What I value about being a Quaker

If I were addressing a meeting of Quakers I would begin by saying something like, “Good afternoon, Friends” echoing the words of Jesus, “I have called you Friends”.

We are the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) and in that name are some important words. We are a Religious Society, that is a Church, and we are recognised as such by Churches Together in Britain and Ireland and of course Churches Together in England. We are not members of the World Council of Churches but I am a member of the committee that has just made a significant submission WCC called ‘A Spirit Led Church’ in response to the WCC Faith and Order Paper ‘The Church, towards a common vision’.

I imagine that if I asked you what you associate with Quakers, apart from porridge, you would probably say, “Silence”. In some ways that is an accurate perception because our worship can be seen as a gathering of people in silence.

There are different sorts of silence. There is the absence of sound and that is rare. There is the silence of private meditation of the sort that we, and people of many other faiths and none, experience when we sit in silent prayer. And there is the silence that we as Quakers experience when we attend a Meeting for Worship. This is not a group of people each doing their own thing but a Communal Act of Worship.

We do not have designated ministers or priests. We recognise the priesthood of all believers and in that sense we have done away with the laity. We wait to be moved by the Spirit and sometimes in Meeting for Worship one or more Friends may feel moved to Minister. Each Ministry is accepted in Silence. There is no outward response except that the Ministries offered during a Meeting for Worship may build on each other as a corporate experience.

We have a book called; “Quaker Faith & Practice” subtitled; “The book of Christian discipline (of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain)”. In the introduction there is the phrase, “We commit ourselves not to words but to a way”. We are not constrained by a creed or by doctrine but we live in a process in which the Spirit is revealed.

So, Quakers also have Meeting for Worship for Business. The way that business is conducted is described in Quaker Faith & Practice and is very disciplined. This is often referred to as the Quaker Business Method. It is usual for Business Meetings to have a Clerk (and often an Assistant Clerk). The Clerk’s role is to discern the will of the meeting and this is recorded by Minute for which the Clerk asks whether the Minutes is acceptable. The positive response to this is, “I hope so”. The result is a set of minutes recorded contemporaneously with the Meeting.

Also contained in Quaker Faith & Practice is a sub-booklet, “Advices and Queries” which could be called a Rule of Life, comparable perhaps to the Rule of Saint Benedict or the Taize rule or the Rule of the Northumberland Community. It is a document for personal reflection and challenge. There are also other pieces of writing for reflection; from the 17th Century through to today. It is a mine of gems.

Why am I a Quaker? In part because I so value the Meeting for Worship and also in part because I have seen the integrity of the Quaker Business Method. But there is more than that. Quakers also have a number of testimonies which are central to our values. These can be summarised as Peace, Equality, Simplicity and Truth.

So for example; Quakers sometimes call themselves Peacemakers and will be seen working for Peace in war zones, at the United Nations and in opposing the renewal of Trident.

We challenge inequality and work hard to establish equality. In particular we ‘pride’ ourselves in having published a document in 1963 entitled, “Towards a Quaker view of sex”. This shook the Churches but we see that this document was instrumental in changing attitudes and the law in this country with regard to same-sex relationships. This does not make us popular with some other churches but it is central to our understanding of our role of discernment and of ‘Speaking Truth to Power’.

To quote Mahatma Ghandi, “we try to live simply that others may simply live”. Today this is clearly demonstrated in our current commitment to sustainability. As a community we have made a commitment to being low carbon community and have led the way with regard to disinvestment from fossil fuels.

And Truth. Look at the newspapers, see what Quakers are saying. We do speak Truth to Power and we are prepared to suffer for it.

Quakers are often thought of as being ‘quirky’, eccentric, controversial and outspoken but also as reliable, trustworthy, and prepared to suffer for their faith.

Why am I a Quaker? In some ways I feel that this is who I have always been. These values and these expressions of worship resonate with me. I love words but I am tired of being battered and constrained by them. I love this freedom to be me and be liberated in these in the company of others.

Peter Rivers