

RICHARD CARR-GOMM: A reflection on his faith and works

As you might imagine, it is an immense and daunting privilege to have been asked to pay this tribute to Richard Carr-Gomm; a man whom I met only once, but whose life and work, as we all know, was astonishingly and wonderfully fruitful. So, where do I begin?

Firstly, a Biblical text: John 15, verse 1. “I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener... no branch of mine can bear fruit by itself, but only if it remains united with the vine...” This is one of those meditations in John’s Gospel which is not found in the other gospels. You won’t find it in Matthew, Mark or Luke. It’s a meditation on friendship, on the relationship between Jesus and his disciples, but it’s more than that, it’s a meditation on human friendship (“there is no greater love than this, that someone should lay down his life for his friends...”); it’s a meditation on the fruitfulness of friendship, (“This is how my Father is glorified; you are to bear fruit in plenty and so be my disciples...”); it’s a meditation on our purpose as human beings, (“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Dwell in my love... This is my commandment to you, love one another...”).

When John wrote that meditation, beginning with the image of the vine and then continuing with his theme about friendship, you can see why he interwove the themes: love and friendship and fruitfulness are dynamic, they grow, they change, they are not neat or tidy, they keep breaking out into newness, they burgeon, they are, as Anne Ridler says in her poem on the birth of a child, “...an uncontrollable glory...”.

As a metaphor, the metaphor of the vine has been profoundly influential in the life of the Church; think of all those images of grapes on church textiles, in carvings and in wall paintings; think of all those Jesse trees in stained glass: a family tree (note the word), beginning with Jesse, the father of King David, and ending with Mary, Joseph and the child Jesus.

When Richard Carr-Gomm began his autobiography with the startling sentence, “Before I was born, I was a twin...”, it’s not surprising that he placed himself within his own family tree: all those references to his grandfather, (Indian civil service, suffering from occasional bouts of melancholia); his mother, who traced her ancestry back via a Duke of Clarence, King Alfred, a Viking chieftain called Heming, right back to Adam and Eve...

And on the Gomm side, those Prussian and Russian connections, Field Marshals, William Penn, financial advisers to the Government: a gloriously rich, rambling vine of a family.

But then, there's another element in Richard's life, like the sap running and coursing through all he created; his Christian faith. He refers to his mother, with a kind of humorous respect, always saying about God: "Underneath are the Everlasting arms..." and then he makes quiet, throwaway remarks which are all the more powerful for being so understated. For example, he refers to the time in the liberation of Germany when he had been wounded and "went to Communion in a field"; as he also did, when he was serving in Palestine, one Christmas Eve and went to a service in a field outside Bethlehem. And then there was the first encounter with Billy Graham and the Mission at Haringey, which he describes as, "...one of those few moments in my life when I felt at one with God". He spent time with the Franciscans at Cerne Abbas and he refers, with much affection, to the influence of that great Methodist minister, Leslie Timmins and his wife Audrey.

If you want to find one of the critical turning-points in Richard's life, look at his autobiography on page 52: "With a conventional baptism and confirmation behind me, I never doubted my belief in Christ and the presence of God...", and he goes on to say, "Preachers preached that service to others should come before self and security: this I certainly didn't practise. Fine music, good prose and splendid sunsets made me feel however that it was true." His Christian faith, the energy within his remarkable life had a strong vein of Romanticism and natural theology running through it. Service to others, he suggests, is found and revealed not only in the way we treat each other but is part of the very fabric of the Universe. The love of God expressed in and through, fine music, good prose and splendid sunsets, is the same love which is revealed in Christ, the same love which is expressed in human caring. And the lack of that love and the lack of awareness of that love lead to intense human loneliness; that aching sense of not being connected to the Universe, that agony of not being connected to others...

It was Richard Carr-Gomm's great, demanding and exuberant vocation to see that friendship is at the heart of human flourishing, and therefore he sought to create structures in Abbeyfield, Carr-Gomm and Morpeth to enable aching human loneliness to be met by the balm of loving, human and divine friendship. As he put it, "Human beings have a soul..."

It is not for me to outline how that vocation, that energy, gave rise to Abbeyfield, to the Carr-Gomm society and to the Morpeth Society, nor to say anything about his remarkable work in building friendships in Uganda. You who are here today represent the societies, organisations and international friendships which Richard developed. You know better than I do, the early struggles, the acute disappointments, the hurts, the tensions, the traumas, as well as the miracles, the joys and the triumphs. And all the family and close friends here to-day, will know more than any of us (and Susan, his late wife, most of all), the hidden “cost” of the vocation and the vision. Fruitfulness does not come without pain and change, nor without apparent depletion, and times of fallow and bleak uncertainty. To the family in particular, for all that they have given to the vocation and the vision of Richard Carr-Gomm, we owe unstinted thanks and deep appreciation.

Richard Carr-Gomm began his autobiography by saying: “...it’s only a beginning book...” And so it is. Both Abbeyfield and Carr Gomm are in a new and exciting phase of its life, more and more demands, more and more imaginative solutions. And yet there needs to be at the very heart of it, that simplicity and delightfulness of vision which Richard Carr-Gomm cherished: the simplicity of knowing, deeply knowing, that friendship and love are, in truth, the cures for loneliness; friendship and love which derive ultimately from the very being of God as he reveals himself to us in Jesus Christ.

This is not about proselytising nor evangelising nor brow beating, absolutely not. It is about giving expression to love in practical service so that all who are lonely may be renewed, refreshed and made whole, so that each one of us can become the people God would have us be.

“As the Father has loved me,” said Jesus, “so I have loved you. Dwell in my love... This is my commandment to you, love one another. “

That is at the very heart of what the charities he founded are all about, the offering of inclusive friendship to all who come through its doors.

May God, in his mercy, give each one of us the courage and the tenacity to continue that inspiring and life-changing vision.

The Rt Revd. Dr. Christopher Herbert.

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