

St John's and St Stephen's Church, Reading, June 20th 2010

Heroes of faith 2: Brother Roger of Taizé



This series has been called 'Heroes of faith'. I'm aware that title is a tad exclusive since it implies somehow that the rest of us are not heroes of faith. We all, in some way, reflect Christ in our lives. We are like prisms – the light of Christ shines into us and through us, changed in some way to produce a spectrum of light that is uniquely ours. Less than perfect, of course, but nevertheless there is something in our lives that comes from him. These 'heroes' that we have chosen simply shine that spectrum more brightly, or at least more people have noticed. Anyway, I don't want anyone to feel discouraged by comparison. All of us stand in that light and give it back, transformed, in some way. But let's pause for a moment and consider one man's spectrum of light and see pattern it forms. I have selected Brother Roger of Taizé.

I'm aware that some here won't have the least idea who Brother Roger is. Let me enlighten you! Roger Schutz was the founder of the community at Taizé in France. Some of our young people visited this year at Easter, and several others have also visited. Today we have sung – and will sing – some of the songs which come from Taizé to give all of us a direct sense of what Taizé is and therefore in some small way what kind of a man Brother Roger was.

In talking about this man, I want to give a brief life history but I would like to major on what it is that he has given the world – what are the colours of his spectrum of light - and what in a sense still gives. I'm going to end with showing a short video clip of him, providing the technology works! Roger Schutz was born in 1915 in

Switzerland. His father was a Protestant pastor, his mother a French Protestant woman. His maternal grandmother was a Roman Catholic. He studied to become a Protestant pastor but during those years of study, felt two strong calls. One was to serve the poor. The other, more difficult for him, was to form a group of men who would share possessions, pray together and become a community focussed on service. The problem was that the idea of a community – a religious community that is – had disappeared in the Protestant churches at the time of the Reformation in the C16. Plenty of catholic and orthodox communities (and one or two Anglican) but none from the churches of the Reformation. Roger nevertheless gathered a small number of friends and began to develop an informal community.

During the 2nd WW, Roger felt that he should do something for the refugees – particularly Jewish refugees – fleeing Nazi occupied France so decided to try and find a house just on the safe side of the line of demarcation between occupied and free France. Cycling from Geneva, he found a house in a poor village called Taizé in Burgundy, SE France. He leased the house and moved in. It was clearly very tough – it was *very* poor but he developed a rhythm of prayer and work – *ora et labore* – very much in the monastic tradition of Benedict. And began to welcome refugees, many of them Jewish, often helping them over the border to neutral Switzerland. This was pretty dangerous work, and he was denounced by collaborators in 1942 and had to flee back to Geneva. After the liberation of France in 1944 he returned and re-formed his community with a few brothers living together in poverty, chastity and obedience.

From that, something remarkable happened. Here was a protestant monastic community living and worshipping in catholic France. But Roger didn't see himself as a protestant; he saw himself as a follower of Christ, drawing his inspiration from way back before the parting of the ways between catholic and reformed, further back even than before the split into east and west, orthodox and catholic, back to the great root of the tree which Christ himself planted. He couldn't be but noticed. Senior Protestant leaders, local catholic clergy, bishops, archbishops, cardinals and every single Pope right up to Pope John Paul II took much interest in what he was doing: for Roger was trying to bridge the gap between protestant and catholic with a living parable of community. Here is one of his great visions: that of reconciliation. His vision of reconciliation encompassed the nations also and, for example, he deliberately welcomed German Christians to visit the community as a sign of reconciliation following the war.

The community grew. And unexpectedly, it was young people who came. Thousands of them. In the 1960s a group of German students and builders came and built the huge Church of Reconciliation; but not huge enough, it has been extended several times. In the 1970s the first RC brothers joined the community with the blessing of the Pope. The community now has about 100 members, both protestant and catholic. Taizé is one of the few places in the world where protestants and catholics can take the bread and wine of the Eucharist together.

In 2005, at evening prayer and at the age of 90, Brother Roger was stabbed and killed by a mad Romanian woman. His funeral was attended by catholic and protestant church leaders from all over the world.

What Roger left behind him was, of course, Taizé. I have spent some time reflecting on what it is exactly that Taizé stands for, what it is that it gives to the world, what are the colours of the spectrum, and I have boiled it down to three things. They were certainly at the centre of Brother Roger's vision and they continue to speak to tens of thousands of people, even young people, every year. They even spoke, I believe, to a small group of visitors from this very church at Easter.

The first gift of Brother Roger through Taizé is *reconciliation*. There's a beautiful word. It was at the heart of our Epistle today in Ephesians 2. Here Paul, speaking of Jews and Gentiles, says this: '*Christ is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility between us...so that he might create one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace*' (Eph 2:14,15). Reconciliation is the process of bringing together people or groups of people who do not naturally get on, who have significant differences, perhaps who even hate each other. I hope that all of us here have experienced personally the joy that comes when you finally make up with someone you've fallen out with. I know it doesn't always work; but you know what it is. Roger's vision was to make his community into a living parable of reconciliation, a place where unity, forgiveness, understanding is celebrated. Certainly, he achieved this in terms of reconciliation and understanding between protestant and catholic and I would go as far as to say that the warmer relations between these two branches of Christianity are due in no small part to Brother Roger's vision. Not only between protestant and catholic; also between nations. It started particularly between two peoples that had been at war, between French and Germans but has gone much deeper and wider than that. Taizé mixes up people from all over the world and as we discovered, it's a joy. The message to us is this: the church, our church, is meant to be a place of reconciliation, a place of coming together. It's not some fuzzy feeling; it's much more than that. Our unity, our discipline of reconciliation is rooted in the reconciliation that God has brought about in Christ. One of the characteristics of Taizé worship is that we all face the same way – forward towards Christ – as a symbol of our oneness. Let us, as we face Christ, be reconciled to one another. Let us reach out to those who come into our doors, to those who are difficult or just different. It is an amazingly attractive and beautiful gift.

The second gift of Taizé, the place where it all started, is to recognise the value and strength of *community*. Taizé is a community of 100 or so men who have taken special vows and who live a common life which others can come and share. Well, I'm not suggesting that the members of St John's take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience – that might cause a few problems – but we *are* a community and that is actually a very precious thing. When I started my present job ten or so years ago one of the partners – a lapsed RC as it happens – reflected that the church is one of the last places where there is still a sense of community. We should recognise the strength of this – that we are a mixture of different people of different ages with shared bonds of friendship and care. We are a community *because* we are reconciled to God and indeed to one another through Christ. We are at our best when we are community. People have a deep longing for community, to be part of something wider than just themselves. This gift of community is our gift to the world.

The third gift of Brother Roger is of *a way of praying*. When he was a young man Roger found prayer very difficult – I wonder if that rings any bells for you – and what he and the community at Taizé have done is to create a way of prayer that is based on singing. In fact, the songs we have sung today are in reality prayers. They are very simple, just a line or two, with simple melodies that have a kind of infectious quality. My own experience of Taizé is that you pray almost without knowing this is what you are doing. The prayer is there already, you just step into it. To sing *Bless the Lord, my soul* is to pray, to worship. To sing *Laudate omnes gentes* – Sing praise, all you people – is to reach out to the community of faith and pray with them to the One from whom everything comes. It's a way of fulfilling Paul's injunction in First Thessalonians 5: '*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances*' (1 Thess 5:16,17). One of the things you notice about Taizé songs is that they are in many different languages. This is a reflection of the fact that the Christian church does not stop at international boundaries. When we take the language of another's country we reach out to them, honour them and in a small way step into their shoes – *This is what it is like to be French or German or Spanish and to worship*. Many songs are in Latin – which was the language of the early church for centuries. To sing in Latin – which today is nobody's language today – is actually to connect with a time *before* all the church splits took place, to celebrate a time when there was visible unity of the church. So even though it feels odd and we find the words unfamiliar, it is good to step out of our comfort zone and towards other brothers and sisters who do not have English as a mother tongue. This way of prayer, the Taizé way, is open to us to use individually as a reconciled community. If you find prayer difficult, learn some Taizé songs and start singing them during the day. You will find you are praying.

These 3 gifts of Brother Roger through Taizé to us – reconciliation, community, prayer, fit together. We are a community because we are reconciled to one another and to God and the deepest act of our reconciled community is to pray to the One who made it possible – do you see it?

That's enough from me. Let's meet Brother Roger.

Richard Croft