

## Keynote address for Scargill Birthday weekend

# Lives shared - lives transformed

Happy birthday Scargill!

And thank you for the honour of being invited to the celebrations.

This place has been - and continues to be – an amazing gift and story.  
Blessed are those who dream dreams and are willing to pay the price to bring them to reality.

We are gathered here because in some way this remarkable place has touched us over the years.

We have already been hearing the stories of the impact and gift of this place.

We bring our own stories to the party – part of an amazing mix of lived faith, discipleship and shared life that successive communities here enabled .... all that supporting, refreshing, teaching, loving, healing, resourcing in ways we will never be able to measure.

Lives shared, lives transformed ....

So here we are, a great a cloud of witnesses, and surrounded by many thousands more beyond sight and naming this weekend.

\* Thank you to those who in the beginning and across the years had the courage and determination to push aside every weight, resist the temptations to play safe and cling to familiar ways – and so to break open the adventure of faith and living that this vision inspired.

\* Thank you to those who kept running the race with perseverance.

My experience of community is that it involves an awful lot of running around.

And perseverance? – well a former chaplain at Lee Abbey defined community life as 'lurching from one crisis to the next'. That is certainly my experience. Community life involves living on the edge of chaos.

\* Thank you to those who faithfully kept their eyes on Jesus. The call to discipleship is better described as self-forgetting than self-denial. We are looking somewhere else –captured by the vision of Christ and his coming Kingdom

This call is always ahead of us. Christian faith is always future orientated. It is always known in a becoming. We are *followers*. So it involves a trusting letting go.

\* Thank you for the enduring and the cost involved ...

The writer to the Hebrews makes clear it is the way of the cross

It is way of sharing the *shame* of Christ, his self-giving and his glory.

So it is found in the joy of God ....

**It has been said that all renewal always begins as a work of faithful remembrance.**

So what was happening in 1959?

The year began with dense fog over Britain causing chaos and death – esp. London. For the England cricket team the fog extended to Australia where we were being totally thrashed.

The Conservatives won a general election by a landslide.

The first Routemaster double decker buses went into service.

Hercule Poirot was solving murder mysteries everywhere ...

The hula hoop and the pacemaker were invented.

Ben Hur was on at the cinema and won 11 Oscars.

Cliff Richard was singing 'Living doll'.

And can anyone remember who won the county cricket championship that year?

(Bishop Chris will now lead us in a time of praise and worship)

Last but not least - Scargill began!

**In its beginnings Scargill was part of a much wider story of faith and shared life ....**

The 1950's was a world still rebuilding after the devastation of world war.

We have just been remembering some of the key anniversaries from that conflict.

There was a longing for new ways of living together - in peace, reconciled, healing, love.

Monastic communities expanded hugely at this time. Many other expressions of community living were springing up out of the dreams of the Spirit - large and small - all in response to the particular needs of the age.

**Let me pick out three stories - three people and communities - among the cloud of witnesses today ...**

**The first story starts some years earlier.**

As the shadows of war were gathering over Europe a young German pastor called Dietrich Bonhoeffer watched the rise of Nazism and his own church was compromising with Hitler and was unable to recognise and confront evil. He knew something new was needed. He formed the Confessing Church and founded a theological college run on radically new lines – based on shared life, worship and prayer where Christ's call to discipleship was lived out in community.

He knew a shape of living was needed that could sustain faith and strengthen discipleship in a world in the grip of evil.

He wrote about it in a little book called *Life Together* – in its time it was a radical and practical vision for Christian community in the midst of a chaotic and dangerous times.

In September 1937 the Nazis closed down the College and arrested a number of the community. Bonhoeffer was imprisoned until his execution in 1945.

But Life Together is still in print. For some years those joining the Lee Abbey community were given a copy of Life Together and it formed the basis for community training.

**Story 2 Brother Roger and Taize**

While Bonhoeffer was creating new community in Germany a young man was lying in an isolation hospital in Switzerland suffering from tuberculosis. The only treatment was long and lonely but there in the solitude he began to feel the compelling call of God upon his life.

In 1940, aged twenty-five, he left neutral Switzerland and went to live in a run-down farmhouse in occupied France. There he secretly sheltered refugees and Jews and helping many to escape. He had to flee but returned in 1944 when France was liberated. He began to care for orphaned children, others gathered too, nearby German prisoners of war were welcomed.

His name was Roger and the house was in a tiny French village called Taize. On Easter Day 1949 seven men joined him in taking vows of celibacy and the Taize community began, based on 'la vie de battage' - the life of sharing. As we know it became a hugely influential movement - especially to a whole generation of disaffected young people through the 1960s. Festivals of youth around the world attracted 20,000 at a time. Pope John XXIII called Taize – 'a little spring time'.

It was a vision for shared life centred with almost naïve simplicity on love, prayer, song, reconciliation and unity in Christ. It became a spring time gift for so many in a tired world and church. It still is.

### **Story 3 Jean Vanier**

The year after Life Together was first published and as Brother Roger was leave hospital, another young Swiss man moved to occupied Paris. He was the rootless son of a high-ranking diplomat, moving frequently and educated in several different countries including England and Canada. Like Roger he worked for the French resistance until he had to flee. He joined the Royal Navy and could have had a distinguished military career. After the war he studied philosophy and could have had a distinguished academic career. But in 1964 he visited an asylum in northern France for men with learning difficulties. It was prison-like. High walls. There was no care program. Many there were visibly distressed.

One of the men simply turned to him and said, 'will you be my friend?' And in the moment that it took him to smile and nod his agreement, Jean Vanier's life was changed forever. He invited two men from the asylum, who had no family, to a run down house north of Paris where they simply shared life together as equals.

Vanier himself remembered feeling at home for the first time.

"I began to live from my heart."

From that household began the L'Arche communities – and how right to be remembering this so soon after Jean Vanier's death ... the amazing legacy of shared life .... now 154 communities and 38 countries and thousands of others in wider networks of belonging (and some here today).

Community, for Vanier, was founded on shared weakness and acceptance of human frailty rather than what we achieve with our strengths and strategies – here was a vision of shared life that where society's assumptions about the strength, weakness, power, status and leadership were turned upside down.

### **There are many other stories we could mention – experiments of different kinds of belonging and shared life ...**

Lee Abbey, Whatcombe House, Post Green – charismatic renewal in the early years was full of community experiments. Northumbria community, Iona, Lindisfarne, Focolare ... and so many others, often with a particular call or focus.

- all shapes of living that pushed the weights and obstacles aside and created something new, places that provided shelter, healing, refuge, teaching, love, laughter, care and refreshment for those needing it most.

- Places that made gospel living more possible and taught and renewed faith.

- Places of resistance to evil and the most sinful, destructive tendencies of human living.

- Places of shared life and welcome in a divided, unjust, fragmented world.

- Places where the foolishness of God overcomes the wisdom of the world, where divine weakness proves greater than human strength.

- Places of justice, mutual reverence – of radical inclusion and welcome.

Little 'spring times' in a world where many live in a winter of lovelessness and unhealing.

Lives shared, lives transformed

## Pause

Stand and share with someone near you – share your own connections with any of these stories ... ways in which shared life has touched and been a gift to you. Not just at Scargill – may be very small groups, formal and informal, networks or organisations, Christian and perhaps others. Places and people that have that have expressed 'Lives shared, lives transformed'.

### Choose two words ...

**1. A word** that expresses something of the gift and impact of those people and places upon your life and faith.

**2. A word that expresses the need for shared life in today's world** - its vulnerability, hazards and needs. Where is this vision most needed if this world is to have a future and a hope (may be the same word).

What will be the key marks of shared life in Christ?

Just two words.

### Flip chart

## Part 2 Life together

The stories that began 60 -70 years ago need to begin again in our time - renewed.

God is surely calling and stirring ...

What stories do we long might be told of our time – somewhere in the future.

What if there are the seeds of those new beginnings are here this weekend?

- people God is calling to new expressions of shared life amidst the enormous challenges of our own time – society and church.

We still need shapes of wise and discerning living in chaotic and violent times – society and nations. In a world that has lost its moral and spiritual compass.

- lives of sharing that make real the compassion of Christ across divisions – spring times of new hope and growth for a weary world and church.

- communities based upon the foolishness of God – finding beauty and value where the world despises and marginalises. Communities of generous inclusion, equality and mutuality. Communities that shame the wise and the powerful and witness to the life of the kingdom.

**The Scargill Community vision and promises begin with exactly the same convictions that Bonhoeffer had.**

**a. This the gift and work of Christ – like the church itself.**

Christian fellowship is not an ideal which we must realise – a strategy to achieve. It is not about the building up or success of the church. Still less is it about the *survival* of the church.

It is not our own creation.

It flows from an entirely different source.

It is not even for us to speak of building or making something for Christ – at least in the first instance.

This is a reality created by God in which we are invited and called to participate ...

‘You did not choose me I chose you’ (Jn 15.16)

‘Abide in my love’.

Christ is making us ...

He is Lord of this and he knows what he is about and what he has in mind in choosing us to be part of it.

**It is found in his invitation, welcome and delight.**

‘As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you’ (Jn 15.9).

**b. Life Together in Christ is always unfinished and messy.**

Our witness is not to ourselves at all – to some perfect example or special gifts.

We are called beyond ourselves.

‘We do not see what we shall become’ says John in his epistle – ‘but we shall be like him’.

Like the first disciples when Jesus said ‘You know the way where I am going’ – we to have to say - no we don't actually.

And Jesus says to us – ‘I am the way’, ‘I have many things to show you ....’,  
‘The Spirit will lead you’.

But we resist this – we do find this hard to accept.

The singer George Michael once said that those we call ‘stars’ are not people with something extra – they are people with bits missing.

It is a very Christian insight I think.

Bonhoeffer said there are two kinds of Christian community.

The first is the church of the *devout*.

This is where we start.

A devout church – is Sunday best, impressive, respectable, well organised, complete - possibly thriving. Looks very spiritual.

But that is not yet the church of Christ – says Bonhoeffer

We must come to the place where we discover we simply cannot do it ourselves.

We must become the Church of the *undevout* – forgiven sinners, learning to live by grace.

And there God says to us - my grace is sufficient. It is more than enough. The story of Scargill bears witness to this again and again.

It begins in the place where love runs out.

It doesn't take long to get there in my experience!

Like most people joining Christian community I arrived with heady idealism.

If this Christian stuff can't work here where can it work?

There is wisdom in the practice of asking new community members to wait three months before taking full community promises.

Three months is roughly how long it takes most of us to simply out of steam from the exhaustion of trying to be good and loving.

I remember the early days of community life going to bed every night with my mouth aching from smiling at everyone – because I thought that was Christian.

The first signs we are running out of steam is that others on the community start to become very, very annoying. And you just don't have the energy to forgive any more. And why should you when it is their fault!

It always amazed me how little the guests seem to notice - quite the reverse.

You stagger out of a community on the edge of disintegration into the dining room, having just nearly murdered someone (which would have given you great pleasure because they are very annoying idiots who should not be allowed near Christian community).

A guest at your table smiles and says – ‘it must be wonderful living here. It is a taste of heaven. God is so near ...’

And you grip the fish slice and think – ‘you are much nearer to God than you realise at this moment!’

But this was not something to cynical about. We are learning to live by grace – not our own achievement of perfection or image.

Jean Vanier once wrote:

‘Community can appear to be a marvellously welcoming and sharing place. But in another way, community is a terrible place.

It is the place where our limitations and our egoism are revealed to us. When we begin to live full-time with others, we discover our poverty and our weaknesses, our inability to get on with people, our mental and emotional blocks, our affective and sexual disturbances, our seemingly insatiable desires, our frustrations and jealousies, our hatred and our wish to destroy.

**‘While we were alone, we could believe we loved everyone.’ .....**

In community life we discover our own deepest wound and learn to accept it. So our rebirth can begin. It is from this very wound that we are born.’ CG p5-6

We begin this adventure as idealists ... we leave as forgiven sinners.

We learn to cast ourselves again on that grace when all other resources have run out ... it is sufficient.

It is as if the struggle itself creates a space of divine grace in which those in our midst can be embraced in divine love and welcome and God can do his work. It is sufficient.

### **c. This life together will always be a journey out of brokenness to healing, from separation to belonging.**

Jean Vanier - ‘society today is the product of fragmentation’ (CG p1) – today’s living is based more and more on competition, independence and self-preservation. Human living is lived in the market place. The only value is financial.

I could not help reflecting as I watched the programs of the D Day landings and the end of the war ...

that in the crisis and confusion of our own day we are picking all this apart - all those hard won stories of rebuilding society, common vision and shared life of the generations before us.

The most basic relationships and patterns of belonging are in crisis in our society.

We have lost the vision.

We no longer know how to remain together or why it matters.

Life together today – wherever and however we live it - is to learn what it means to live together in Christ in the midst of chaotic times and fractured societies.

Breaking down walls.

Reaching across divisions of all kinds.

#### **d. Places of turning and meeting**

– the gospel word is metanoia.

Vanier wrote that community is simply ‘ the call to turn to and to love those whom God has set before us’. CG 23

Life together begins in a turning towards each-other – as God turns his face to us in Christ. It is all mutual ... Without deserving, earning or thought of gain. Just turning in loving gift. As it did from our birth - before we could speak, negotiate, manage or bargain for what we needed it had to come to us as gift. Love came down to us. It still does. All is gift.

This means that always the most the most significant gift Christ gives us ... the gift that will most surely bring us his grace and enabling – is not skills, qualifications, experiences of the Spirit ... it is the person sitting next us.

Take a look.

Might be disappointing – but we will be too polite to say so.  
We were hoping for something more reliable.

It is all mutual - we to each other, Christ to us - and we to Christ

Lives shared, lives transformed.

#### **4. Into the life of God**

Life Together is the heart of Christian faith and witness in the world  
- because this is what God is like.

When the medieval theologians tried to express the life of the Trinity they spoke of a round dance.

A round dance ... each endlessly weaving in and out of the other. Each poured out to the delight and hallowing of the other. Nothing withheld, nothing possessed – a dance of divine, joyful poverty. All gift.

And we are drawn in ...

This is life together

Welcome to the delight and joy of God.  
Welcome into the dance of divine love

Lives shared - lives transformed.

Thanks be to God

A closing prayer

Saviour Christ,

in whose way of love  
lies the secret  
of all life  
and the hope of all  
people,  
in this place of training and preparation together  
we pray for quiet courage and wisdom to match  
this hour.

We did not choose to be born  
or to  
live in such an age:  
but let its problems challenge us,  
its discoveries exhilarate us,  
its injustices anger us,  
its possibilities inspire us  
and its vigour renew us  
for your kingdom's sake.  
Amen