

What on earth does “spirit” mean? An evening with Fr Laurence Freeman OSB

A Multi-Faith Event in Surrey

The World Community for Christian Meditation collaborated with a local charity, Elmbridge Multi-Faith Forum which brought together, on a balmy summer evening, some 250 people at the Sacred Heart Church in Cobham, Surrey. We were not specialists, just ordinary people representing over 20 different faiths and denominations.

Fr Laurence said “just being here together itself was an inspiration and a sign of the unity of the Spirit.” Indeed it was a sign of hope that so many of us recognise the urgency of our times – when working towards a greater understanding, respect and real dialogue between people from different faiths seems of the essence.

Real dialogue changes us Fr Laurence said, because we take the risk to see things from another’s point of view. We have to dialogue without hubris, self-satisfaction or ignorance and turn to the other without fear of losing our own identity.

Fr Laurence asked what “spirit” might mean for us on our earth today when people of different religions live together as never before. What does “spirit” mean for people who define themselves as spiritual but not religious. We expect religion to make the world a better place but it fails to interrupt the endless cycle of violence on the planet. The crisis of religion is its refusal to attend to the spirit – the transcending force that brings about real change in the human heart.

Exploring a passage from Abhishiktanada, Fr Laurence spoke about four qualities of the spirit – inwardness, joy, energy and love - that may be relevant for our times. Spirit as inwardness – is an interiority that does not reject the material world but rather seeks an in-depth encounter that allows growth and transformation of the whole person. Spirit as joy – a joy not dependent on what we want but arises from insight into reality and allows us to link with others. Spirit as energy – is the dynamic power which dissolves old forms and reforms, renews and redeems impossible situations. Spirit as love – as the flow of love between the Father and the Son in the Christian Trinity is experienced in all loving relationships. Religion without love is demonic. Good religion serves to create a space in society and the human heart where the spirit can grow and expand. Practically we can do this by beginning with ourselves.

Meditation which is found at the core of every religious tradition can lead us into this interior experience which is the ultimate goal of all religious practice. Meditation becomes of supreme importance as the basis of our inter-religious dialogue because we can explore this universal spirituality and unite at an experiential level. Meditation may not resolve all our problems Fr Laurence concluded, but it may help us to celebrate our differences.

The evening concluded with time to mingle and enjoy each other’s company and delicious Thai, Indian, Lebanese, Jewish and English food.

Brij Waterfield, Surrey Regional Coordinator

To hear the talk please go to www.wcmt.org.