

SERMON 19.3.17

LOVING GOD THROUGH PRAYER AND CONTEMPLATION

The Spiritual Pathways series is opening up different ways of recognising God's presence and drawing us into a deeper relationship with God. Some of them may not appeal to you, others will. I encourage you to try some of the practices as a way of refreshing you spiritually. Some of the spiritual pathways focus on being active – others are quieter and more reflective.

The pathway for today – Loving God through prayer and contemplation - is what God does within our inner life, causing us to want to be silent, to stop what we are doing, and pay attention to God. We live in a society that doesn't make much room for silence, meditation or contemplation. We call this time 24/7 – being available all the time, connecting all the time, information coming at us 24 hours a day.

What happens to our inner life if we don't make time to draw aside from the constant rush and noise? We become dry, as though life is squeezed out of us. You may find that your usual ways of praying, and reading scripture, become stale. You continue out of habit but the clarity is lost.

In my growing up, attending church, Sunday School and youth group, I learned that prayer was talking to God. As a child, I remember that the prayers in church services always seemed long. We were expected to have a quiet time every day – reading a Bible passage, and a devotional thought, and praying. It was good training. It wasn't until I was older, that I began to hear about contemplation, meditation, and forms of prayer that were not about confessing sin, asking God for something, or working through a prayer list.

Some people fear that the church is going off the rails if contemplation and meditation are taught, as though they are from new age or eastern religions. There are secular courses which teach mindfulness and meditation. Don't be afraid of contemplation and meditation – we are talking about a Christian focus and pathway. The importance of being silent and listening to God is highlighted in many places in the Bible, and is part of a long Christian tradition.

A personal experience.

Several times I have gone away on a silent retreat. There are no rules about a silent retreat, except no talking. – even at meal times. There is a lot of time to listen, to read, pray, walk, reflect.

The longest retreat I have done is 5 days of silence. For an hour each day, you meet with a spiritual director to talk about what you are experiencing. This particular retreat was at Santa Casa Queenscliff. The group would meet for silent prayer at the beginning and end of each day.

At the time, I was about to finish ministry at the Williamstown Church of Christ after 8 years. Ash Barker, who was then Director of Urban Neighbours of Hope, a mission order that lives and works among the poor, had invited me to become their pastor to offer pastoral support and spiritual care to their workers in Bangkok, Australia and New Zealand. I went on the retreat to pray about it.

By the third day of the retreat, a lot of surface thoughts had gone, and I was processing things at a deep level. I was in my room, reading a Bible passage set for the day: Isaiah 50: 4-5,7. As I read, I experienced spiritual clarity – like an inner warm flame. I didn't hear an audible voice, but there was a very strong light shining in me and on the words I was reading. The passage came alive. I felt that God was asking me to pay attention to this passage and that the guidance for me about ministering with UNOH was there.

'The Sovereign Lord has given me his words of wisdom, so that I know what to say to his weary ones. Morning by morning he wakens me and opens my understanding to his will. The Sovereign Lord has

spoken to me, and I have listened. I do not rebel or turn away...Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be dismayed. Therefore, I have set my face like a stone, determined to do his will. If you are walking in darkness, without a ray of light, trust in the Lord and rely on your God.'

I took those words as guidance, wisdom, affirmation – offered them back to God – and made the decision to work with UNOH.

Those words are no longer just on paper, they are in my heart. That is what happens in contemplation. We can't manufacture what happens. What I shared from my own experience doesn't happen every time. If you make it a regular practice, the fruit will come but it may not be immediate.

Contemplative prayer is a receptive posture of openness toward God. It is a way of waiting with a heart awake to God's presence and his Word. This kind of prayer intentionally trusts and rests in the presence of the Holy Spirit deep in our own inner life. It is a helpful part of discernment, when you are making a decision. A quiet assurance will come – this is the way to go, this is what you are to do. Contemplative prayer is a way of being with God that does not depend on giving God information about people or what we would like done in the world. Intercession is the prayer that we offer on behalf of others and the world. In contemplative prayer, if a person comes to my mind, I simply say their name, and then continue silently and listen.

A word about distractions. We all have monkey minds. We want to focus, but our mind jumps all over the place. While you are listening to my sermon, it is happening. Your mind will take in some of what I say, but you will also be thinking of other things – what you are doing this afternoon, someone you want to call, an email you haven't sent, work yet to be finished. Don't punish yourself when this happens, it's all very normal. If you find your mind wandering in contemplation, gently bring your thoughts back into focus.

Origins of the contemplative tradition:

The Christian contemplative tradition had its beginnings with what were known as the Desert Fathers and Desert Mothers in Egypt, Palestine and Syria. They were early Christian hermits in the third century. They sought solitude and separation from material goods, and devoted themselves to prayer and fasting. The challenge of all Christian traditions, and we see this today, is when extremes develop. Extreme forms of self-denial developed and when they became the rule, a breakaway movement would spring up to counterbalance the extremes.

An example of a strange practice was a group called Pillar-saints, who were Christian ascetics. They lived on pillars, preaching, fasting and praying. They believed that putting their bodies under stress would help ensure the salvation of their souls. One was Simeon who climbed a pillar in Syria in 423 and remained there until his death 37 years later.

The contemplative tradition continued through the Middle Ages and the Reformation and into modern times.

What we learn from these ancient spiritual disciplines is an invitation to a slower and quieter place.

Some of the quotes from people in this tradition give us a fuller picture:

'Spiritual life is like living water that springs up from the very depths of our own spiritual experience.'
St. Bernard of Clairvaux (France, 1090 - 1153)

'Prayer is the deliberate and persevering action of the soul. It is true and enduring, and full of grace. Prayer fastens the soul to God and makes it one with God's will. Between God and the soul there is no between.'
Julian of Norwich (English mystic and theologian, 1342 - 1416)

'The very best and highest attainment in this life is to remain still and let God act and speak in you. The quieter the mind, the more powerful, the worthier, the deeper, the more telling and more perfect prayer is.' Meister Eckhart (German theologian, 1260 - 1328)

'First keep peace with yourself, then you can also bring peace to others.' Thomas a Kempis (German author of *The Imitation of Christ*, 1380 - 1471)

'Interior silence is one of the most strengthening and affirming of human experiences. There is nothing more affirming in fact, than the experience of God's presence. That revelation says, as nothing else can, "*You are a good person, I created you and I love you.*"'
Thomas Keating (American monk, 1923 -)

'Somewhere in those depths of silence I came upon my first experiences of God as a loving presence that was always near, and prayer as a simple trust in that presence.'
Cynthia Bourgeault (Episcopal priest, America, 1947 -)

'The careful balance between silence and words, withdrawal and involvement, distance and closeness, solitude and community, forms the basis of the Christian life.'
Henri Nouwen (Dutch Catholic priest, 1932 – 1996)

'Prayer is not a stratagem for occasional use, a refuge to resort to now and then. It is rather like an established residence for the innermost self. All things have a home: the bird has a nest, the fox has a hole, the bee has a hive. A soul without prayer is a soul without a home.'
Abraham Heschel (Polish-born American rabbi, Jewish theologian, 1907 – 1972)

Contemplative examples in the Bible include:

- The Psalms are full of images of silence and being still.
- Jesus retreated to the wilderness for 40 days to be alone with his Father. Why was the seeking out of solitary places a regular practice for Jesus? To be able to hear from God. To balance the demands of people around him. To strengthen himself for his ministry.
- The disciple John focuses on God's love in his writings. He is described as 'the one whom Jesus loved'. John chapters 14-17 express the unity of love between Jesus and his Father, in the Spirit, which he shares with us.

Bible references to silence and contemplation:

'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.' Psalm 23; 1-3

'Be still and know that I am God.' Psalm 46: 10

'Let all that I am wait quietly before God, for my hope is in him. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress where I will not be shaken.' Psalm 62: 5-6

God said (to Elijah), "Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 1 Kings 19: 11-13

This is what the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel, says: "Only in returning to me and resting in me will you be saved. In quietness and confidence is your strength." Isaiah 30: 15

Jesus said, 'Here's what I want you to do: Find a quiet, secluded place so you won't be tempted to role-play before God. Just be there as simply and honestly as you can manage. The focus will shift from you to God, and you will begin to sense his grace.' Matthew 6: 5 (The Message)

Jesus said, 'Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.' Matthew 11: 28-29 (The Message)

Jesus said, 'Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch can't bear grapes by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can't bear fruit unless you are joined with me. I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can't produce a thing.' John 15: 4-5 (The Message)

Loving God through contemplation requires making sufficient space for silence. Our culture does not lend itself to silence and reflection, so we need to intentionally carve out time without distractions. Sitting in God's presence is like rain to the parched ground; it refreshes and causes life to spring forth. It doesn't mean ignoring our responsibilities or engaging with people and their needs. It means that we detach from the expectations that other people place on us, and open ourselves to what God wants of us.

Helpful ideas and practices to develop a contemplative attitude

- **Set regular time aside to be quiet and still, and know that God is God.** Start with breathing slowly and deeply. Let your breath settle into its normal rhythm. This is calming. You can practise it when you notice yourself become tense and stressed or anxious.
- **Attend a silent retreat. Start with a day.**
- **Pray the Jesus prayer: 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'** Sit quietly. Focus on your breathing. Begin to say the prayer quietly to yourself with each breath. Keep praying it.
- **Try the practice of Centering Prayer.** Settle comfortably and let go of thoughts and tensions. Choose a word as a symbol of your intention to surrender to God's presence (e.g. peace, hope, love, joy, grace, help). When other thoughts come, gently return to your word. Use only the one word as your focus for prayer at that time. As you become accustomed to this form of prayer, try 5 minutes – then 10, 20. At the end of your prayer time, come out of the silence, by praying for others, or saying the Lord's Prayer.
- **Focus on a familiar prayer like the Lord's Prayer.** Take a phrase at a time – one phrase a day e.g. 'Our Father ... (next day) who is in heaven ... (next day) Hallowed be your name ...' Spend time in silence, focusing on the phrase for the day.
- **Do a prayer walk – slowly, noticing things as you walk.** Take in the sights. Appreciate God's good handiwork.
- **If you enjoy art, choose a painting to gaze at.** Or go to an art gallery, walk around and slowly take in the different forms of art work.
- **Sit quietly. Think of a person – family, friend, work colleague, neighbour.** Think about your relationship with that person. What do you appreciate? What frustrates you? Try to see life

from that person's viewpoint. See them through the eyes of God. Offer prayer for that person.

- **Read a Bible passage, or choose one verse.** Savour it. Sit with it for a length of time. What is God drawing your attention to?

- **Palms down – palms up prayer**
 - Sit with your hand on your lap. Breathe deeply and relax. Place yourself in the presence of Jesus.
 - Turn your palms down and begin to drop your cares, worries, agendas and expectations into Jesus' hands. Let go of all that is heavy or burdensome. Relax. Breathe deeply.
 - When you have given your cares to Jesus, turn your palms up on your knees. Open your hands to receive God's presence, word and love. Listen.
 - When you feel prompted to end, tell the Lord what it is like for you to simply be with him.

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