

Fred Kaan – A Personal Tribute

October 12, 2009

One Saturday morning in November, 1974, the doorbell rang in our flat in Meyrin, a suburb of Geneva, Switzerland. Two strangers in their mid-forties stood on the landing. They were just back from Canada, they said, from a wonderful cross-country tour singing hymns, and having heard there were Canadians just arrived on their street, they wanted to bring greetings. It turned out, of course, to be Fred and his first wife, Elly, the mother of Martin, Peter and Alison. The beginning, too, of a wonderful friendship – as we became shortly thereafter their next-door neighbours, a relationship that has endured and deepened across these thirty-five years. Alison became my three children’s beloved babysitter; Martin and Peter and I cycled on Saturday excursions around the canton of Geneva and beyond. In time that friendship came to embrace the dear woman known to so many of you, Anthea, she whose deep love for her partner carried them both through these last difficult months of Fred’s departing. So this afternoon I count it a great honour to have been invited by Anthea and the family to speak a few moments of tribute from the perspective of a longtime friend, with the aid of some personal vignettes.

But first, I would be remiss if I did not say that I stand in this afternoon for countless thousands of North Americans, who have found their faith enlivened, and their lives enriched, in singing the hymns of Fred Kaan. They would want me to express their gratitude for Fred’s life and work. Artists like Ron Klusmeier, who has written more than forty tunes to Fred’s texts,

poets like Carl Daw and Brian Wren, who acknowledge in him a master and an inspiration. The pilgrims my colleague Lynne McNaughton and I have brought to England to sing, and hear Fred's reflections. This is Thanksgiving weekend in Canada, and all across my homeland yesterday, congregations sang hymns like the Communion Calypso, and "Now let us from this table rise" that have become beloved. They would want me to express their gratitude for the profound renewal of their worship song through Fred's words.

Affection for his crisp imagery and lean expression could begin at an early age. Children may well have appreciated, better than some of their elders, his playfulness, his puns, his reversal of images. Fred loved to tell how he sat in our Meyrin flat with tears on his face, as my children aged seven, five and three lit the Advent candles whilst singing "Down to Earth as a dove, came to us Holy Love".

In the house there is bread.

Jesus in a stable,

In the church a table.

Fred first encountered the English language as an adolescent, an astounding fact for one who employed it so well; and he brought to his practice of it all the passion and pleasure, as well as the intensity, of a lover. How many of us have delighted in his wordplays, that functioned as a sharp elbow in our spiritual ribs, interrupting the smooth passage of pieties across our lips, demanding that we engage with our minds the words we were singing. In that regard how can one surpass the closing line of "*To show by touch and word*" –

in Canada one of Fred's most beloved hymns - where we ask, at the conclusion of worship:

Now come with us that we may have

Your wits about us where we live.

A friend tells how, the first time she used this hymn in her urban congregation, at the door after the service more than one parishioner tried to convince her that there clearly had been a misprint in the last line of the hymn! On the contrary, Fred's wordplay was an inspired reflection of Paul's call in Philippians, to carry about within us, "the mind of Christ".

Some found his lines far too unsettling. I once chose as concluding hymn for an annual conference in Vancouver, his "*Lord, as we rise to leave this shell of worship, called to the risk of unprotected living*". When the order of worship was printed, I found this hymn had been dropped, replaced by one with much more conventional pieties, under the excuse that, "our people don't like thinking of this magnificent cathedral with its imported, expensive stained glass windows, as a *shell of worship*". Precisely, Fred would have said!

"*Sing we a song of high revolt, sing we the song that Mary sang, of God at war with human wrong!*" Fred loved to tell that the inclusion of this, his version of the Magnificat, in a hymnal for grammar school students, had drawn its wrathful denunciation as Communist propaganda in the British House of Commons by no less a foe than Enoch Powell. Fred of course wore that as a badge of honour.

There are so many stories that could be told. I will conclude with one more. In December 1975 Fred appeared at my apartment door, more excited than I

think I have ever seen him. He was holding a tape recording just made at the Nairobi 5th Assembly of the WCC, where a West German jazz ensemble had turned the litany he had written into a song that had captured the Assembly, in worship and at after-hours parties. That fundamental sea-change in church music, initiated in his earlier *New Songs For Asian Cities* and *Cantate Domino* Fred had a major role in carrying forward into the Vancouver 6th Assembly, where I had the privilege of working with him. There the worship team on which he had a key role, brought the music of the world church from Asia, Africa, Latin America, into the Assembly, and thence into all of our subsequent hymnals around the world. Let me conclude this tribute in words drawn from that 1975 litany, words too infrequently heard today, words that express so well the heart passion of my friend:

Lord, we shall need ever-new insights into the truth,

Awareness of your will for all humanity,

Courage to do what is right, even when it's not allowed,

Persistence in undermining unjust structures until they crumble into dust,

Grace to exercise a ministry of reconciliation.

For the ways in which Fred's own life and work were an incarnation of that quest for new insight, that courage, that persistence, this afternoon we give thanks.

R. Gerald Hobbs