

## Reflections on the 2017 Carrs Lane Lectures

### *Creating a World beyond the Beliefs that Divide*

On Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> October, we welcomed Revd Gretta Vosper, minister in the United Church of Canada, and her husband, Scott Kearns, to Birmingham. Their visit was long awaited and much had been invested over two years in the planning, undertaken jointly with the Progressive Christianity Network (PCN) UK. For the first time, our main event on the Saturday was extended by an informal gathering on the Friday evening and a service on the Sunday morning. It was a full-on weekend! But prior to any of the planned events, Chris and I had the privilege of getting to know them both over a meal in our home that first evening.

In the introductory session on Friday, both Gretta and Scott spoke movingly about their personal journeys of faith, she growing up in a liberal Christian home and church, with an understanding of a non-theistic God, and he coming from an evangelical family, the son of a Baptist minister, unquestioning and literally steeped in God's Word, but increasingly uncomfortable as his critical faculties matured in a professional context and, finally, much to his mother's chagrin, he left the church.

Although Scott had found his spiritual home at West Hill United Church in Toronto where Gretta ministers – and married her - he was nevertheless surprised when he saw that she had added 'Atheist' to her profile on the church website. That was four years ago. After a lifetime of living, preaching and, more recently, publishing a non-theistic theology, Gretta made the courageous – some would say foolish – decision to make this declaration, she admits, for political reasons. She wanted to stand beside those who, in countries such as Bangladesh and Turkey, were being persecuted and, in some cases, executed for such a declaration. She felt it was an act of justice. This was not a case of losing her faith; she had simply decided she needed a different language with which to talk about it.

She had been brought up on a new Sunday school curriculum based on critical scholarship which, although it was controversial at the time, was the bedrock of her theology. She learnt about Jesus as an historical figure, human just as she was, and the Bible as the work of human minds. Through her training, she learnt to pick the words apart and analyse them; she encountered many concepts of God and understood them as human constructs, all of which has led her to deconstruct those traditional images of an external, supernatural, interventionist divine being who orders our world as we determine. She emphasised that this is not rare in a minister; what is rarer is finding a congregation willing to 'transition' from traditional to liberal theology with its minister. In West Hill United, she has found that. The inclusivity she offers means that some in the congregation happily accept that she never mentions God while others feel she talks about God all the time!

In her lectures she emphasised the importance of community, stressing the need for a new commitment to inclusivity as she described her approach to ministry for all, irrespective of belief or lack of it. She highlighted the needs of the 'Nones', those who have no religious affiliation but who nevertheless crave a sense of belonging. This, she argues, the Church should be offering, unconditionally. She used the familiar prayer acronym ACTS, applying

it to basic human needs: *'Adoration'* becomes a sense of wonder, pulling us out of ourselves into relationship with each other and the universe; *'Confession'* becomes a reflection on our sense of self and on our relationship with the self; *'Thanksgiving'* becomes a recognition of the blessings of life, everyday; *'Supplication'* gives us the opportunity to recognise the needs of others and be light to their lives and a source of goodness in the world. Gretta seeks to change the world for the better, without promising anything she cannot deliver; she sees her role as providing community to those who want no commitment to the church nor see any point in 'painting religion onto their condition'.

Scott's presentation in the middle of the day took us somewhere we've never been on a lectures' day before! We sang! As a composer and song writer, he shared his guidelines on accessible, relevant language and the values on which his writing is based, embracing them not as 'the Truth', but as basic truths for living. While never diminishing the beliefs held by others, his writing avoids claiming any universal or absolute status for what is to be sung so texts are always open and inclusive. Scott introduced us to many of his compositions and invited us to join in, which everyone did with gusto and, in many cases, relief at encountering words that they could sing with integrity, for example:

*To love more truly, this is my goal; to care more deeply, with all my soul;*

*To show compassion, extend forgiveness, to make a difference, I give my all.*

In her second lecture, Gretta described an impending 'perfect storm of perfect storms'. There is a potential catastrophe brewing because of issues relating, firstly, to the planet: exponential population growth, our selfish depletion of resources and implications of natural destruction; secondly, around issues relating to society as it fragments into small stories: through global communication developments with consequential impediments to conversation and relationship, a lack of leadership and the breakdown of community networks leading to growing isolation; and thirdly, issues relating to religion: churches increasingly irrelevant, voiceless politically as well as spiritually, the loss of community hubs provided by churches and a reluctance on the part of denominations to look outwards, enjoying liturgy to pleasure themselves rather than investing in engagement with the newcomer. If any of these were addressed in any category, the perfect storm could be avoided; otherwise we are in peril.

Gretta believes we should respond by building social cohesion through the churches now. If, in survival mode and defined by its losses, the Church dies, it will be too late. We have to continue to be honest and open rather than confined by literal beliefs. We have to acknowledge our own humanity and recognise others' humanity, as the basis of healthy, healing relationship. A progressive Church has a legacy for the future but only if it recognises the values by which it wants to live. We have to put that code forward and share it for the future; the world needs it.

Those of us who managed, despite the marathon road closures, to get to the New Meeting Unitarian Church on Sunday morning shared in a service led by Gretta and Scott which echoed all that they had talked about. Coalescing around the title: *Grounded, Guided, Growing*, the language was open and inclusive; the music, sometimes meditative and quiet

and at other times robust and full of energy, was always engaging; the atmosphere throughout was relaxed but profoundly devotional, reflecting the whole-i-ness of which Gretta had spoken. With an emphasis on community, everyone could – and did – participate, whether in the singing or in response to the invitation to bring joys or burdens to the gathering in the sharing time when, after each contribution, either *'In this abundant blessing'*, the response was **'We share the joy'** or *'In this, our time of need'*, **'May love abound'**. It was inclusive and prayerful as we felt the connections woven around us.

In the 'Perspective', Gretta spoke graciously and eloquently about what it means to her to worship in this way and why, sharing the values that underpin her ministry. The service closed with Scott's hymn: 'I pledge to all humanity' to the tune Thaxted:

*I pledge to all humanity, the fullness of my heart,  
that we might build together love's greatest work of art:  
a world made free from hunger, a world made free from hate,  
a world in which through honour we each communicate.  
A world that never falters, that binds unto each life  
The goals of love and freedom, the pledge to end all strife...*

*...For truth must not relinquish the future to the past  
But build a bright tomorrow where love might reign at last.*

It was beautiful and I felt uplifted, inspired and empowered.

I come back to my introduction on Friday evening. The word 'atheist' is a difficult word; it's one we shy away from because it's so brittle and definite; it doesn't leave any slack; it's dangerous; it's damnatory; it's altogether a defining word and it has defined Gretta, causing many people to dismiss her as beyond the ministerial pale.

I must admit that, in producing the advertising for the lectures, I would have preferred the term 'a-theist' to describe her, with its mediating hyphen, but since Gretta didn't use it, I felt I shouldn't either. However, it did cause some reaction here, as it has in her own denomination, of course. But for many of us who heard her speak at Carrs Lane and then particularly at the service, the label is immaterial when the reality is of a woman who is passionate about her cause, committed to the ministry to which she is called and gifted in the way she shares the love that is her inspiration.

It was truly a privilege to have Gretta and Scott at Carrs Lane and, for us personally, to get to know them and to experience a new, warm friendship.

Julie Grove

Footnote: If you missed some or all of the weekend's events or would just like to be reminded of them, a recording will be available in due course from Chris Avis  
[chris.avis2@hotmail.com](mailto:chris.avis2@hotmail.com)