

Misunderstandings

Today I am looking at the misunderstandings which come from inexperience with words. When our daughter was a two year old, she was a great talker and even though we were very proud of her, at times we longed for a little bit of quiet, so we often told her she was talking too much. Perhaps we did it too kindly, since she interpreted these words as praise for her speaking. I discovered this one Sunday, before I was a Quaker, when I took her to the children's service in our Parish Church. The Vicar had come down into the body of the church and was giving a simple sermon to the children. She was standing on the pew beside me, transfixed by his eloquence. She turned to me and said loudly "Man talking **too much**." This stopped the Vicar dead in his tracks, not knowing that this was in fact intended as great praise.

Words do mean different things to each of us. We always find it easiest to talk to people we know well or who share similar interests or background. This is not a problem for young men to be called "Squire" in Birmingham, or women addressed as "Hen" in Glasgow. It becomes more difficult when the words carry an agenda, like "Are you a Christian?" While a large number of people in this country might well think they were, never-the-less there are those who have a very exact beliefs about what they mean by these words, and for me to say "yes" would be to mislead them. Quakers are a non-credal Church which means that we do not require adherence to any particular form of words about the divinity as a condition of membership. Because most people who ask if you are a "Christian" are convinced Protestants and are very clear what they mean, I try and use words that do not deny the Christian roots of our Religious Society by saying "I am trying to be a disciple of Jesus." This answer also serves when I am asked if I am "saved", another very tiresome approach from a stranger and one to which it is even easier to give a misleading reply.

Speaking about spiritual matters is very difficult, since we are trying to use words for ideas and subjects that are beyond our understanding. If we need to speak, we must prepare ourselves carefully, in both heart and mind. This is not something that can be usefully done at a chance encounter in the street, and if I were to try it, you would be right to say "Man talking too much!"

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