



A THOUGHT FOR THE WEEKEND

19th May, 2023

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

John 14:27

A few weeks ago in The Hub we sang the hymn, 'Dear Lord and Father of mankind', a favourite of mine, partly because of its history, and partly because it is a powerful call for today's Christians. The verses we sing are the last stanzas of a long poem called "The Brewing of Soma", written in 1872 by American Quaker John Greenleaf Whittier.

Soma was a hallucinogenic drink used in Ancient Near Eastern religious ritual to induce a state of trance; it was believed to help towards experience of the divine. Whittier felt that in his day some Christians (to quote the poem) used *"music, incense, vigils drear, and trance, to bring the skies more near, or lift men up to heaven!"*. The poem mocks such contrivances to lift ourselves heavenwards, and ends with an appeal for simplicity, sincerity and quietness in coming to God, -the lines we now have as the hymn.

Amongst colleagues on a theology course I took in the '70s was one who claimed to have found God through drugs, and another who was a follower of Guru Maharaj Ji, a self-proclaimed 'Living Perfect Master', in the same style as the Marahishi Mahesh Yogi, whom the Beatles followed from the late 60s.

Central to that Eastern-influenced '60s 'hippie culture' was meditation, which thereby got a bad reputation in Christian circles. But Biblical meditation, contemplating a passage, holding a scripture verse in mind, repeating it with different emphases, asking God to bring his presence and word through it, *is a good practice*. Through it we hold back the world's distractions and give our Father an invitation to "open the eyes of our heart" (Ephesians 1:18).

Whittier wanted to remind Christians that we need to come with quiet simplicity before God: silence, or perhaps music, maybe in a 'sacred space' at home or outside, no distractions. Only then can we deeply contemplate God and his word, with time, and listening. Then we can feel what Jesus described as *"my peace"*, peace not as the world gives, peace that only he can bring, peace that passes human understanding as Paul put it. It is not a peace that human contrivance can supply, nor as the adverts offer, nor as suggested by some mindfulness techniques, nor even by 'the brewing of Soma'!

This is what Whittier was addressing when he wrote the last verses of the poem, beginning, "Dear Lord and Father of mankind". It is an appeal to God to "Forgive our foolish ways! Reclothe us in our rightful mind... (we need)... purer lives, ... deeper reverence ... simple trust like theirs who heard beside the Syrian sea". In our world it is a challenge to find the time and space, the freedom from distraction and the inner tranquillity for such an approach to God, so that we can hear the "tender whisper of thy call, ... the still, small voice of calm".

It's a challenge worth meeting. After all, "... Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." (Luke 5:16)