



Nazareth Letter March 2024

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

The Soul of Contemplative Prayer

In the Lent Retreats we have had I gave a reflection and several of you have asked me for the text of this. At the time I spoke from the heart using only some notes I had made but in this letter I wanted to try and write down some of the things I shared. So if you have already heard this I hope it is an opportunity to reflect a little more on these qualities and if you have not heard it before then I hope and pray it is a little helpful.

“Peace be Still” these are the words that Jesus says in the midst of the storm on the lake. They are words we still need to pray in the midst of our own storms and the storms of our world. We do not have the power ourselves to stop the storm but we can sometimes with Christ’s help be raised above the storm clouds and turbulence and look down on those clouds from above- no longer lost in cloud but seeing the vastness of the sky and the place of pure light. Or to change the image we can dive down beneath the waves to rediscover the ocean of God’s presence even in the places of turmoil. The fruit of our practice of contemplative prayer together is compassion- and sometimes compassion is painful- it is “the tender wound of solidarity¹” with all that is and those who suffer. We cannot escape the turmoil of the world rather this struggle is “entrusted²” to us. And with this path we do not walk alone but with Christ. Rather than defeating and destroying the pain of our world – we witness in Christ how pain and grief can be dissolved into a love that is so much greater. It is like washing muddy feet in the vast ocean of God’s love. Sin may flow, as St Paul says, but grace overflows. (Romans 5.20)

The practice of contemplation simplifies us. It calls upon us to breath in God’s Spirit more deeply. To walk softly, to make haste slowly, to open up, to be receptive to Christ who is greater than all our fears and from whom nothing and nobody can separate us. This not something we do, or we achieve this is something God does in us.

Breath

God breaths into Adam and Eve. Jesus breaths on his disciples with the words ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’ God breaths into us and every human being and living creature. Our prayer

¹ Martin Laird

² Martin Laird

begins with that breath- a breath which opens us to the Spirit of God- oxygenating our lives with the life of God. This breath is not our possession it is God's gift. So essential that we do not recognise how vital it is to life. So begin your contemplation with this recognition of God's life breathed into you. Breathed deeply- that breath without which there is no life.

Bodily

Our prayer is not simply the repetition of words. Our whole bodies are also the prayer. We are all, from in the beginning, from Adam and Eve onwards we are told- made in God's image and our bodies are the dwelling place of God's Spirit. In other words Our bodies are sacramental- the visible sign of God's presence- fearfully and wonderfully made. As we pray we offer all that we are. Christ is "the Word made flesh"- our flesh- tabernacled or tented in the flesh of all humanity. It is not just your words that pray- your eyes, your ears, your heart, your skin, your body, your hands, your legs, your feet, your whole self is praying.

Beholding

One of the greatest gifts we can give anyone is to see them. To see, to recognise, to be present, to be with. To behold the full humanity of another is to enter into the mystery and miracle of life and their humanity. George Bernard Shaw wrote that "to be indifferent to a fellow creature is the essence of inhumanity" The ability to see someone else deeply and to let them feel seen, heard and understood is something upon which friendship and community depends. To behold is not to hold onto or to cling but to truly see- to be and to hold in open hands, attention and full presence.

Balancing

We are seeking balance- an inner stability and constancy. There will be ups and down but at the very centre there will be faithfulness. Like riding a bicycle, or skating on ice- however skilful, or flashy or beautiful the bicycle you will end up on the ground unless we learn to find an inner balance. This requires an inner centredness- locating that our point of gravity is in Christ. Balance is the still point at the centre that hold the turning wheel together.

Boundless

We are set free. Remember the words Jesus says to Lazarus "Unbind him and let him go" (John 11.44) We are not oppressed by Christ but set free to live life in all its fulness. And this Spirit is boundless- in that it is abundant and crosses the frontiers and borders of prejudice. It is not confined or limited to a particular group- rather it is for the world

Becoming

We do not have an objective or a set of goals we wish to reach in our Christian lives rather we are always seeking to become and this becoming never ceases until we come to God's kingdom in heaven. What is this becoming- it is life in its fulness- it is becoming the person we were created to be in relation to others who were also created to live most fully. It is never ceasing to seek God and the fulness of God.

Befriending

We are not called servants any longer we are called friends. To befriend is to stand at the side of someone not because of obligation but because of a deeper bond of loyalty, care and

recognition of a relationship beyond words or definition. Friendship begins perhaps as small as a mustard seed but becomes the tree in whose branches you can find shelter. A fri

Behovely

This an ancient word meaning needed, necessary, appropriate- it was often used to describe something that was part of a daily pattern or necessary routine. Our prayer, for all its flights of creativity and fancy is anchored in the daily necessity and chores of life. It grounds us and becomes part of the pattern of life we depend on. It is a word used by Julian of Norwich- she says that "sin is behovely." In other words to discover God's grace and to put our trust in God rather than self to discover our own sinfulness and failure allows room for the forgiveness of God to come into our lives

Blessed

In our lives it is so easy to see the fault, the thing to blame, the curse rather than the blessing. But we are seeking blessing both to receive blessing and to offer blessing. As we review our lives and bring our hopes and fears before God we try to unknot the tangles and seek the presence and the blessings of God even in the times that feel like darkness. This is not an avoidance of the pain of life but the revelation that Christ is often most present when we need him most.

Beseeking and Bestowing

Our Spirit is to both to ask God but also to offer. It is a Spirit of reciprocity. There is no harm in calling upon the aid of God as though our lives depended on it. They do. There are times when all we can say is "Help!" Speak your truth to God and constantly call upon him in times of trial but also be ready to offer and to give all that you are and all that you can.

Belonging

Our whole lives are a journey to belonging. And one of our greatest human fears is that we will be the rejected- unfit, left out, discriminated against scapegoated. Our lives may taste the joy of belonging but we are never fully at home until we rest in God. And there is a place of loneliness and fear of abandonment in each human heart. Mother Teresa said "Today, if we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other." Belonging is not about fitting into a group, or selling out, or pretending it is about being present to others and truthful to ones-self and to God and in so doing to realise that you have come home.

Belonging is discovering that God makes his home with us- in human flesh, so that we might make our home with God.

Beloved

To be and to be loved. To love and to be loved in return- to stand in the light of love, to be lit up, and to return that light of love. This is a love that does not die. An attentive love, that loves even more in adversity. A love that is for one's whole being. It is the reflection of God's love- like a mirror reflecting back. Still and yet moving- human and divine. Present and yet forever.

Bible Passage

The Word Became Flesh (John 1)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Wonderings

I wonder which of these B's speaks to you or challenges you most

I wonder how and if you find peace in the storm

I wonder how contemplative prayer simplifies you

I wonder what difference contemplative prayer has made to your life

Richard Carter