
Alastair McIntosh
discusses nonviolence
and his involvement in
Extinction Rebellion

How the green blade rises



Good Friday is coming. Its quaint lunar rhythm draws nigh, late this year, on 19 April. As we look towards it in the diary, I'm also looking backwards to Midwinter's Solstice last year – 21 December had been an exacting day.

That afternoon, I'd been invited down to the little church of Tundergarth for a service that marked thirty years since the Lockerbie bombing. The same morning, Extinction Rebellion had invited me to speak at their protest outside the BBC in Glasgow.

With supporting signatories including the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, environmental activist Vandana Shiva, and author and filmmaker Naomi Klein, this new social movement's first demand is that: 'The government must tell the truth about the climate and wider ecological emergency, reverse inconsistent policies and work alongside the media to communicate with citizens.'

I'd felt uneasy, standing with my back to the BBC, and I acknowledged so. In Scotland, they've been good on the environment, but across the UK there's been concern at the platforms they've provided to those who deny the scientific consensus on climate science. As the House of Commons' Science and Technology Select Committee report on communicating climate science said in 2014, at times the BBC has provided 'false

balance' by 'giving opinions and scientific fact the same weight.'

My speech noted that the corporation's founding motto was not neutral. Paraphrasing radical Hebrew prophets, it proclaimed: 'Nation shall speak peace unto nation.' But what might that mean,

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when the very foundations of peace today rest on such a thrown natural ecology?

Blocking roads and bridges, occupying offices, and school children striking can kick-start an agenda. But to build on it, we must dig to the root drivers of both ecocide and its denial in the human psyche.

One reason why our governments and broadcasters blow hot and cold is that often we're divided – not just among ourselves, but, most invidiously, within ourselves.

Sustained action for transformation must be responsive, not just reactive. That requires insights from depth psychology and even a spiritual motive force. As George Fox said in 1656, from his prison cell in Cornwall:

Friends... Keep in the wisdom of God that spreads over all the earth, the wisdom of the creation, that is pure... then you will come to walk cheerfully over the world, answering that of God in every one.

Quaker faith & practice 19.32



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What happens when we allow ourselves to be inwardly exercised, so that we start knowing our activism as spiritual activism? We see that life unfolds across a long front. The Bhagavad Gita, the gospel of Hinduism, describes this as the 'Field of Truth', or Dharma. None of us has got a God's-eye view. Thus George Fox's call: to discern the ways and roam the paths of God.

As Friends, ought we merely replicate the work of secular organisations? Or should our contributions scatter seed upon the ground of near-on 400 years' experience with the gifts of grace, resistance and vision? Quaker stillness, our capacity for gathered presence, has led us to develop deep discernment processes such as Meetings for Clearness. Through Friends such as Parker Palmer in the United States, these now find expression in the secular world, but their heart is spiritual.

Our Peace Testimony opens paths of nonviolence. At our best, we know that when we 'pray for those who harm you', we humanise not just adversaries, but ourselves. Such is the work of love.

Which brings me back to Good Friday. Some marginalise Christ, some miss the story's mythic depth, but it was one of ours they crucified. Not least, an activist – who complained about the hunger of the masses, who befriended all the lonely people, who considered the lilies of the field in all their glory, who lived nonviolence even unto outward death.

And so to Easter. We can only face the hard news current affairs of Good Friday if, as planetary hospice workers, we can stand to bear witness. If we stand outside the tomb of space and time, but look up to the stars, and glimpse the Field of Dharma's longer front. As an old hymn has it:

*Now the green blade rises from the buried grain,
Wheat that in the dark earth many years has lain;
Love lives again, that with the dead has been:
Love is come again, like wheat that springs up green.*

Such is today our 'basic call to consciousness'. Can we give service in these troubled times, so that the green blade rises? ●

Alastair is from Glasgow Meeting.

His BBC speech can be read at: <http://bit.ly/McIntoshBBC>.

With Matt Carmichael, he will run a course at Woodbrooke on Spiritual Activism, 7-9 June.