represent Trinity (with no banner to identify us but we tried to follow the Church Action Against Poverty banner). My first experience of a protest march in London was amazing. Thousands and thousands of people - old, young, families, groups - that snaked through the streets of London, holding the most interesting and diverse banners and placards.....Apparently the Museum of London is trying to collect some of the placards and it may be interesting to view them! I particularly liked the one carried by some very young children: "Save my school and save my library" with a picture drawn of their school and their library. Michael liked the placard "I am rich. tax me!" that he saw. While Janet strode on into the park, Michael and I dropped out of the march just before it entered Hyde Park, and thus we missed the speeches that followed, among which the excellent speech of Roberta Rominger who was the only church leader who spoke! "On behalf of the United Reformed Church, I say, 'Count us in'" (The speech is reproduced later in this magazine and on the URC website).

Back home it became quickly clear that the media was bent on spending more time focusing on the tiny group of troublemakers, rather than the thousands of peaceful protesters! It affirmed what we all know: the media likes to focus on the bad news and, whether we like it or not, we are fed with a continuous diet of bad news! Apparently, bad news sells, good news doesn't! Perhaps that is why we have such difficulty getting a hearing for the good news that we proclaim! Yes, we have a gospel to proclaim: good news in a world where bad news makes the headlines. Of course, we live in a Good Friday world, where people are suffering and dying needlessly at the hands of the powers-that-be, whether they be corrupt leaders, authoritarian governments, or economic systems of exploitation and greed. And even our planet, with its amazing biodiversity, is being crucified.

So what about this good news? What about Easter? What does it mean that "Christ is risen. He is risen indeed!"? Doesn't that mean that death and all the death-dealing powers in the world do not have the last word? Doesn't it mean that even in the midst of all the bad news there is the good news of hope, of new life, of new possibilities and opportunities? Doesn't it mean that there is another way, rather than the dead-end way of the world, and that way is discovered and walked by many people?

Yea, I am convinced that there are many people who are proclaiming the good news by the way they live, by their actions, by walking in protest marches (like the pensioner with her dog who walked beside us in London; she looked like she had walked in many marches before!) The world is full of people who care, who feed the hungry and clothe the naked, visit the sick and the prisoners. There are many people who practise truth-telling, even when their message is not welcome to politicians and power-brokers, and who may find themselves literally or figuratively "nailed on a cross"! I am sure that there are many people who make changes in their lives, living simply so that others may simply live and so that future generations may also enjoy the beauty and bounty of the earth. And while we are privileged that we have this "gospel" to proclaim, we are not the only ones who show that the Easter message is true. In a Good Friday world, there are many people, of all faiths and none, who stand up and raise their voices for change.....People who believe in "life before death", to borrow the slogan of Christian Aid, and who believe there is another way, which we call "God's way", which is that death does not have the final word....life has!

We have this gospel to proclaim.....Christ is alive and because he lives "the spirit bird of hope is freed for flying, our cages of despair no longer keep us closed and life-denying!" (Shirley Ann Murray)

All best wishes for Easter and the Easter season!

Leonora.

March for the Alternative
26 March 2011
Roberta Rominger's address to the demonstration

I'm here on behalf of the 1500 congregations of the United Reformed Church, nearly all of which are involved in community work. The stories they are telling these days are deeply frightening. It's not just huge, long-standing flagship projects facing closure. It's the everyday things. It's noticing that every week the number of people coming for help increases. It's watching the morale of a community decline. It's the church-based credit union reporting that more and more people are applying for loans. Where it's clear they will not be able to repay, you have to say no, but you say no knowing that their next resort will be one of those doorstep lenders with their extortionate interest rates. You can go on cooking meals for an old people's lunch club, but if the local authority can no longer help with transport, you don't have any clients. We Christians believe that we have a mandate to stand alongside the people society leaves behind. It's a sobering place to stand right now.

There are alternatives. Between us today, we'll be offering a host of ideas. But from us in the churches, two contributions.

The first is an alternative mindset. God's economy is about grace and sufficiency, not greed and scarcity. So the right solution will be one that closes the gap between rich and poor, inviting us to meet in that place called "enough", which is a place rich with possibility. The second is a cause that is dear to our hearts. The URC has been campaigning hard for the Robin Hood Tax. It is a simple and elegant way to bring an extra £20B into the public coffers. It levies an infinitesimal tax on financial transactions around the globe. Redistribution of wealth that is both just and reasonable.

There is no shortage of solutions. See the passion and commitment and ingenuity represented by the thousands of us here today. On behalf of the United Reformed Church, I say, "Count us in".

None of us is here today just for a one-day march. You're here for the long haul. So are we.



Janet Brown and
Leonora and Michael
Jagessar on the march.

The Bible and the Law

When I was leading worship at Trinity in February we considered Biblical passages from Deuteronomy (30), one of the book of the Jewish Law, and from Matthew's Gospel from the Sermon on the Mount (5.21-27). There are close parallels between the giving of the Law on the mountain through the leadership of Moses and the restatement of the Law by Jesus.

Deuteronomy tells of the giving of the Commandments which were to form the foundation of the laws governing the Israelite society in their new land. Once they began to settle they had to find ways to live together in harmony, to learn to be good neighbours. That unity was to be found in those simple commandments. Nowadays it is common to hear the criticism that they are so negative with their refrain "Thou shalt not". But they are a warning against some of the worst aspects of human behaviour: civic harmony is fractured when people steal, or murder, or commit adultery, or lie about others. It is always easier to point out the pitfalls as outlined in the commandments than it is to spell out a code of conduct which would enhance society's cohesion.

The Ten Commandments are only the summary of the Law; the rest of Deuteronomy amplifies in great detail what it would mean to live as God's people. They were, for example, to work at making a society in which orphans and widows would be cared for and love would be shown to foreigners who lived in the same community - even to the extent of giving them food and clothing.

The Book of Deuteronomy is very old, approximately 2700 years old, so it is no surprising that it also includes much that relates to the culture of that time: guidance about what food to eat, some of it quite sensible and some of it rather obscure now. Underlying the book as a whole there is a strong strand of compassionate common sense: every seven years, for example, debts were to be cancelled. "There will never be any poor among you if only you obey the Lord your God". (Chapter 15). Human behaviour and reverence for God are two sides of one coin. Those who love God, love other people. Moses said he was offering the people a choice between life and good or death and evil: "Choose life and your descendents will live". In other words, if you want society to prosper, you must order it on the principle of good neighbourliness: positive relations with everyone. Deviation from that principle brings about unhappiness, injustice and misery; eventually society disintegrates.

Jesus, in his ministry, took the Law and interpreted it against the society in which he lived. He looked at the principles the Law was trying to express, but he looked more deeply into them. He radicalised the Law. It was not just the outward act of murder that was to be judged, but the anger that leads on to murder. Indeed, it was not just the anger, but the use of insult, "you good for nothing", "you fool" - these terms of denigration were evidence of hostility, and it was hostility which was against the spirit of the Law. The Law can only deal with the extreme cases of violation, but it is these fundamental, apparently lesser, infringements, which, if not checked, lead on to the broken relationships. I guess that in our day it was this lower level of societal breakdown that led to the introduction of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs). Jesus recognises that we are imperfect people living in an imperfect world. If we are to guard against alienation and overcome it we have to work for reconciliation. This is high priority, so much so that you should leave the worship and go and be reconciled with whoever you have offended. That's how urgent reconciliation is!

Jesus doesn't offer hard and fast rules; for example, he conceded that divorce might be allowed under some circumstances. It is the spirit of the law that matters. The letter of the law may be easy to practise but it could hide violations that are just as damaging. So he leads on from speaking about murder to backbiting and ridicule. In our news not long ago there was a case of the woman who killed her handicapped daughter and then killed herself because of the ridicule they had endured - those who ridiculed them were responsible for their deaths. In the same way in our time it is easy to condemn adultery and divorce but what about cruelty and lack of trust between partners? What about lying and constant undermining of trust? Are not they just as destructive in a relationship? Through the sermon on the mount the disciples were being encouraged to look deeply into human behaviour and apply the law with insight and compassion.

John Reardon.

Action by Christians Against Torture

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***All that is required for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing -
Burke***

Sheila Knopp has the latest ACAT Newsletter. There's too much to reproduce in full here, so please ask Sheila if you would like to view the whole thing. In particular, there are several imprisoned people who need your support.



Leonora shows off the Call to Trinity, signed by individual members of the congregation.