



THE DIOCESE OF  
CYPRUS AND THE GULF  
THE EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN  
JERUSALEM AND THE MIDDLE EAST

## EXPLORING CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

### PART 1: CLASSIC SOURCES



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## Introduction to the Course

### Aim

This module leads us to the wellsprings of Christian spirituality, and explores their abiding relevance today in our discipleship.

This course aims to introduce you to major classic expressions of Christian spirituality. Each unit will have four major strands, woven in different ways:

- 1 historical background to a spiritual writer
- 2 engagement with a text from the writer
- 3 questions to stimulate discussion and reflection
- 4 prayer exercise giving the opportunity to pray in different ways

### Approach

There are 3 things to bear in mind in the study of spirituality

#### 1. The need to develop a two-way conversation

Gadamer wrote of the need to recognise both the horizon of the writer in question and to acknowledge and identify our own horizon.<sup>1</sup> We are invited to respect the 'otherness' of the text and allow it to question us. We bring our questions to the text, which may be re-shaped in the process. Sheldrake sees this as a two-way conversation: 'what is needed is a receptive and at the same time critical dialogue with a spiritual text in order to allow the wisdom contained in it to challenge us and yet to accord our own horizons their proper place.'<sup>2</sup> Such an approach opens us to new insight, within an encounter with the text which recognises both reader and text not as static entities but as dynamic players.

#### 2 . Maintain a hermeneutic of respect and criticism

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<sup>1</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (ET, London, 1979)

<sup>2</sup> Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, (SPCK 1991) p165

This encounter takes place within the dialectic of a hermeneutic of suspicion and a hermeneutic of generosity (after Ricoeur<sup>3</sup>). The former is unafraid to ask questions and to offer a critique where appropriate. A hermeneutic of generosity handles the text with a certain respect and recognises its authority in its own terms. The student of spirituality will seek to hold these attitudes within a creative balance and so be ready to be both surprised and heartened by the text encountered.

### **3. Awareness of 'self-implication'**

The student and scholar are called to be an objective observer and analyst of religious practice, maintaining a critical distance between him/herself and the documents or phenomena studied.<sup>4</sup> However, this becomes difficult within the area of spirituality because we are all humans on a spiritual quest or spiritual journey. (Even the atheist student will be asking 'ultimate questions' about meaning and purpose.) The purpose of the Engaging Christianity series is not only to educate but to develop, stimulate and resource our life of discipleship. So we should not be afraid to 'go out of our comfort zone' – on the contrary, we should be ready to welcome ways of praying into our own practice which are at once ancient and fresh. We should

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<sup>3</sup> P. Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1970).

<sup>4</sup> S. Schneiders, 'The Study of Christian Spirituality' in A. Holder (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality* (Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2005), 15–33; B.C. Lane, 'Writing in Spirituality as a Self-Implicating Act' in B.H. Lescher & E. Lieberbert (eds.), *Exploring Christian Spirituality* (Paulist Press, N.Y., 2006), 53–69

be prepared to be touched and inspired by the witness of classic spiritual writers, so that our own life of prayer and witness is strengthened and encouraged.

### **Practicalities**

The module consists of between seven and ten sessions (the group can decide how many beyond the seven core sessions to do) and each lasts approximately 90 minutes with a short act of worship either before or after the session. There will be a group leader to guide you through the material.

### **Commitment**

Apart from attending and playing a full part in the sessions themselves, the only other commitment is to do some preparation prior to each meeting. This will normally be something to think about or read. There will also be additional resources recommended – such as books, websites and films – but there is no requirement to make use of these.

Canon Dr Andrew Mayes, Diocesan Spirituality Adviser

## **OUTLINE**

### **CORE SESSIONS**

#### **UNIT 1 SPIRITUALITY & JESUS**

We look at the concept of spirituality, exploring the origins of the term, its transformational character, & begin to ask about its relationship to daily life

We look at the spirituality of Jesus, and the role of solitude & prayer in his ministry

#### **UNIT 2 DESERT SPIRITUALITY: Basil of Caesarea**

We look at the physicality of the desert & its clues for the landscape of spirituality, noting three physical deserts in the Bible. We look at John the Baptist & Jesus' experience in the desert. We note the origins of the desert fathers & mothers – what led them into the desert. We consider the invitations and challenges of the desert. We engage with a reading from Basil the Great

#### **UNIT 3 SPIRITUALITY OF ICONS**

We begin by thinking about the significance of 'images' & the origins of icons. As we consider different responses of resistance and welcome to icons, we engage with two important defences of their use. We consider six key features of icons and engage with three famous icons and allow them to lead us into reflection & prayer.

#### **UNIT 4 CELTIC SPIRITUALITY**

We gain a perspective on the history of the Celtic tradition, identifying major strands of early Celtic Christianity. We encounter some Celtic ways of praying and conclude with a closer look at an example: St Patrick's Breastplate.

#### **UNIT 5 PROPHETIC SPIRITUALITY: Francis of Assisi**

We begin with an overview of key characteristics of Francis' spirituality, then look at the life of Francis through the lens of the theme of liberation. We engage with a key text from Francis and explore the relationship of suffering

& spirituality in the life of Francis. We consider the theme of reconciliation in Francis' life and describe qualities of prophetic spirituality.

### **UNIT 6 MYSTICAL SPIRITUALITY: Julian of Norwich**

We begin by asking 'what is a mystic?' and consider Jesus as a mystic. We recall the flowering of mysticism in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and explore the teaching of Julian of Norwich, engaging with key texts. We ask how we can encourage the mystic in us.

### **UNIT 7 EVANGELICAL SPIRITUALTY**

We identify key characteristics of evangelical spirituality. We engage with an example from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, John Bunyan and with 18<sup>th</sup> century John Wesley.

### **OPTIONAL SESSIONS**

### **UNIT 8 MONASTIC SPIRITUALITY: BENEDICT**

We set Benedict in his historical background and engage with a reading from his *Rule*. We unpack the text through questions for discussion, seeing how Benedictine wisdom speaks to our life today.

### **UNIT 9 TERESA OF AVILA: METAPHORS IN SPIRITUALITY**

We consider the significance and role of metaphor in spirituality and in spiritual writing and conversations. We encounter Teresa of Avila's image of the Interior Castle, her image of the Waters and her image of the Silkworm.

### **UNIT 10 STRUGGLE & HOPE IN SPIRITUALITY**

A significant cluster of metaphors in describing our relationship with God involves the language of struggling; the spiritual combat, which turns out to be a blend of wrestling and hope in the spiritual experience. We begin with the archetypal story of Jacob's wrestling with God (Genesis 32) and examine three major themes in the poem-prayers of George Herbert, looking at prayer as a place of transparency, a place of transformation, and a place of encounter with the incarnate, suffering and rising Lord.

## UNIT 1 SPIRITUALITY & JESUS

### AIMS OF THIS UNIT

- 1 Welcome, overview of course & 'ground rules'
- 2 We look at the concept of spirituality, exploring the origins of the term, its transformational character, & begin to ask about its relationship to daily life
- 3 We look at the spirituality of Jesus, and the role of solitude & prayer in his ministry
- 4 We will discuss some of the issues in pairs/ threes & in the larger group
- 5 We will conclude with prayer/ reflection

### SPIRITUALITY: THE PROBLEM OF DEFINITION

'It appears that spirituality is one of those subjects whose meaning everyone claims to know until they have to define it.'<sup>5</sup> As Professor Sheldrake cautions, spirituality has become a slippery and elusive word to define. In recent years, the word has been utilised in ever-wider contexts, far beyond the confines of church or even religion: indeed, the rise in the use of spirituality to denote some kind of personal experience of awareness seems proportionate to the decline of the institutional church.<sup>6</sup>

A national study of college students' search for meaning and purpose typifies current usage of the term:

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<sup>5</sup> P. Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History* (SPCK, London, 1991),32

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Archbishops' Council, *mission-shaped church* (Church House Publishing, London, 2004),9

Spirituality...captures those aspects of our experience that are not easy to define or talk about, such as inspiration, creativity, the mysterious, the sacred, and the mystical. Within this very broad perspective, we believe spirituality is a universal impulse and reality.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Q1 What is your understanding of the term 'spirituality'?***

#### **The history of the term**

The word *spirituality* translates the Latin *spiritualitas*, corresponding to Paul's use of *pneumatikos*. The core Latin word *spirare* means 'to breathe.' It evokes the Genesis account of God breathing his life force into the first human: 'he breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living being' (Gen. 2.7). We recall how in Ezekiel's vision of dry bones, what was necessary was the invigorating and empowering Spirit: 'I will place my Spirit within you and you shall live' (Ezek. 37:14). The Spirit is the breath or *ruah* of God. The Risen Christ breathes the Spirit into the disciples in the Upper Room: 'He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit" ' (Jn. 20:22). So we start to see that spirituality involves a human openness to the Holy Spirit: as Paul puts it: 'The Spirit joins with our spirit' (Rom. 8:16).

In his theology, Paul expresses the believer's new life in Christ as 'life in the Spirit' *kata pneuma*, 'according to the Spirit', contrasted with life outside Christ which is *kata sarx*, 'according to the flesh' (here 'flesh' denotes not body or physicality but 'life not ruled by God').<sup>8</sup> For Paul, 'For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God' (Rom.8:14).

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<sup>7</sup> Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students' search for meaning and purpose on [www.spirituality.ucla.edu/about/spirituality.html](http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu/about/spirituality.html)

<sup>8</sup> See J.Ziesler, *Pauline Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 1990),79.

The earliest recorded use of *spiritualitas*, in a text once attributed to Jerome, conveys this same sense: 'So act as to advance in spirituality.' It was only in the twelfth century that *spiritualitas* began to be used in contrast to *corporalitas* (bodily) or *materialis* (matter). In France in the seventeenth century the word *spirituality* began to be used more widely of the spiritual life referring to practices of prayer or devotion; ultimately it entered the English language in this sense of 'means towards Christian perfection' in the early twentieth century through the translation of Pierre Pourrat's *La spiritualité chrétienne*.<sup>9</sup>

### **Spirituality as transformation**

In recent years Christian scholars have pointed to the transformational or transformative character of spirituality in a sense that is directly relevant to this study. Sandra Schneiders writes that 'spirituality as an academic discipline studies the transformative Christian experience as such.' She tells us that the study of spirituality is 'self-implicating' – that is, we cannot as Christians study it dispassionately as an academic discipline only; somehow it must affect us. So in this module we will expect to be renewed spiritually as well as gain a keener grasp of the subject. It is hoped that this module will enrich your own life of discipleship! Waaijman considers spirituality as a process of transformation taking place within the divine-human relationship<sup>10</sup> while McGinn goes further and calls mysticism 'a process of personal transformation.'<sup>11</sup>

### ***Q2 What transformations or changes do you hope for in this study?***

### **Spirituality and life**

A definition of spirituality that entails divine/human encounter is offered by former Anglican Officer for Evangelism Robert Warren: 'By *spirituality* is meant our

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<sup>9</sup> This paragraph is indebted to article M.Downey, (ed.), *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Liturgical Press, Minnesota, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> Waaijman, *Spirituality*, 426

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in K.Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods* (Peeters, Leuven, 2002), 455–456

understanding and experience of how encounter with God takes place and how such an encounter is sustained.<sup>12</sup> But such a definition does not go far enough, for it stops short of suggesting that such encounter changes people, makes a measurable difference to their lives. The late Methodist scholar Gordon Wakefield stresses this: 'Spirituality concerns the way in which prayer influences conduct, our behaviour and manner of life, our attitudes to other people....Spirituality is a combination of living and praying.'<sup>13</sup>

## SPIRITUALITY OF JESUS

### Leaving behind Nazareth

Luke alone tells us about the spiritual customs or habits of Jesus. He uses the phrase twice:

'When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, *as was his custom*' (Luke 4.16). Later, on the eve of the passion, as Jesus prays in the garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives, Luke tells us: 'He came out and went, *as was his custom*, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him (Luke 22.39). So we note: there was a change in the prayer customs of Jesus!

In his years in Nazareth, prayer was based on the synagogue liturgies and in the family. There were also the regular annual festivals of the Temple in Jerusalem. Luke tell us that Jesus attended the Temple at the age of 12, possibly for the Jewish *barmitzvah* ceremony when a Jewish boy was admitted to adulthood and responsibility before the Law (Luke 2:41–51). He probably made regular visits, as in John's Gospel. The three annual festivals were Passover (Pesach), Pentecost (Shavout) and Tabernacles (Sukkoth).

In his prayers, Jesus was steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures. He would have known the psalms deeply, for these form the heart of Jewish prayer. It seems that he was particularly familiar with the prophet Isaiah, for he chooses the passage to read from Isaiah 61, and some phrases placed on his lips seem to echo the language of

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<sup>12</sup> R. Warren, *Building Missionary Congregations: Towards a Post-Modern Way of Being Church* (Church House Publishing, London, 1995)

<sup>13</sup> G.Wakefield, *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (SCM, London, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1983), v

Isaiah's servant songs. In the episode we call 'the cleansing of the temple' he quotes both Isaiah and Jeremiah, and identifies himself closely with them both.

At the age of 30, Jesus quits his hometown, family, friends and village religious customs. Now he is becoming itinerant: 'the son of man has nowhere to lay his head.' He is becoming a pilgrim and wayfarer, and traditional patterns of prayer will no longer be possible. He will now pray in the hills (Lk. 6:12) and in lonely desert-like places (Mk. 1:35, 6:30–32). He is moving into a new spiritual experience, a fresh way of encountering God his Father. He is entering upon untried and challenging ways of praying.

### Jesus– the Mystic?

In recent years, attempting to pinpoint and locate the inspiration that drives Jesus, scholars have characterised him as a 'mystic.' In his study of the prayer–life of Jesus, Thomson identifies prayer as a crucial source of inspiration and illumination for his ministry.<sup>14</sup> In a more recent study, Bruce Chilton characterises Jesus as a mystic imparting esoteric teaching: 'He had already initiated them [the disciples] into his visionary practice, but now he distilled and systemized his mystical insights...into a personal tradition (*a kabbalah*)'<sup>15</sup>. Marcus Borg sees Jesus as a 'Spirit person,' interpreting the long periods of prayer mentioned by Luke (6.12) as Jesus' use of contemplation or meditation.<sup>16</sup> Borg sees Jesus as a Jewish revolutionary mystic and affirms that his mystical experience is the best explanation for his subversive wisdom and his passion and courage as a social prophet. Borg believes that Jesus' radical convictions spring from his prayer–experience, which was marked by a vivid sense of epiphany and divine disclosure.

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<sup>14</sup> J.G.S.S. Thomson, *The Praying Christ: A Study of Jesus' Doctrine and Practice of Prayer* (Tyndale Press, London, 1959)

<sup>15</sup> B. Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus* (Image/ Doubleday, London, 2002), p. 175. For a more cautious approach to the prayer of Jesus see O. Cullmann, *Prayer in the New Testament* (SCM, London, 1995).

<sup>16</sup> M.J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (1987) as discussed in M.A. Powell, *The Jesus Debate: Modern Historians Investigate the Life of Christ* (Lion, Oxford, 1998). We will consider the mysticism of Jesus further when we look at Julian of Norwich.

Other scholars too point to the prayer life of Jesus as being the source and spring of his mission: Geza Vermes, in his *Jesus the Jew*, sees Jesus as a Galilean charismatic holy man and miracle-worker in the tradition of Elijah and Elisha. Tom Wright notes the role of receptive prayer in Jesus' experience, remembering that in the return of the Seventy after their mission, within their debriefing and reflection with Christ, perspectives arising from prayer are shared: 'Jesus in prayer had seen a vision...[he] had seen, in mystical sight, the heavenly reality which corresponded to the earthly victories won by the 70.'<sup>17</sup>

## Jesus – the Hermit?

Jesus, a hermit? We think of him as gregarious, reaching out to others in healing and teaching, always surrounded by crowds, by the multitudes. But a closer reading of the Gospels reveals not only a strong hermit-character in Jesus but also points us towards understanding the very secret of his leadership.

Jesus was *literally* a hermit, for the word derives from the Greek word *eremos* which features strongly in the Gospel accounts: it means lonely or deserted place. Mentioned many times in the narratives, it denotes the experience of aloneness, solitude, which Jesus craved. We shall take a look at how the gospels use this word to describe a place or state so favoured by Jesus. Jesus was, secondly, *literally* an anchorite, a solitary: the word derives from the verb that keeps cropping up in the accounts: *anachoreo*, to withdraw, to make retreat, to retire. These two hermit-words became basic to the earliest monastic vocabulary – a grammar or language of solitude – describing the early monastic experience of detachment from the world.

It is not possible, of course, to reconstruct from the gospels Jesus' interior life or his psychology, but we get glimpses, pointers, indicators to this. We can certainly examine the role that the evangelists give to Jesus retreating to a place of isolation and seclusion, and how this functions in the narrative: we can notice the part played by the *eremos* in the context of the gospel story, by the *anachoresis*, noting what came before – what triggered the retreat – and how Jesus behaves afterwards. This will give us some clues as to the effect of the silence on Jesus, at least in the eyes of

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<sup>17</sup> T.Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (SPCK, London, 2004), p. 125

the gospel writers. We will be attentive to how at particular moments the evangelists deliberately employ the significant and more highly charged verb *anachoreo*, denoting ‘to make a retreat’ instead of the more common verbs ‘to go’ *ágo* or *ápeimi*.

Moreover, we shall discover that the hermit life is key to Jesus’ survival in ministry, humanly speaking, and the very well-spring of his inspiration.

As we look at the gospels, we see *solitude functioning in at least five ways in the ministry of Jesus*.

## 1 clarifying vocation

### The desert

Three scenes stand out: the desert, the mountain and the garden. Jesus begins his ministry in the wilderness. After his baptism, he is driven by the Spirit into the inner desert. He discovers it to be a place of angels and demons, or as Mark puts it succinctly: ‘He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him’ (Mark 1:13). Jesus experienced the desert as a place of conflict, in which he decisively battled with shortcuts to prestige and power. But here, most of all, he learned to discern the Father’s voice, and discovered the priorities for his ensuing ministry. Here he discovered what was to become the secret of his ministry: ‘Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own but only what he sees his Father doing...The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing’ (Jn. 5:19,20). In his desert-prayer, Jesus glimpses the divine imperatives that will guide him in the days ahead. Amidst the rocks he clarifies his personal mission, and sees what was important, and what was not. Amidst the rocks, Jesus comes to understand his vocation clearly: the experience crystallizes his sense of direction, his very purpose.

It is in the desert that Jesus clarifies his priorities and his over-arching vision. Like the very landscape, he lays bare his soul to God. As the wind blows over the desert, so the Spirit, who drove him into the wilderness, breezes into his soul and energizes him for what is to come.

In leadership terms, we would say that Jesus ponders and sets his strategy in his desert-prayer. We see this pattern recurring in his ministry, for at crucial moments Jesus enters the hermit state. Before Jesus makes the major decision about those he will call to be the core of the new people of God, fulfilling the twelve tribes of Israel, he devotes long hours of prayer, in the darkness of the night: 'Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles...' (Lk. 6:12, 13)

### **The mountain**

Jesus clarifies his vocation in the context of solitude and prayer in the Transfiguration. Luke tells us the reason for Jesus' ascent of the mountain: he went up the mountain to pray. He had reached a cross-roads in his ministry, a watershed: at Caesarea Philippi he had asked his disciples to declare their understanding of him, and he began to speak, for the first time, of his coming passion in Jerusalem. While Peter could not handle the idea of a suffering messiah, Jesus spoke of the passion of the Son of man. Now, on the holy mountain, Jesus mystically engages with two displaced persons: Moses and Elijah. Moses speaks with him about the exodus Jesus is to accomplish in Jerusalem. Truly, this prayer experience clarifies to Jesus his vocation more strongly than ever. Now he can see very clearly what he has to do. We might use the word 'discernment' in relation to what is going on in the hermit-prayer of Jesus.

### **The garden**

The theme of vocation resurfaces in Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane. On the night of his passion, Jesus goes directly from the room of the last supper to a favourite place of retreat. As we noted, Luke tells us it was his custom to make retreat in the garden of Gethsemane, at the foot of the Mount of Olives, a secluded spot across the Kidron valley from the temple. There in the darkness, Jesus ponders his fate and considers different options represented in sword and chalice. He moves from

resistance and hesitation to a place of surrender as he embraces his destiny. In his prayer he discovers fresh reserves of courage.

## 2 healing grief

We see Jesus entering solitude after two momentous events involving the fate of John the Baptist, his arrest and his death.

First we see in Matthew 4:12 'Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew (*anechoreesen*) to Galilee.'

In the perspective of the first evangelist, Jesus receives news that John his cousin has been jailed. Jesus is stunned by the news, and goes into solitude in order to gain some perspective on the situation: what does this mean for Jesus, and for his timing? He realises that with the removal of his forerunner and precursor from the scene, now is the time to begin in earnest his public ministry. Jesus had, it seems, lingered in the lower Jordan valley after his time in the Judean desert. The news of John's captivity causes Jesus to head north. As Mark puts it: 'Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news from God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" ' (Mk. 1: 14,15). For Jesus *chronos* turns to *kairos*. There are two ways of looking at time: *chronos* denotes successive events of history, coming one after another in a linear fashion, but *kairos* denotes God's time, God's inbreaking into history, the hour of opportunity, the moment of grace. Mark tells us that Jesus greets this event as a *kairos* moment: the time has come, the hour has dawned, God's reign is imminent and within reach! But, Matthew tells us, Jesus gains this revelation of God's timing through his *anachoresis*, his withdrawal, his retreat. The retreat affords an opportunity to process the pain of the news, and to see John's arrest not as a tragedy but opportunity, not as a disaster but as a disclosure – of God's unfolding will and purposes.

We see this, secondly, when the news of John's death reaches Jesus' ears. He learns the sorry tale of how the daughter of Herodias acquired the head of John the Baptist on a platter at a public dinner party. What is his reaction? Matthew tells us: 'Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew (*anechoreesen*) from there in a boat to a

deserted place (*eremos*) by himself' (14:13). The account is triply emphatic of solitude: Jesus withdrew – made a retreat; to an *eremos* (lonely place); by himself, in his own company. Jesus needs a space alone. He needs to process his grief and heartbreak. As he thinks of John's violent demise, he no doubt ponders his own fate and destiny. Will this be his path, too? In the silence of his retreat, he faces not only his sorrow but also his fears and forebodings. Is this what lies in store for him, and how soon?

But this time of aloneness also renews and reequips Jesus, in Matthew's perspective. He emerges from this desert-experience to reveal what Matthew (14:14) calls 'compassion'. The Greek word communicates an intensity: it denotes being moved with tenderness or pity in one's inward parts. Of course, in English the word has the connotation 'to suffer with' someone. Jesus has found his silence transformative. He begins with mourning mingled with fear, but ends with a heart brimming over with strong love and compassion for the crowds, a deep empathy and solidarity with those who are facing illness, vulnerability and fragility in their human compassion. Jesus' grief does not lead to self-pity ('Am I next?') but to solidarity with those who suffer. And he immediately recognises the leadership gap: for, Matthew tells us, 'they were like sheep without a shepherd.' After his withdrawal, Jesus is ready to advance. He has discovered the reenergizing effects of silence.

### **3 handling conflict**

Matthew's gospel emphasises Jesus' struggle with the Pharisees – his original readership was separating from the synagogue. Matthew states more than once that Jesus makes a retreat after an intense time of confrontation, controversy and argument with the Jewish religious experts on the law. An experience of conflict leads directly to a time of silence in which Jesus regains his perspective. His argument with the Pharisees over healing on the Sabbath culminates in a death-threat: 'the Pharisees went out and took counsel against him, how to destroy him.' The account immediately goes on: 'Jesus, aware of this, withdrew (*anechoreesen*) from there' (Matt. 12: 14, 15). His collision with enemies leads to withdrawal, to a space in which Jesus, somewhat battered and bruised, both regains composure and discovers new energy for the next round of the fight, which ensues immediately (Matt. 12:22–37). Jesus is able to take on the Pharisees with a renewed authority, which springs from his time of silence. He speaks with fresh gravitas: 'every

kingdom divided against itself is laid waste...if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you' (12: 25, 28).

John's gospel, too, depicts Jesus making a retreat after a significant moment of potential contention: 'When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew (*anechoreesen*) again to the mountain by himself' (Jn. 6:15). Now it is the fourth evangelist's time to employ this key verb: this is a highly poignant challenge to which Jesus chooses to respond by making a retreat, because it concerns the heart of his vocation. The people want Jesus to be a political messiah, leading deliverance from the Roman occupiers. They want a king. But Jesus will not take this path, and decisively turns his back on this option. The withdrawal gives him a chance to take stock, to refocus and reorientate himself after this perhaps scary approach ('by force') from the crowd. He makes an *anachoresis* not only to protect himself from this row and affray but also to regain perspective on his true calling: to be not a political king, but bread to be shared for the world (Jn. 6: 16ff).

Matthew gives other examples of how conflict leads to a period of withdrawal. In chapter 15, Jerusalem scribes and Pharisees enter into bitter contention with Jesus over the issue of external washings and ablutions. Jesus will not tolerate this ritual drained of morality and states that it is the heart that matters (Matt. 15:18, 19). After this further bout in the ongoing combat, the evangelist tells us: 'Jesus went away from there and withdrew (*anechoreesen*) to the district of Tyre and Sidon' (15:21, RSV). Jesus makes a journey across the northern mountains of Galilee to a retreat-location on the coast where he knows he will be able to introduce the disciples to different cultures and world-views: there he meets the Syro-phoenician woman, who will challenge him over the big issue of who is welcome in God's kingdom. After this set-to and clash with the woman, Jesus makes his way up into the hills above Galilee 'and sits down' (15:29). Surely, he is ready for another rest – but he doesn't get it!

#### **4 renewing focus**

Both Mark and Luke emphasize the role of prayer and silence in the example Jesus sets before the disciples, following the forty days of prayer, struggle and preparation in the desert. In Mark chapter 1, a hectic twenty-four hours of ministry

is followed by prayer before dawn in an *eremos* –lonely place (1:35): the time of prayer is both the conclusion of an intense period of ministry and the prelude to the next stage. This rhythm of prayer and activity is repeated in the disciples' experience: after first incursions into ministry, they give an account of their experience to Jesus and he responds: 'Come away to a deserted place (*eremos*) all by yourselves and rest a while' (Mk. 6:30,31). Lane points out: 'In each instance reference to the wilderness–place is preceded by an account of Jesus' preaching and power; he then withdraws from the multitude which seeks his gifts.'<sup>18</sup> After this retreat, another time of ministry (6:35–45) is followed by Christ's retirement into the hills for prayer at night (6:46): the pattern of intense activity and solitude is repeated.

## 5 learning deeply

Luke links prayer and deep learning. In three events, Jesus' prayer time looks like the seedbed of his teaching and the place of his theological reflection, because the silence is broken by Jesus speaking words of instruction. In Luke 6, Jesus withdraws to the hills and prays through the night after a demanding period in which great crowds gathered for preaching and healing (Lk. 6:12). This prayer time leads directly to the Sermon on the Plain (6:20ff), suggesting that the Beatitudes and Woes took shape during his night of prayer. We see a second example in chapter 9 of the gospel. After another period of intense ministry, a further time of prayer becomes the context for learning and questions: 'Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" ' (9:18). After prayer, Jesus teaches about the suffering Son of man (9:22).

A third example of the relationship between prayer and learning is found as Christ spontaneously moves into a prayer of thanksgiving after the disciples' period of debriefing and theological reflection shared upon their return from ministry (chapter 10). Jesus gives thanks for the gift of revelation (*apokalupsis*) taking place in the pastoral experience of the Seventy (Lk. 10:21).

As Dunn puts it, we should note 'the degree to which Jesus provided a model to his disciples as a man of prayer...To be a disciple of Jesus was to pray as Jesus prayed.'<sup>19</sup> Christ's exemplifying a balance between prayer and activity is

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<sup>18</sup> W.L.Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1974), p. 81

communicated not only by his own personal practice but by appeal to other expressions, notably in the passage about Mary and Martha (Lk. 10:38–42) in which Mary chooses ‘the better part.’ Jesus then models praying himself and this leads directly into teaching (Lk.11:1). He speaks of the kind of prayer that involves bringing questions and puzzlement to God: ‘Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you’ (Lk. 11:9).

### **Withdrawal...and return**

Jesus does not stay a hermit or anchorite. He brings his stillness into the midst of the noisy world: his desert heart still pulsates within him. But he must leave the lonely places – heartened, challenged, instructed, comforted and energized – to face the demands of ministry and the call of the cross. This rhythm between withdrawal and engagement, this ebb and flow of prayer and ministry, is the key to the ministry of Jesus: we noted that, in John’s view, he only does what he hears the Father telling him, in his listening prayer (Jn.5:19, 20;14:10). On the mount of transfiguration Peter wants to build three booths in order to give Jesus and his companions a place where they can dwell. He wants to hold onto the moment. Jesus will have none of that. He leads the disciples down the mountain right into the place of desperate human need. We go with him, echoing the hymn by Armitage Robinson:

‘Tis good Lord to be here,

Yet we may not remain;

but since thou bidst us leave the mount,

come with us to the plain.

***Q3 In the light of our look at the five functions of retreat/solitude in Jesus’ experience, what do you now think about the relationship of spirituality and life, prayer and work?***

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<sup>19</sup> J.D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Eerdmans, Michigan/ Cambridge, 2003), p. 561

*Q4 How would you express the relationship between spirituality and behaviour?  
How does how you pray affect the way you live, your lifestyle and ethical choices?*

#### **FURTHER QUESTIONS for reflection**

- 1 What difference, do you think, did the experience of solitude make to Jesus' ministry?
- 2 Which of the five ways in which solitude enhanced Jesus' ministry resonate with your experience?
- 3 Why are we fearful of solitude? Why is the word 'hermit' regarded sometimes as unattractive or eccentric?
- 4 Why is the hermit-experience crucial to leadership?
- 5 What steps can you take to incorporate solitude into your practice of ministry?

#### **PRAYER EXERCISE**

Choose a 'lonely place' from the Gospels that we have considered – maybe desert, mountain or garden – and replay one of the episodes we have considered. Ignatius of Loyola in the sixteenth century invites us to engage with such texts using our five senses and our imaginations vividly. Ignatius says: Use your eyes to look at the scene, visualize it, imagine it in your mind's eye, place yourself into the picture and become one of the characters. Reach out in your imagination and touch with your fingertips the characters, the soil, the water, the physical aspects. Even smell the scents of the scene and taste the air, the food, the atmosphere. But above all, Ignatius says, open your ears and listen to what the characters are saying to each other, what they are saying to you and what God is saying to you through all this. This approach to Scripture once again slows us down and demands time and attention. It leads to clearer discernment of God's will for us in the practice of ministry. Close with St Ignatius's own prayer: 'Take, O Lord, and receive my entire liberty, my memory, my understanding and my whole will. All that I am and all that I possess You have given me: I surrender it all to You to be disposed of according to

Your will. Give me only Your love and Your grace; with these I will be rich enough.'

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### FOR FURTHER READING

O. Cullmann, *Prayer in the New Testament* (SCM, London, 1995)

J. Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (SCM, London, 1974)

B.C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: exploring desert & mountain spirituality* (Oxford University Press, 1998)

A. Louth, *Theology and Spirituality* (SLG Press, Fairacres, Oxford, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., 2000)

..... *The Wilderness of God* (Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 2003)

A.D. Mayes, *Another Christ: Re-envisioning ministry* (SPCK, London, 2014)

M. A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: the Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1998)

E.H. Peterson, *The Contemplative Pastor: Returning to the Art of Spiritual Direction* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1993)

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<sup>20</sup> For a useful introduction to this pattern of praying see T. M. Gallagher, *An Ignatian Introduction to Prayer: Scriptural Reflections According to the Spiritual Exercises* (Crossroads Publishing Company, New York, 2008).

## **UNIT 2 DESERT SPIRITUALITY: Basil of Caesarea**

### **AIMS OF THIS UNIT**

- 1 We will look at the physicality of the desert & its clues for the landscape of spirituality, noting three physical deserts in the Bible**
- 2 We will look at John the Baptist & Jesus' experience in the desert**
- 3 We will note the origins of the desert fathers & mothers – what led them into the desert**
- 4 We will consider four invitations from the desert**
- 5 We will consider four challenges from the desert**
- 6 We will engage with a reading from Basil the Great**
- 7 We will conclude with prayer**

### **INTO THE DESERTS OF PRAYER**

***Q What comes into your mind when you hear the word 'desert'?***

The very word 'desert' may evoke in the imagination scenes of endless windswept sand dunes, perhaps a sense of desolation. In fact, as we shall see, the desert becomes a central experience in Christian spirituality, holding in itself the very secrets of prayer, a place of radical exposure to God. In this chapter, we shall encounter four deserts: the Negev, the Judean wilderness, the desert of the early Church and finally the desert-spaces we must open up in the spiritual landscape of our own lives. We shall first explore the significance of the desert-experience in the Bible, and then see how it becomes a formative, decisive metaphor of the Christian experience of

prayer in the early centuries of the Church. Finally, we shall engage with a seminal text in the tradition of the Desert Fathers, from Basil of Caesarea. As we look at the Bible stories, keep in mind these two questions: What sort of things happened in the desert? Can these sorts of things happen also in the experience and journey of prayer?

### **THREE DESERTS**

#### **The Negev desert**

The first desert is the desert of Abraham and the Exodus. This flat sandy desert region is found between the Mediterranean and the Dead Sea valley. Narrowing toward the south, it becomes increasingly arid and breaks into dramatic sandstone hills. Dusty, brown mountains rise amidst a landscape of dirt, rocks, deep canyons and mysterious craters. Hidden in these hills today are Israel's' major military installations and her nuclear arsenal. The silence of this desert is shattered from time-to-time as bomber jets screech overhead.

Abraham was invited by God to step into this desert and so begin an awesome adventure with God. When he was seventy-five years old, God said to him, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you' (Genesis 12:1). He was summoned to leave behind all his securities and familiar landmarks, and venture forth into the Negev desert. He became a pilgrim and a pioneer. The desert for Abraham represented a call to relinquish control over his own destiny, to step out in trust and discover a radical dependence on God alone. His faith is celebrated in the Letter to the Hebrews: 'He set out, not knowing where he was going...living in tents...he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God' (11:8-10). For Abraham, the desert was a call to quit his comfort zone and to look expectantly to God.

#### **The Sinai Desert**

After the Exodus event, Moses found himself in the Sinai desert as he led the people of Israel towards freedom. They found the desert to be a place where they had to grapple with physical foes. It was a place of skirmishes, battles and victories. But it was also, for the Israelites, a place where they had to face the enemy within - doubt, impatience, the rebellion of their hearts. The

desert was a time of grumbling and complaint, and God cries out to them, 'O that today you would listen to my voice!' (Ps. 95:7).

Why was it that, according to the Biblical perspective, the journey lasted forty years and not forty days? Perhaps it was because God had some important, crucial things to teach them. First, the people discovered themselves (Exodus 19:1–8). They gained a new sense of identity and purpose. They got a sense of their dignity and destiny. They realised that they were no longer slaves but priests in God's eyes. They went from being nobodies to being God's cherished people. They discovered a sense of peoplehood and they realised that God had plans for them. Second, they discovered the living God in a new way (Exodus 19:16–20). In the theophany and revelation of Sinai, they encountered God and his divine will, represented in the Ten Commandments. In the desert they experienced the deliverance and providence of God. The desert was, for Moses and his people, a place of life-changing discovery. In the desert, the people came to realize that God had a destiny for them, a unique vocation.

Elijah also found himself in the Negev and on Sinai. For him it was a desert of despair and burnout, where he collapsed exhausted after fleeing the wicked queen Jezebel (1 Kings 19). All his stresses were catching up with him, but God sent him further across the desert to the remote mountain of Horeb. There he found God in the 'sound of sheer silence.' There God ministered to his deepest wounds. There God restored him. There God gave him a new sense of direction and replaced his frantic chaos with a clear set of priorities.

### **The Judean desert**

Judean desert stretches east from the central highlands towards the fault-line scarp of the Great Rift Valley. It is a windswept, rocky and rugged wilderness. Mountains, cliffs, and chalk hills tower above deeply-incised canyons. The chiselled ravines are parchingly dry for much of the year, but in winter, rains from Jerusalem pour through them in torrents forceful enough to move great boulders, which litter the riverbed. Acacia and juniper trees cling to the cliffs, while hawks circle overhead, Bedouin's goats picking their

way precariously over the rocks. The Judean desert is a place of paradox: rugged grandeur, raw splendour, untameable beauty, threatening yet inviting, affirming yet disturbing, a place of life and death. It was at the edge of these very hills that the Qumran community established itself about 100BC: later producing the *Dead Sea Scrolls*, they sought to model an alternative apocalyptic community awaiting the Redeemer. The desert has always attracted those on the social margin: fugitives, solitaries, outlaws, hermits....

## JESUS & THE EARLY CHURCH

### John and Jesus in the Desert

As we turn to the New Testament, we discover that the Gospel actually begins in this very desert of human need: 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah: "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way: the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord!" ' (Mark 1:1,2). John the Baptist appears and a voice echoes among the rocks and waste-places: 'Turn back to God!' The desert, symbolic of man's emptiness, becomes the place of salvation, the place of transformation, through John's call to *metanoia*, repentance, a total re-orientation of human lives towards God.

Jesus thus begins his ministry in the desert. After his baptism, he is driven by the Spirit into the inner desert. He discovers it to be a place of angels and demons, as Mark puts it succinctly: 'He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him' (Mark 1:13). Jesus experiences the desert as a place of conflict, in which he decisively battles with shortcuts to prestige, pride and power. But, most of all, it was the place where he learns to discern the Father's voice, and discovers the priorities for his ensuing ministry. Here he learns what was to become the secret of his ministry: 'Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own but only what he sees his Father doing...The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing' (John 5:19,20). In his desert-prayer, Jesus glimpses the divine imperatives that will guide him in the days ahead. Amidst the rocks he clarifies his personal mission, and sees what was important, and what was not. Amidst the rocks, Jesus comes to

understand his vocation clearly: the experience crystallizes his sense of direction, his very purpose.

### **The Desert in the Early Church**

When the Emperor Constantine, in 313, proclaimed religious freedom throughout the Roman Empire for Christians, everything changed for the Church: the deserts beckoned once more. And when in 380, the Emperor Theodosius declared Christianity to be the state religion throughout the whole of the empire, Christendom was born, and the call of the desert became louder and irresistible. For after the end of the persecutions, nominalism and mediocrity crept into the Church, for now it was so easy to be a Christian – in fact, everyone was a Christian – of sorts. But to some it seemed that the standards of discipleship were being watered down, and only a superficial commitment to Christ was needed. Seeking to rediscover a radical Christianity, first tens, then hundreds, then thousands went to the desert. Seeking a more challenging discipleship, they created settlements in the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Asia Minor. The red martyrdom of shedding blood was over – this was the ‘white martyrdom’ in which Christians sought to die to the self and allow the Risen Christ to live in them. They went into the desert to discover an authentic spirituality: whether living alone as hermits or together in community, these men and women pursued the same aim – to come face-to-face– with God.

In the Byzantine period, the Judean wilderness was flooded with monks seeking seclusion. The title of Derwas Chitty's book sums up the phenomenon: *The Desert a City*. At the height of the Byzantine period in the sixth century A.D., there were seventy monasteries in the Judean desert. Today one can visit seven living monasteries. In the narrow ravine of the Wadi Faran, in the desert east of Jerusalem, we find the very first Judean monastery, founded in 275 by St Chariton. Today, a sole Russian monk occupies this cave-complex, the silence broken only by the babble of the nearby spring and by birdsong echoing amidst the sheer white cliffs. The Greek Orthodox monastic village of Mar Saba, dating from the fifth century and one of the oldest continually-occupied monasteries in the world, has grown barnacle-like on the cliffs above the Kidron valley. Also near Bethlehem, are the fortress-monasteries of St Theodosius and St Elias. In the depths of the Wadi Kelt a small community resides at St George of Kobiza,

while clinging precariously to the precipitous cliffs above Jericho is the Monastery of the Temptation of Christ. Near the Jordan River, five miles north of the Dead Sea, lies the Greek Orthodox monastery of St Gerasimus. There are also ruins to be discovered: one can visit substantial remnants of the monastery of St Euthymius (377–473) who established the pattern for Palestinian monasticism by insisting that those who desired the eremitical (solitary) life were first trained in the cenobitic community. The remnants of one monastery are to be found in the scary Wadi Og. In his sixth century account of the discovery of this site as a suitable place of prayer and retreat by Theoctistus and Euthymius, Cyril of Scythopolis gives us a vivid sense of the topography:

As they passed through the desert they came to a terrifying gorge, extremely steep and impassable. On seeing the place and going round the cliffs above it they found, as if guided by God, a huge and marvellous cave in the northern cliff of the gorge. Not without danger they made the steep ascent and just managed to climb up to it. Overjoyed as if the cave had been prepared for them by God, they made it their home.<sup>21</sup>

## THE DESERT & DISCIPLESHIP: FOUR INVITATIONS

Basil of Caesarea (330–379) played a vital role in helping to bring the vision of desert monasticism to the wider world. He visited the monastic settlements of Palestine, Syria and Egypt in order to discover their secret. On his return to Cappadocia he embodied his insights in his Rule which to this day is central to eastern monasticism, while Benedict acknowledges his debt to Basil in his own Rule which became the basis of western monasticism. In his letter to his friend Gregory Nazianzus, written to persuade him to come and join the retreat at Pontus, Basil explores four aspects of the call of the desert.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> R. M. Rice (tr.), *Lives of the Monks of Palestine by Cyril of Scythopolis* (Cistercian Publicans, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1991), p. 11

<sup>22</sup> All the quotations from Basil are from 'Letter 2' in G. Barrois (tr.), *The Fathers Speak* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, New York, 1986)

**First, the desert calls us to stillness and silence.** Basil writes: ‘One should aspire at keeping the mind in quietude [*hesychia*]...’ The Desert Fathers echo this theme. The story is told:

Abba Macarius the Great said to the brothers at Scetis, when he dismissed the assembly, ‘Flee, my brothers.’ One of the old men asked him, ‘Where could we flee to beyond this desert?’ He put his finger on his lips and said, ‘Flee that,’ and he went into his cell, shut the door and sat down.<sup>23</sup>

**Secondly, the desert calls us to solitude.** Basil explains: ‘The solitude [*eremia*] offers a very great advantage for our task of prayer. Let us for a season be free from the commerce of men, so that nothing may come from without and break the continuity of the *ascesis*’ [training or discipline]. There is a place in discipleship for getting off the treadmill of work and activity, saying goodbye to the clamour of things in the world forever competing for our attention, in order that, for a while at least, we may become focussed on God and utterly attentive to him.

**Thirdly, the desert calls us to detachment.** Basil writes: ‘Now this withdrawal [*anachoresis*, retreat] does not mean that we should leave the world bodily, but rather break loose from the ties of ‘sympathy’ of the soul with the body.’ Basil is extolling the virtues of making a retreat from activity, for a few minutes, or hours, or days. He says that, for a season, we have to cut our ties, loosen our grip and grasp on activities, let go of our attachments and of our worries. This is so we can become wholly available to God in prayer.

**Fourthly, the desert calls us to receptivity.** The most important thing, says Basil, is that we are ‘making ready to receive in our heart the imprint of divine teaching...beautiful is the prayer that impresses into the mind a clear notion of God.’ For Basil and the Desert Fathers and Mothers, the overriding

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<sup>23</sup> B. Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (A.R.Mowbray, Oxford, 1975), p.131

aim is to learning to listen out for the whisper of God's voice and to discern his will and guidance.

### Recent writers

Modern writers point out that at the heart of the experience of the Desert Fathers was the quest for inner and outer transformation. Thomas Merton puts it:

What the Fathers sought most of all was their own true self, in Christ. And in order to do this, they had to reject completely the false, formal self, fabricated under social compulsion in 'the world.' A life of work and prayer enabled the old superficial self to be purged away and permitted the gradual emergence of the true, secret self in which the Believer and Christ were 'one spirit.'<sup>24</sup>

Henri Nouwen echoes this view:

Solitude is not a private therapeutic place. Rather, it is the place of conversion, the place where the old self dies and the new self is born...Solitude is the place where Christ remodels us in his own image and frees us from the victimizing compulsions of the world. Solitude is the place of our salvation.<sup>25</sup>

### FOUR CHALLENGES FROM THE DESERT

The physical desert, into which the heroes of the Old Testament ventured, and which was so vital to Jesus and the early Church, poses crucial questions to us today.

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<sup>24</sup> T. Merton, *the Wisdom of the Desert* (Shambhala, Boston & London, 1960), p. 4, 7

<sup>25</sup> H. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (DLT, London, 1987), p 27, 32

## **Dare you open up a space for God in your life?**

The physical desert is a place of exposure to sun and wind, where there is no hiding place. It calls us to seek a spiritual state or condition in which we become naked before God, exposing heart and mind to the wind of his Spirit and the warmth of his love. The desert is a place of persistent erosion, where wind and even water wear down the resistance of stubborn rocks and refashion their shapes. There are unremitting processes of disintegration at work in the desert landscape, as well as processes of formation and building up. So too, in prayer we must learn to become susceptible to God and open to his ever-creative remoulding. In prayer, our normal guards need to melt away so that God is allowed to reshape our life and our priorities. As there is an immediacy in the desert, where all props are gone and only essential things matter, so in prayer masks drop off. In prayer we risk facing up in utter honesty to the realities of our lives. From his fourth-century monastery at Bethlehem, Jerome put it: 'The desert loves to strip bear.'<sup>26</sup>

## **Dare you thirst for more of God in prayer?**

The desert speaks powerfully of our spiritual poverty. It reminds us to confront the aridity of our lives, and to recognize where there might be signs of emptiness. As Macarius wrote: 'We have an insatiable longing for the Spirit, to shine out – the more spiritual gifts we enjoy, the more insatiable is the heavenly desire in our hearts, the more hungry and thirsty we are for more grace.'<sup>27</sup> Thus the desert of prayer becomes a place of deep renewal and experience of the Holy Spirit. Isaiah the prophet sees the desert as a symbol of humanity's need – a natural analogy for our need of God. The desert represents spiritual poverty and human thirst for the divine:

For I will pour water on the thirsty land,

And streams on the dry ground.

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<sup>26</sup> *Letter to Heliodorus*

<sup>27</sup> G.A.Maloney, *Intoxicated with God: the Fifty Spiritual Homilies of Macarius* (Dimension Books, New Jersey, 1978), p.33

I will pour my Spirit upon your descendents,

And my blessing on your offspring.

(Isaiah 44:3; c.f. 35:1–10; 41:17–20).

### **Dare you embrace prayer itself as pilgrimage and exploration?**

We have seen how the desert was a place of pilgrimage and discovery in the Scriptures. This invites us to consider the experience of prayer itself as a terrain to be explored, a place of mystery in which we can find out new things about ourselves and about God. Prayer is a quest or search in the holy space which spans ultimacy and intimacy, the discovery of God as Source and as *Abba*. Silences can open up for us desert-like spaces where we find ourselves to be learners of God. The desert rouses us to explore more deeply the mystery of God and the mystery of our self. It attests that we are called to be explorers of the inner space.

### **Dare you break the silence?**

As Ecclesiastes (3:7) reminds us: 'There is time to keep silence and a time to speak.' If in the silence we clarify our priorities as did Jesus and listen for the Father's voice, we are also being equipped for those times when we need to break the silence. While today a deep silence lingers amidst the rocks of the Judean desert, sometimes conflicting sounds can be heard: howling winds funnelled down the gullies; the timeless flute and call of the Bedouin shepherd-boy as he minds flocks of goats and sheep. The night air is pierced by the wailing of jackals and the laughter of hyenas. By day the jarring, hammering sound of rock-breaking machinery and earth-moving equipment arises from construction sites, where new Jewish settlements turn the desert, once again, into a city. This reminds us: there are times when a silence *should* be ended. There are times when we need the courage and passion of John the Baptist to be 'a voice in the wilderness' and speak out a prophetic word of encouragement or critique in relation to society around us.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

*1 How helpful do you find the description of prayer as 'a terrain to be explored'?*

*2 To what extent do you find the desert a positive image of spirituality?*

*3 How far do you find that physical landscapes mirror the interior life of the human spirit?*

*4 Can you identify any ways in which you sense you should 'break the silence' – where a prophetic word of critique or encouragement needs to be spoken out?*

## A READING FROM BASIL THE GREAT

Basil the Great, the brother of Gregory of Nyssa, became a monk in Syria and Egypt, and as Bishop of Caesarea organised monastic life in Cappadocia. His *Rule* remains a foundational document for eastern monasticism to this day.

...One should aspire at keeping the mind in quietude. The eye that wanders continually around, now sideways, now up and down, is unable to see distinctly what lies under it; it ought rather to apply itself firmly to the visible object if it aims at a clear vision. Likewise, the spirit of man, if it is dragged about by the world's thousand cares, has no way to attain a clear vision of the truth...Each day arrives, each in its own way obscuring the mind; and the nights, taking over the cares of the day, deceive the soul with obnoxious phantasms. There is only one escape: withdraw from the world altogether. Now this withdrawal does not mean that we should leave the world bodily, but rather break loose from the ties of "sympathy" of the soul with the body. This means to be without a city, without a house, without anything of our own, without property, without possessions, without resources, without affairs, without contacts, without being taught by men, but making ready to receive in our heart the imprint of divine teaching...The solitude offers a very great advantage for our task... Let therefore the site of the monastery be most like our place here [Annis], free from the commerce of men, so that nothing may come from without and break the continuity of the "askesis", for a pious "askesis" nurtures the soul with divine thoughts. Is there a greater happiness than to imitate on earth the choir of angels? At daybreak,

to get up at once for prayer and honour the Creator with hymns and canticles. Then, when the sun shines with its pure light, to rush to work, to be accompanied everywhere with prayer and, so to speak, to season our labour with the salt of hymns; to establish the soul in joy and drive out sadness is the gift and the comfort of the hymns. Quietude is therefore the principle of purification of the soul, when the tongue does not speak the words of men, when the eyes do not turn all around to behold the complexion and the proportion of bodies, when the hearing does not loosen the spirit with sweet tunes composed for pleasure, or with jokes or buffoon cries most apt to unnerve the strength of the soul...

The high road leading to the discovery of duty is the study of inspired Scriptures. In them are found rules of action, and the lives of the blessed which the Scriptures have transmitted to us are like living images of the godly life set before us that we may imitate their good works.

... Prayers succeeding to lecture rejuvenate and invigorate the soul, which is moved toward God by desire, for beautiful is the prayer that impresses into the mind a clear notion of God. This is properly the “inhabitation” of God, to have God seated in oneself through memory. Thus we become a temple of God, when earthly cares do not interrupt the continuity of memory, when the mind is not disturbed by unforeseen passions and when, fleeing from all things, the friend of God withdraws unto God, drives out all incitements to evil, and holds fast to those practices that lead to virtue.

The extract comes from Letter 2 of St Basil to Gregory of Nazianzus trans, Georges Barrios in *The Fathers Speak* (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, New York, 1986).

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER WITH BASIL

1. Basil begins by talking about the need for quietude, focus and single-mindedness “*to attain a clear vision of the truth*”. How do you disengage from the pressures of the day when you enter prayer? How do you deal with distractions in prayer? Do you find a visual focus helpful or do you prefer to “shut down” your senses?

2. What led the Desert Fathers to go to the wilderness? What place can there be for *withdrawal* in today's spirituality? Share experiences of retreats, quiet days, prayer walks. What is your experience of solitude?

3. Basil writes "*break free from the ties of 'sympathy' of the soul with the body*". Is this distinction between soul and body helpful – or does such a dualism undermine a more holistic approach to life? Are there "*ties of sympathy*" that we need to break free from? What place is there for renunciation in today's discipleship?

4. " '*Askesis* ' nurtures the soul with divine thoughts". The word *askesis* means literally 'training' or 'exercise' and gives rise to 'asceticism'. The picture is that of a spiritual athlete (look up 1 Corinthians 9: 24– 27). What place is there today for spiritual disciplines like fasting?

5. The aim of *askesis* is to become more fully the "*temple and inhabitation of God*". Look up the scriptural basis for this metaphor in 1 Corinthians 3:16,17; 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1. Do these texts ask us to separate from the world?

## PRAYER EXERCISE

### *Either*

Place stones in a circular tray with a central candle and dim the lights for an image of the desert. Read slowly Mark 1:12–13 (Jesus in the wilderness) and Mark 6:30–32 (his invitation to the disciples). In the stillness take stock of how much *quietude* there is in your life. Ask Christ to show you where you can create deserts or quiet spaces in your daily and weekly routine. End by praying together Psalm 131.

### *Or*

Perhaps using the same initial focus, try a simple awareness exercise. Take time to relax. Listen to the different sounds outside. Then listen to yourself breathing: hear your breath! Then listen for God's "still, small voice of calm". Repeat slowly "Speak Lord, your servant is listening". Welcome him as the Lord coming to his temple. Close the exercise by saying the Lord's Prayer slowly. If in a group, share experiences afterwards.

## FOR FURTHER READING

D. Chitty, *The Desert A City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism Under the Christian Empire* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, New York, 1997)

B. C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998)

H. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: desert spirituality and contemporary ministry* (Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1987)

A.D.Mayes, *Holy Land? Challenging Questions From the Biblical Landscape* (SPCK, London, 2011)

....*Beyond the Edge: spiritual transitions for adventurous souls* (SPCK, London, 2013)

B. Ward, *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers* (SLG Press, Oxford, 1986)

## **UNIT 3 SPIRITUALITY OF ICONS**

### **AIMS OF THIS UNIT**

1 We begin by thinking about the significance of 'images' & the origins of icons

2 As we consider different responses of resistance and welcome to icons, we engage with two important defences of their use

3 We consider six key features of icons

4 We engage with three famous icons and allow them to lead us into refecton & prayer

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Image-making**

We live in a visual age. Image is everything. The Greek word for image in the NT is icon.

We are image –conscious. We are image–makers in many different senses. We develop our own image. We practise imagination – which literally means developing images or icons.

Icons in Christian spirituality are windows of heaven, doors of perception. They invite you to see things differently, to glimpse divine mysteries. They summon you to contemplation.

## Origins

We don't know for sure when icons were first made, but in the background are two trends:

First, there are the portrait paintings – upright and portable – from the Nile Valley. These developed from Egyptian mummy painting. They were often of the departed. They spoke of both presence and absence. Like a photo we might keep of a departed loved one today, these paintings evoked the presence of the person, but were evidently not the person – a powerful representation, none the less. Icons too are evocative and suggestive.

Second, in the background is the early Christian paintings in the Catacombs, dating from the second and third centuries. Christ the Good Shepherd was often depicted as a youthful, beardless Saviour. These are early examples of the desire to depict the divine in art.

There emerged two groups.

First, the *iconophiles* – the ones who loved icons. They pointed out that God himself was an icon–maker, or image–maker. In Genesis 1.26 we read: ‘ God created man in his own image: in the image of God he created him.’ In the NT Jesus is described as the icon of God; ‘He is the image of the invisible God’ (Col.1.15).

A second group were the *iconoclasts*, who destroyed icons. They pointed out that one of the Ten Commandments stated: 'Thou shalt not make a graven image'. So they smashed the icons. (Something similar went on in the English Reformation: the protestant/ puritan destruction of statues in parish churches and the whitewashing-out of art on the walls of our churches).

*Q1 Some people say 'I do not like icons'. Do we need to like them? Is it the function of icons to be liked - or to disturb and inspire? What is your first reaction to them?*

## TWO ATTACKS AND THE DEFENCE OF ICONS

The first period was 717–741. Pope Leo III called them idols and led a campaign against icons. This was the period of the rise of Islam, which prohibited images. It was felt that icons were a barrier to evangelization, and put people off from Christianity.

In this first period, the main defender of icons was John of Damascus (660–750). He said: God himself is the master icon-maker. God gets involved with matter, with material things, in 2 ways;

1. In the creation, he makes and shapes matter
2. In the Incarnation, The divine Word becomes flesh. God takes on materiality. God is no longer pure spirit – he now has a physical body, born of Mary. John's great saying is:  
'I do not worship matter (the paint and wood of icons). I worship the Creator of matter, who became matter for my sake.'

This leads us to the heart of the Christian faith. The Christian religion is visceral, physical, visual, tactile and sensual, because we believe that the invisible God has made himself visible and tangible. In Jesus Christ we see God in a physical way – this is the outrageous idea of the incarnation: God himself has taken on flesh and blood. As the First Letter of John puts it:

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it (1 Jn 1:1, 2).

If we want to know what God is like, we take a long look at Jesus.

John of Damascus taught this at the Second Council of Nicaea in 787. He made a distinction between *latreia* – worship, which can only be given to God, not icons, and *proskunesis* – respect, veneration, which can be paid to icons.

### **A reading from St John of Damascus**

In former times God, who is without form or body, could never be depicted. But now, when God is seen in the flesh conversing with men, I make an image of the God whom I see. I do not worship matter; I worship the Creator of matter who became matter for my sake, who willed to take his abode in matter; who worked out my salvation through matter. Never will I cease honouring the matter which wrought my salvation! I honour it, but not as God. ...Because of this I salute all remaining matter with reverence, because God has filled it with his grace and power. Through it my salvation has come to me. Was not the thrice-happy and thrice-blessed wood of the cross matter? Was not the holy and exalted mountain of Calvary matter? What of the life-bearing rock, the holy and life-giving tomb, the fountain of our resurrection, was it not matter? Is not the ink in the most holy Gospel-book matter? Is not the life-giving altar made of matter? From it we receive the bread of life!...Is not the Body and Blood of our Lord matter? Either do away with the honour and veneration these things deserve, or accept the tradition of the Church and the veneration of images.

We use all our senses to produce worthy images of him, and we sanctify the noblest of the senses, which is that of sight. For just as words edify the ear, so also the image stimulates the eye. What the book is to the literate, to the

image is to the illiterate. Just as words speak to the ear, so the image speaks to the sight; it brings us understanding. For this reason God ordered the ark [of the covenant] to be constructed of wood which would not decay, and to be gilded outside and in, and for the tablets [of stone] to be placed inside, with Aaron's staff and the golden urn containing the manna, in order to provide a remembrance of the past, and an image of the future. They were not placed aside in the meeting tent, but were brought forth in the sight of all the people, who gazed upon them and used them to offer praise and worship to God. Obviously they were not adored for their own sake, but through them the people were led to remember the wonders of old and to worship God, the worker of wonders. These were images serving as memorials; they were not divine, but led to the remembrance of the divine...

If you speak of pagan abuses, these abuses do not make our veneration of images loathsome. Blame the pagans, who made images into gods! Just because the pagans used them in a foul way, that is not reason to object to our pious practice.....

If we attempted to make an image of the invisible God, this would be sinful indeed. It is impossible to portray one who is without body: invisible, uncircumscribed, and without form. Again, if we made images of men and believed them to be gods, and adored them as if they were so, we would be truly impious. We do neither of these things. But we are not mistaken if we make the image of God incarnate, who was seen on earth in the flesh, associated with men, and in his unspeakable goodness assumed the nature, feeling, form, and colour of our flesh. For we yearn to see how he looked, as the apostle says, 'Now we see through a glass darkly.' Now the icon is also a dark glass, fashioned according to the limitations of our physical nature. Though the mind wear itself out with effort, it can never cast away its bodily nature.

D. Anderson (tr.), *St John of Damascus: on the divine Images - Three Apologies Against Those Who Attack the Divine Images* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, N. Y., 1980), pp. 23, 24, 26, 32, 52.

The second attack on icons was triggered by Emperor Leo V, and Armenian, in the ninth century. The defender of icons in this second period of iconoclasm was Theodore the Studite, a monk in Constantinople. In his book *On the Holy Icons* he said that just as the Council of Chalcedon in 451 had declared that Christ has two natures, human and divine, so icons have two corresponding aspects:

1. The wood and paint, the physical aspect, like the human side of Jesus
2. A divine aspect and inner meaning, as Jesus had

In this way, Theodore established the doctrinal basis for icons, and said that they were testimony to the Incarnation, the Word made flesh. This strong defence led to the 'Triumph of Orthodoxy', as it was called, in 843 and guaranteed the place of icons in the devotion of the eastern churches.

### **A Reading from Theodore the Studite**

'It is a degradation', the heretics say, 'and a humiliation, to depict Christ in material representations. It is better that he should remain in mental contemplation, as he is formed in us by the holy Spirit....For Scripture says, "What profit is an image when its maker has shaped it, a metal image, a teacher of lies?" '

Would you please stop ignorantly dragging out scriptural verses to use against us, taking the words spoken against the pagans in regard to the forms of idols, and misapplying them to the icon of Christ? For what person with any sense does not understand the difference between an idol and an icon? That the one is darkness, and the other light? That the one is deceptive, the other infallible? That the one belongs to polytheism, but the other is the clearest evidence of the divine economy?

The veneration of Christ is one and the same as that of his representation; and what Christ is called, his image is also named. For both are Christ....whatever is said concerning the prototype, the same may be said also concerning the copy? In the case of the prototype it is said properly, but in the case of the copy it is said figuratively...

The icon has its quality from painting with colours, perhaps, or assembling variegated stones, or the sculptor's art, or gold, or silver, or some other material delineation. It shares the name of its prototype, as it shares also the honour and veneration; but it has no part in the very nature of the prototype. Therefore, by whatever names Jesus Christ is called, his image is called by the same names. If we should say that Christ is 'the Lord of glory', in the same way his image is called 'the Lord of glory.' If we should say that Christ is 'the power of God' and 'the wisdom of God', likewise his image is called 'the power of God' and 'the wisdom of God'. If we should say that Christ is 'the Son of Man', likewise also his image is called 'the Son of Man.' Moreover when God the Word himself says, 'I am the Light of the World' his image may say the same by its inscription. Again, when Christ says, 'To me every knee shall bow, in heaven, and on earth and under the earth', his icon may also say this by inscription....And whatever names the inspired Scripture calls the Saviour, we must be able to call his icon by the same names.

C. P. Roth (tr.), *St Theodore the Studite: On the Holy Icons* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, N. Y., 1981), pp.26, 27, 51,52

*Q Has Theodore gone too far? Has he overstepped the mark?*

*Q Are your sympathies with the iconophiles or with the iconoclasts? Why?*

## SIX QUALITIES OF ICONS

1. They are a tool of prayer, not religious art to be admired
2. An icon is 'written' not painted. So it is 'read' not viewed.

3. Through line and colour the iconographer seeks to convey a sense of awe and mystery and stimulate prayer. Colours are significant: blue= heaven; green= earth; red= human flesh; purple= power; white= purity, light; gold= divine energy, the glory of God.
4. An icon is a work of tradition, it is not an individualistic creation. It is not signed by the 'artist' (or 'writer'). The iconographer avoids innovations. Rules and traditions are passed on. Every brush stroke is attended by a prayer – indeed there are manuals to guide this.
5. We don't see emotions in the faces in an icon as much as virtues– qualities like patience, compassion, love.
6. Where in western art a religious picture might become a sentimental object, in the East its purpose is to convey the mystery and majesty of Christ.

## **PRAYING WITH ICONS**

The Victorians taught us 'hand together, eyes closed.' The Orthodox would say the opposite: hands open, and eyes open! Icons encourage us to use our body in prayer. We are not disembodied spirits. Spirituality can encompass physicality. God has given us senses! Prayer is a matter of both head and heart. Actions speak louder than words: a kiss of devotion placed on an icon says everything.

Icons are used both at home and in church. In Orthodox homes, the icon corner in the main room is a constant reminder of the presence of God and the saints. As one steps into an Orthodox church one is aware of the ancient words 'this the house of God, this is the gate of heaven'. In the Russian Chronicles we read how in the tenth century Vladimir, Prince of Kiev, was wondering what religion should be appropriate for the Russian people. He sent envoys to survey the religious landscape across the known world. They reported back to him: Islam was found to be too demanding and God too remote. Judaism was felt to be too tribal. Western Christianity, with its Latin tongue, was deemed too complicated.

But when the envoys came back from their visit to Constantinople, having encountered the liturgy and icons of the great Church of Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) they declared: 'we did not know whether we were in earth or in heaven'. So, in 989, Vladimir made his choice, and Russia became an Orthodox country: mass baptism followed and in due course, devotion to icons became a key feature of the culture.

### **Prayer Exercise: Engaging with Three icons**

#### **Christ of Sinai**

<http://www.katapi.org.uk/Art/Icon-ChristPantocrator.html>

This is one of the earliest icons. Dating from the sixth century, it is an encaustic icon, using wax. It remains at St Catherine's Monastery, Mount Sinai. It expresses well the mystery of icons and the way they challenge perceptions.

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#### ***Q what do you notice about it?***

It is asymmetrical. Christ's right eye (on our left) is clear and looks straight into our soul. It seems demanding, even judging perhaps.

Christ's left eye is weepy – there is a tear running down the face. It speaks of his compassion and solidarity with us.

This icon expresses the paradoxes of the Christian faith; it holds together in a unity what might otherwise seem contradictions: 'meekness and majesty, manhood and deity'. The icon begins to hold up a mirror to us, as we reflect on the paradoxes of our own lives. It calls us to contemplative silence and wonderment.

#### **Rublev's Icon of the Trinity**

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy\\_Trinity\\_Icon#mediaviewer/File:Andrej\\_Rubl%C3%ABv\\_001.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_Trinity_Icon#mediaviewer/File:Andrej_Rubl%C3%ABv_001.jpg)

It was painted – or written – in 1425 by Andrei Rublev. It depicts the story of Abraham entertaining three angels (Genesis 18). This becomes a meditation on the Holy Trinity.

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Notice:

- Three slender angels, in conversation, in relationship
- The table, and the chalice on it
- Colours: blue of heaven/ divinity. Greens – different types of revelation. Gold.
- The circular movement. It starts at the foot of the right hand angel. Expresses the unity and equality of the Trinity.
- The vertical lines, lead from earth to heaven. Each angel bears a slender sceptre:

The Father – points to the Tree of Life, the creation, Eden; this also evokes the Three of the Cross.

The Son – points to the city

The Spirit – points to the mountain of revelation.

Notice above all the gap at the front of the table. To this meal of profound communion and unity we are summoned. The original icon – what size do you think it is? Now in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, it measures six foot square. You stand in the middle. The gap is the space for you. The worshipper comes into the meal, and joins the dance of the Trinity. The gap is actually about 2 foot wide. Space for each person! The icon beckons us: come, and take the Cup!

**Icon of Our Lady of Vladimir**

<http://www.pallasweb.com/ikonsassets/p/big/vladimir.jpg>

Also known as Our lady of Perpetual Succour. Written in the 12<sup>th</sup> century at Constantinople, later moved to Moscow and Kiev.

What do you notice?

- Eyes of Jesus– Adoring eyes of Jesus on his Mother, and his hand around her neck and breast
- Eyes of Mary – open in wonder: contemplation or asking – looking into far distance, or looking at you? Inviting you to join the prayer, the embrace.
- Paradox – is she happy or sad? Is this tenderness or strength/ Do her eyes reveal a mother’s love or anxiety for her Child?

Here we see the icon as a mirror – it mirrors our own hopes and fears; it brings a transcendent dimension into our situation, it invites us to look with God’s eyes on the world

#### FOR FURTHER READING

K. Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1978)

J Baggley, *Doors of Perception: icons and their spiritual significance* (Mowbray, London, 1987)

.....*Icons: Reading Sacred Images* (Catholic Truth Society, London, 2007)

.....*Festival Icons for the Christian Year* (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, N.Y., 2009)

Icons can be obtained from [cenacle.co.uk](http://cenacle.co.uk);  
[conventofstelizabeth.org/byzicons](http://conventofstelizabeth.org/byzicons)

## UNIT 4 CELTIC SPIRITUALITY

### AIMS OF THIS UNIT

- 1 We gain a perspective on the history of the Celtic tradition
- 2 We identify major strands of early Celtic Christianity – based on Michael Mitton’s “Restoring the Woven Cord”
- 3 We encounter some Celtic ways of praying – and try them out
- 4 We conclude with a closer look at an example: St Patrick’s Breastplate

No doubt we all begin with a wide mix of knowledge and perceptions on the subject of Celtic spirituality and prayer. Many theologians and historians have reservations about the use of the term ‘Celtic Christianity’ or ‘Celtic Church’. What do we mean by those terms? It’s not easy to give clear and balanced view about the Celtic Church; written records are scarce – as much of what is available to us now was written long after the beginnings of early Celtic Christianity, and is open to interpretation.

A vast pool of literature is now available on the Celtic Tradition – so we need to be aware that factual history has become intertwined with folklore and conjecture – hence the danger of over-romanticism! <sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> This unit, up to St Patrick’s reading, is written by Sue Riddell & we are grateful to her for sharing this material

However what seems generally to be accepted is that Celtic Christians, living in the first centuries after Christ, developed a form of spirituality with a very distinctive flavour – described by Ian Bradley as “the early indigenous Christian communities of the British Isles”.

## 1 HISTORY

- **Origins** The pagan Celts occupied Central and Western Europe for many centuries before the time of Christ, but Roman troops eventually pushed them to the western fringes of the continent. They settled in Britain, Ireland and Gaul (France).
- It was among the Celtic peoples that Christianity first came to Britain. There is some evidence of a Christian presence; possibly even from the 1<sup>st</sup> Century...some Christians among Roman legions; tin traders (Joseph of Arimathea legend). 2<sup>nd</sup> Century writer Origen refers to Christians in Britain; 6<sup>th</sup> Century historian Gildas speaks of Britain receiving “Beacons of Light” in the reign of Tiberius, who died in AD37.
- After the Roman forces withdrew from Britain around the year 410, Christianity almost died out. Nevertheless, pockets of faith remained where the Romans had failed to occupy, i.e. Ireland, North England, Scotland, and Wales. However, Christ-like personalities established loving Christian communities to which multitudes responded.
- **The Celtic missions:** The story of the Celtic church in Britain really gets going with the missionaries Ninian & Columba in Scotland, David, Samson & Illtyd in Wales; Patrick & Brigid in Ireland; Aidan, Cuthbert & Hilda in England. The celtic fire was growing into a blaze: monastic groups began to spring up, with some evidence that they were inspired by the spirituality of the Desert fathers.
- A unique Church structure emerged: there were originally no towns, just nomadic settlements – hence the church became more monastic than diocesan, resulting in quite independent rules and liturgies.

- This indigenous expression of Christian life only one to exist until 6<sup>th</sup> Century. At the same time, pagan Anglo-Saxons (the English) colonised what is now England. In the year 631, St Aidan was sent from Iona to evangelise Anglo-Saxons from the island of Lindisfarne, on England's north-east coast. Lindisfarne missionaries won the hearts of the English and reached as far south as London. Much of Pre-Christian Celtic culture adapted easily to good things of gospel. *“The 6<sup>th</sup> Century Welsh bard, Taliesin...maintained that ‘Christ the Word was from the beginning our Teacher, and we never lost his teaching. Christianity was in Asia a new thing, but there was never a time when the Druids of Britain held not its doctrines.’ (Ian Bradley).*
- Pope Gregory commissioned Augustine with forty missionary monks to evangelise the pagan Angles and Saxons pouring into Britain, and, it seems to bring correction to the “wayward” Celtic tradition i.e. different date for Easter! The indigenous Celtic church looked toward the simplicity of the East – but conflict grew with the Roman church. This came to a head at the Synod of Whitby in 664, when the rules of the Roman mission were imposed upon the English, and later upon all Britain and Ireland. Anglo-Saxon Christian leaders, trained by Aidan’s mission (notably Cuthbert and Hilda), accepted the new framework, but maintained their Celtic spirituality for some time. However, by the 10<sup>th</sup> Century the Roman tradition had all but subsumed this indigenous church. Only on Iona, the Celtic monastic community established by Columba 700 years before, continued until the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, only finally to be dispersed with the building of a Benedictine Abbey.
- **The marginalization of the Celtic tradition:** Banished to the edges of British Christianity, the distinctiveness of the indigenous Celtic Church was sidelined – including its emphasis on the image of God at the heart of the human, and the essential goodness of Creation.
- The decline of indigenous Celtic communities was also hastened by relentless invasions of Vikings, Danes, and later, Normans. However there were pockets of resistance to the Roman mission – in Devon, Cornwall and Scotland, and particularly in Ireland. This period of resistance was marked by some of greatest creative achievements of

the Celtic tradition – the illuminated manuscripts, high-standing crosses, and intricate metalwork.

- The outward structure of the Celtic mission fragmented – but insights of Celtic spirituality stayed alive in Britain and Ireland through the poetry and prayers of the people – and a continuity of expression in arts and education. Celtic teachers became spokesmen for spiritual truths which had no formal church home – including John Scotus Eruigena, and many Irish teachers throughout Western Europe. The riches of spirituality were passed down the laity in oral form – especially in many prayers of daily life.
- After the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Reformation in Britain, the reciting of these prayers was discouraged, even banned – regarded as pantheistic and pagan in origin. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a combination of religious persecution and the Highland Clearances had resulted in a thorough fragmentation of Celtic culture – and a tragic loss of collective memory.
- **The recovery of the Celtic tradition:** We owe much to Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica* in Scotland, and Douglas Hyde's *Religious Songs of Connacht* in Ireland for the preservation of some of these prayers; yet by the 20<sup>th</sup> Century their living use had virtually disappeared.
- Nevertheless, these two men represent the beginnings of a revival in Celtic art and literature, and the 20<sup>th</sup> Century brought a growing toleration of the Celtic tradition, and an increasing depth of appreciation for its spiritual richness.
- In 1938, George McCleod, a Church of Scotland minister, rebuilt Iona's ancient abbey, fulfilling a prophecy of St Columba, and founded the modern Iona Community. Since the 1980s, Celtic-style books of prayers by David Adam, vicar of Lindisfarne, have become widely popular, as have a wave of books about Celtic Christianity, study courses, and Celtic interest networks.
- 24/7 prayer movement emerged out of a rediscovery of early Christian Celtic distinctiveness, as well as significant number of reconciliation initiatives.

## 2 STRANDS OF CELTIC SPIRITUALITY

(See *Restoring the Woven Cord* – Michael Mitton)

**Authenticity, simplicity and holiness:** The Celtic church had its faults, but its strength lay in the fact that it had never had much to do with powerful institutions, and formed its life and witness among the poor and insignificant. Both Celtic and Roman Christianity were strongly community based, and both managed effective mission bases; yet differences emerged in lifestyle. The Celtic clergy lived in simple dwellings, built simple wattle and daub churches, and lived in conspicuous poverty, practising humility. The Roman clergy lived well, paraded pomp, and built grand churches with dressed stone etc.

**Love of Scripture:** The Bible was the most influential book in the devotion of the Celtic church. Pre-Christian Celts showed little interest in literature and writing – hence the scarcity of recorded history. However the emerging Church broke with this tradition in its love for Bible, yet staying true to previous oral traditions – learning huge parts of scripture by heart. They had a balanced approach to and view of scripture – *“...they would have hated the scepticism of liberals but would have been very uncomfortable with the rigidity of the fundamentalists”*. (Michael Mitton) So – a balance of word and spirit. The Celtic love of the Bible *“sparked genius of poets, songwriters, artists”* the fruit of which emerged in Lindisfarne gospels, the Book of Kells and so on. Their love of culture, literature, and their commitment to learning preserved many treasures of history – hundreds of monks spent their lives copying out texts of antiquity.

**Children:** The Celtic church displayed a ready acceptance that the good things of God were for children too. They took seriously Jesus’ teaching about children and the kingdom of God. Young children lived in, and were schooled in the monasteries – accepted as fully part of worshipping

communities. Children were expected from an early age to encounter God in supernatural ways – they had visionary experiences, and moved in prophetic giftings. A number of stories have been handed down about these experiences – not to evoke sentimental “how sweet” reactions, but rather to emphasise the respect in which children were held. *“Their visionary experiences were not doubted or dismissed as childish fantasy, and their prophetic gifting was welcomed. The thought that God could work only through the learned and the articulate was abhorrent to the Celtic church.”* (Michael Mitton)

**Community:** A strong commitment to community was a natural consequence of pre-Christian Celtic life. Celtic tribes took responsibility for the sick and handicapped; women were more respected in Celtic society than in any of its European contemporaries. Hospitality was of prime importance, as was a sense of place, a sense of identity. In the Irish language “Who are you” was not merely inquiring after a person’s name – but meant “Of what people do you spring?” The individual’s position in society related to their ability and service to the community. Each person in a Celtic church community would be responsible to an “anamchara” – or “soul friend” – a non-hierarchical, non “status” support network which dispersed authority in the community away from a central figure – whether clergy or lay. Monasteries were often huge theocratic villages; often associated with a clan with the same kinship ties – along with slaves, freemen, celibate monks, married clergy, professed lay people, men and women living side by side. *“The dominant institution of Celtic Christianity was neither the parish church nor the cathedral, but the monastery, which sometimes began as a solitary hermit’s cell and often grew to become a combination of commune, retreat house, mission station, hotel, hospital, school, university, arts centre and powerhouse for local community – a source not just of spiritual energy but also of hospitality, learning and cultural enlightenment.”* (Michael Mitton, quoting Ian Bradley) Wherever they lived they saw Christ in their neighbour and made community with them.

**Creativity:** Pre-Christian Celtic society contained six basic social classes. The fifth class, second to the Chieftains, grouped druids, lawyers, doctors – and also, significantly, bards, poets, storytellers and minstrels – a well trained, highly regarded body of people. So Celtic peoples coming to Christ would have delighted in finding a faith so filled with creative life, poetry, storytelling, music and art – all excellent for teaching profound truths in ways that would not only feed the mind, but would enlighten the spirit and warm the heart. The visual arts (i.e. illustrated manuscripts as in Book of Kells and Lindisfarne Gospels) were often only entrusted to mature Christians – who spent huge amounts of time and devotion. Celts loved intricate patterns. Standing crosses were covered with pictures and interwoven designs, full of vitality and meaning; many depicting biblical stories, or the lives of the saints – and serving as lively evangelistic tracts! Celtic writers talked about worshipping God with the "five stringed harp" – meaning all five senses.

**Death and the Dead:** The Druid-led religion of the Celts had evolved doctrine of immortality; death was the passage of the soul into the next, much better version of this world. Therefore the Celtic Church felt at ease with an understanding of death and the dead – and believed those in heaven were free to pray for the church in this world, and on occasions to visit with a message. *“For the Celtic Church it was a very thin line that divides the saints triumphant from us on earth. Those who witnessed before us and are received up into glory are very much alive. They are not men and women of the past, but sons and daughters of God, who are alive now and in the fullness of eternal life.”* (Michael Mitton) Bede’s “Life of Cuthbert” gave a number of well-documented stories about healings happening at Cuthbert’s tomb. The Celts had real sense of place, so when holy people died, the places of burial became in a real sense somewhere which marked a special work of God. Thus one of a number of pre-Christian beliefs about death

was redeemed – as the Celtic church took hold of a sharp awareness of the dead and transformed it into something consistent with the Easter faith it proclaimed.

**Evangelism:** The Celtic way of mission was to plant the experience of Christ within the natural patterns of the people. Celtic missionaries had a gentle and sensitive approach – seeking to live alongside the people, to understand and respect their beliefs, not to dominate or culturally condition. They were not infected by depressing European doctrines about the loathsomeness of humanity – but had an optimistic view of human beings. Clear about the reality of human sin, not reticent in teaching about hell, yet holding a positive view of human nature, the Celtic church saw the inherent goodness in God’s creation. The two very much connected – they saw that God’s created order was damaged, but not totally sick – therefore individuals, the land they lived on, the communities that were part of and the way they lived were to be respected. This was a very different approach to that of later missionaries, who tried to impose their own Western values, in order to secure a cultural as well as a religious conversion of indigenous peoples.

Another important feature of their mission was an understanding of power. Many accounts have survived which recorded the miraculous in the context of mission – closely linked with personal holiness and remarkable humility. *“By its humility and authenticity, the church showed that it was not interested in using this power for dominance, but genuinely to demonstrate that the love of God could break in powerfully on people’s lives to rescue, heal and deliver them.”* (Michael Mitton)

Another feature marked a joyful abandonment to the unknownness of mission. Few Celtic gospel missions were formally planned – a group would usually set off, asking God to direct their steps, being open to whatever, or whoever came across their path. These wandering missionaries became known as peregrinatio, perpetual wanderers. St. Brendan’s prayer... “Shall I abandon, O King of Mysteries, the soft comforts of home?”

**Healing and miracles:** The Celtic church felt at ease with a God who intervened miraculously in life. There was a high expectation that holy people would be ready vehicles through which God could work powerfully. Well documented accounts of miracles and healings abound in the writings of St. Bede. The miraculous closely linked with holiness and prayer. Ministry of healing was especially appropriate among the poor, where the Celtic church could always be found, and where they delighted to proclaim, by words and works, God's loving mercy. However, they also had a holistic approach – and would have recognised the healing of God in the work of the doctor as much as in supernatural healings – and saw no distinction. There was also no expectation that all would be healed and delivered miraculously – despite many signs of the miraculous, illness was accepted in everyday experience.

**Ministry of Women:** Celtic society gave women equal status and social prominence – a fundamental difference from other European societies. It was inevitable that the emerging Christian Celtic church would take this positive attitude to women in their communities...hence women like Brigid, Hilda, Ebba, and Ethelburga exercised leadership roles, though not priestly roles. Hilda, a disciple of Aidan, established several monasteries, including Whitby. *“We find, then, in the Celtic church an impressive acceptance of the feminine. It is desperately sad to recognise how this was lost after the Synod of Whitby. Had we been allowed to pursue the natural faith that the Spirit of God first breathed upon this land, which contained a far more just attitude to women than was experienced in the church elsewhere, then our shameful history of repression of women may not have developed and there would have been no need for the over-reaction of those extreme forms of feminism that are for some the only way they know how to cry for justice.”* Michael Mitton.

**Prayer:** The whole stress of Celtic Christianity was on the immanence – the felt, conscious, almost tangible experience of God in and through all strands of life, interwoven throughout the cosmos. An awareness of Christ as a companion next to you, a guest in your house, a physical presence in your life – and the presence of God found in the physical elements of earth, rock and water, in plants, trees and animals, and in the wayward forces of wind and storm. Therefore an all-bracing, all-encompassing prayer life emerged in the Celtic Church – of which several main strands seem to have informed and undergirded their prayer:

- A deep, living sense of God’s presence in and through all things
- An instinctive reverence for, and affinity with nature
- A deeply intuitive awareness of the spiritual dimension

**Prophecy:** The Celtic church, unencumbered with burdens of rationalism, closely in touch with creation, gave a high value to the imagination. In a culture where many were illiterate, they were a people who were intuitively very aware, not only seeing and perceiving, but also hearing all kinds of signals from heaven. Cuthbert, whose whole ministry was seeped in prophetic visionary activity – was said to see with the “eye of the eagle” – the traditional symbol for John’s gospel; much admired by the Celtic church because it could fly higher than any other bird, and had the sharpest eyesight. Dreams too were a respected medium for God’s communication. An openness to the intuitive, an acceptance that God delighted to communicate with his people, meant that decision making processes relied more on humble, simple trust in the wisdom and revelation given intuitively, rather than by committees and structures.

**Spiritual Battle:** The world of demons and angels was very real to the Celtic church, which held the spiritual gift of discerning of spirits as not only useful, but vital for its life and ministry. Many stories of spiritual combat were recorded by St. Bede in “matter of fact” language. This kind of warfare

was seen as normal for those who wanted to follow Christ. Wilderness areas were seen as places of deep spiritual conflict – i.e. Farne Island, considered to be a dark and frightening place until Cuthbert cleansed it. Prayers of protection, like Patrick's Breastplate rejoice in the power of the Trinity to protect. The Celtic love for creation, perceptiveness, and an understanding of spirit realm produced a view of land which sees it as good, but which can also be contaminated – so land often cleansed, and blessed in prayer before monasteries and churches were established.

**Wild Goose – the Holy Spirit:** The Celtic church was very alert to the activity of the Spirit who was so involved in creation. They chose the symbol of the wild goose to represent the Spirit – studying this bird, seeing in it so much of the life and work of the Spirit. It became the inspiration for St. Brendan's Voyage – who sensed the unfurling wings of the Wild Goose, urging him to spread his own wings and travel to far-off lands, not only with a desire to spread the gospel, but with a mystical quest to seek glimpses of Paradise. Brendan set off with fourteen companions in a simple coracle into the Atlantic, allowing the wild wind of the Spirit to take them where it would. Travelling for several years, they came upon small island communities of monks, encountered icebergs and great whales, travelled vast distances – possibly discovering America eight centuries before Columbus. The Celtic peoples were natural travellers and explorers – but there was a real cost involved in pulling up roots and venturing out – a cost reflected in the use of the word "martyrdom". Three types of martyrdom were recognised by the Celtic church. These were red, green and white. "Red" martyrdom meant dying for the sake of Christ...which became a reality as Vikings invaded the "Bay of Martyrs" in Iona, when 68 monks slaughtered by Norse raiders in 806. Also "green" martyrdom, primarily to do with a lifestyle of confession, penance, and living life for Christ at home. "White" martyrdom meant leaving home and country through love of Christ – the giving up of normal security. The peregrini (celtic wanderers) came into this category.

For the Celtic church, the Spirit was the glorious gift of God who visits us intimately and powerfully. Patrick's "Confession" reveals the continuous activity of the Spirit, in which the gifts of 1 Corinthians 12 are very present – prophecy, wisdom, knowledge, discerning of spirits, faith – and healing and miracles. Bede records an account of Cuthbert, bringing the grace of the Holy Spirit in a large outdoor confirmation event – in which, such was the Spirit's presence that a young man with a wasting disease was healed. *"Once you received the Spirit in this way, you began a life of adventure open to the leading of the Wild Goose."* (Michael Mitton)

**Creation:** Celtic Christians saw a universe ablaze with God's glory, suffused with a presence that calls, nods and beckons – a creation personally united with its Creator in every atom and fibre. They loved the psalms – especially for their creation imagery – which held great appeal for Celts whose previously Druid-led pagan religion also had a very high regard for nature. Ian Finlay (Columba) *"The Celtic church grew among people who were not builders, who were not tempted to follow a tradition of containing their gods in temples, but felt closer to them where they felt the wind buffeting their faces, and saw the flash of white wings against the sky, and smelled the sun-warmed bark of trees."*

Their new faith enhanced the Celt's love for creation, and many Celtic communities were formed in wild and remote places – for here they could feel the power of the wind and the strength of the sea.

St. Brendan was an example of that ultimate and extreme prayer in creation itself: abandonment to the elements and weather – a complete immersing in nature, simply to experience God.

**Conclusion:** Leaving aside the ambiguities of scholarship and historical integrity – we are still left with some clear, vibrant features of a spiritual heritage which have come to us from those early Celtic Christians.

### **3 SOME WAYS OF PRAYING IN THE CELTIC TRADITION**

The Celtic church embraced prayer familiar to every tradition – all kinds – and at times aggressive (probably noisy!) battle prayer, engaging forces of darkness; but also knew the prayer of silence and stillness, the foundation of the contemplative life. Celtic prayer was deeply Trinitarian, and reflected the fusion of religion and life. Ascetic practice was common – hermits leading austere lives of fasting and contemplative prayer; as well as charismatic–style enthusiastic prayer. Cuthbert spent hours praying in the cold sea; Patrick prayed at night in the woods and mountains, and through snow, frost and rain. Prayers of protection emerged, like Patrick’s Breastplate – the *Lorica* – which rejoices in power of the Trinity to protect. The miraculous was closely linked with holiness and prayer. Prayer also could be quite physical – people would pray as they walked; crossing themselves; also drawing an imaginary circle around them in a prayer of protection.

#### **Caim: Prayers of Protection**

As Israelites poured out their sorrows, called on Lord for help through psalms – so Celtic Christians developed a range of prayers and rituals to invoke God’s protective power – many adapted from pagan charms/incantations. One such ritual, adapted from pre-Christian origins is the *caim*. To a Celtic Christian, a circle was a sacred space. It was a replica of the cosmos and symbolized the Celtic belief that time was circular rather than linear. God was the Creator and he inhabited the centre of the cosmos and time.

In times of danger, inhabitants of Outer Hebrides would draw a circle round themselves and their loved ones. Using the index finger of their right hand, they would point and turn round sun-wise while reciting a prayer such as:

*The Sacred Three*

*My fortress be*

*Encircling me*

*Come and be round*

*My hearth and my home*

David Adam (of Lindisfarne, a composer of beautiful modern encircling prayers, has written this of the caim:

*“This was no magic, it was no attempt to manipulate God. It was a reminder by action that we are always surrounded by God. He is our encompasser, our encircle. It is our wavering that has put us out of tune. This is a tuning in to the face that ‘in Him we live and move and have our being.’”*

Circle me, Lord. Keep protection near and danger afar.

Circle me, Lord. Keep light near and darkness afar.

Circle me, Lord. Keep peace within; keep evil out.

**Prayer Exercise:** Take a moment to think about those you have concern, care for. What is it you would ask God for them – what they need near, within; and what needs to be kept away, and without.

To pray the *caim*, or encircling prayer, extend your right index finger, and turn clockwise drawing a circle around yourself in the air. Use your imagination to see yourself and those you are praying for surrounded by the safety of the Father's care and protection.

**Circle** (*name*), Lord. **Keep** (*name the good you want revealed*) near and keep (*name the evil you want removed*) afar.

**Circle** (*name*), Lord. **Keep** comfort near and discouragement afar. **Keep** peace within and turmoil out.

**Circle** (*name*), Lord. **Keep** hope within and despair without.

*"Many sorrows come to the wicked, but unfailing love surrounds those who trust the Lord."* Psalm 32:10 (NLT)

### **Everyday Prayer** (*prayers of Presence*)

Much prayer was spontaneous, but in time, certain prayers became part of church and community ritual. Prayers for everything! All these were coming out of a deep sense of the presence of God – God here and now, close at hand, present in life and in work, immediate and accessible. Prayers for every situation encountered from dawn to dusk – the most humdrum and mundane activities merited prayers for God's blessing, whether lighting the fire or milking the cow, churning butter, baking, weaving, shepherding, fishing, bidding farewell, journeying, going to bed , Examples: (from *Carmina Gadelica*)

Dressing: *Even as I clothe my body with wool*

*Cover Thou my soul with the shadow of Thy wing*

*(Carmina Gadelica)*

Children encouraged by mothers as they put on clothes to “clothe our souls with grace while clothing our bodies with raiment”. Other blessings, like the hand blessing meant that throughout day, whatever is handled is handled with awareness of presence of God – highly specific in this milking prayer...

Blessing of hands *Bless, O God, my little cow*

/Milking prayer *Bless, O God, my desire;*

*Bless Thou my partnership*

*And the milking of my hands, O God.*

*Bless, O God, each teat,*

*Bless, O God, each finger;*

*Bless Thou each drop*

*That goes into my pitcher, O God! (Carmina Gadelica)*

Esther de Waal (*The Celtic Way of Prayer*) speaking of the treasury of poems, prayers and blessings collected by Douglas Hyde and Alexander Carmichael:

*“The sense of divine presence and protection is one of the many gifts of the Celtic tradition to us, and it is perhaps the most important. ‘The Gaelic race see the hand of God in every place, in every time and in everything’, wrote Hyde. ‘They have this sense of life being embraced on all sides by God.’ ”*

Rom.12:1 *“So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking–*

*around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him.” (The Message)*

You could build up your own treasury of blessing prayers/poems/songs!

***Prayer Exercise:*** Put down notebooks etc. Come to stillness, peace. Invite you to think back through 24 hours – notice the ordinary, mundane tasks or encounters. Anything – simple as feeding the cat, cleaning your teeth... Choose one thing – be in that moment, that activity – sense the love of God there. ***Now write short two-line blessing...***

### **Transformational Prayer (*Healing the Land/Spiritual Warfare*)**

The early Celtic Christians clearly saw themselves as having an intercessory responsibility for the nation. After a victory against the ever-threatening Penda, King Oswy gave twelve grants of land where, as expressed by Bede, *‘heavenly warfare was to take the place of earthly’*. This land became the home of a monastic community whose job it was to make constant intercession for the peace of the nation. To turn a battle site into a place of prayer was typical of the Celtic desire to heal the land, turning darkness to light – so the land often cleansed and blessed in prayer before monasteries and churches were built.

The Celtic love for creation, a perceptiveness, and an understanding of spirit realm produced a view of land which sees it as good but can be contaminated. The Celtic Christians believed in the necessity of “healing the land” through prayer. Scripture itself speaks of how land is polluted through bloodshed, betrayal, immorality & violence. Hosea describes how the

desolate, barren land itself mourns, weeping (Hosea 4). But – alongside is the promise that the land and community will be healed through intercessory prayers and repentance (2 Chronicles 17). Spiritual warfare was a constant reality for the Celtic church, and often men and women would devote themselves to long times of prayer, even years, as in the case of Cuthbert's nine years on the Isle of Farne.

So much can change when we get involved praying blessing into our world. We become part of God's dream for creation as we come, in blessing, in the opposite spirit to prevailing, negative, even destructive attitudes around us. St Francis prayer is a beautiful (modern) example: coming in the opposite spirit to prevailing attitudes in community (it's possible Francis himself was influenced by the substantial mark left by Celtic missionary Columbanus and his foundation some 600 years earlier in the area).

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon;  
where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope;  
where there is darkness, light;  
and where there is sadness, joy.*

**Prayer Exercise:** Come to quietness. Think about the land where you live, ask the Spirit to make you aware of areas of conflict, community breakdown, social deprivation – any situation in need of healing. Perhaps an area of land which has suffered historical conflict, and violence – and communities suffer still. See yourself walking the land (perhaps LITERALLY walk there) where healing and transformation is needed. Wait for a sense of God's love, hope

for this situation. BLESS, using St. Francis' words... Speak blessing into the conflict, breakdown, despair, and darkness.

Walking round the room, speak out St. Francis' words:

*Lord, make us instruments of your peace.*

*Where there is hatred....we sow love;*

*where there is injury...we speak pardon;*

*where there is doubt....we sow faith;*

*where there is despair, we speak hope;*

*where there is darkness.....we call for light;*

*and where there is sadness....we bless with joy.*

**Prayer in Creation** (*prayers of oneness*)

Celtic Christians saw a universe ablaze with God's glory, suffused with a presence that calls, nods and beckons – a creation personally united with its Creator in every atom and fibre. They celebrated grace and nature as good gifts from God and recognised the sacredness of all creation.

They easily accepted the Oneness at the heart of life – the inter-connectedness of all – as expressed in the Trinity; the motif of the Celtic knot. Able to move beyond a western, Greek based dualistic worldview – the Celtic Church inspires us to a return to our true origins in Creation – where everything is in harmony – where everything belongs.

***Prayer Exercise:*** Being in Creation – Prayer of Oneness

Find a space (*preferably out in creation!*) to be.

Stand – or sit.

Relax – let go all thoughts...

Let your senses gradually awaken to all around you...

Simply wait. Simply gaze. Simply be.

Feel the breath in the air around – soak in it....)

*Allow a few minutes for reflection.*

#### 4 A READING ATTRIBUTED TO ST PATRICK

Since the late sixth century monks from the Irish–Celtic Church had led missions into Europe, courageously sharing the faith but little attending to the task of consolidation. In the eighth century Anglo–Saxon evangelists continued this work, underpinned by a stronger Roman sense of church organisation. At the very edges of Europe – and beyond the reaches of the former Roman Empire – Celtic spirituality had been developing its own distinctive character. Centred on monastic foundations, it saw a new flowering in the eighth century, expressing itself in beautiful religious poetry. At this time there was a new interest in the figure of St Patrick who had played such a key role in evangelisation three hundred years earlier. Prayers became attributed to him because they sought to represent the rich tradition he helped to establish.

I rise today

in power's strength, invoking the Trinity,

believing in threeness,

confessing the oneness,

of creation's Creator.

I rise today

in the power of Christ's birth and baptism,  
in the power of his crucifixion and burial,  
in the power of his rising and ascending,  
in the power of his descending and judging.

I rise today

in the power of the love of cherubim,  
in the obedience of angels,  
and service of archangels,  
in hope of rising to receive the reward,  
in the prayers of patriarchs,  
in the predictions of prophets,  
in the preaching of apostles,  
in the faith of confessors,  
in the innocence of holy virgins,  
in the deeds of the righteous.

I rise today

in heaven's might,  
in sun's brightness,  
in moon's radiance,  
in fire's glory,

in lightning's quickness,  
in wind's swiftness,  
in sea's depth,  
in earth's stability,  
in rock's fixity.

I rise today

with the power of God to pilot me,  
God's strength to sustain me,  
God's wisdom to guide me,  
God's eye to look ahead for me,  
God's ear to hear me,  
God's word to speak for me,  
God's hand to protect me,  
God's way before me,  
God's shield to defend me,  
God's host to deliver me:

from snares of devils,  
from evil temptations,  
from nature's failings,  
from all who wish to harm me,  
far or near,

alone or in a crowd...

May Christ protect me today

against poison and burning,

against drowning and wounding,

so that I may have abundant reward;

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,

Christ within me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,

Christ to right of me, Christ to left of me;

Christ in my lying, Christ in my sitting, Christ in my rising;

Christ in the heart of all who think of me,

Christ in the tongue of all who speak to me,

Christ in the eye of all who see me,

Christ in the ear of all who hear me.

I rise today

in power's strength, invoking the Trinity,

believing in threeness,

confessing the oneness,

of creation's Creator.

For to the Lord belongs salvation,

and to the Lord belongs salvation

and to Christ belongs salvation.

May your salvation, Lord, be with us always.

Extract is from *Celtic Christian Spirituality: An Anthology of Medieval and Modern Sources* ed O. Davies & F. Bowie (SPCK, 1997).

### Questions to Ponder with St Patrick

1. *"I rise today ...invoking the Trinity"*. This Celtic "breastplate" prayer seeks God's protection at the start of a new day. How do you begin each day? How do you view each day – as God's gift, as a fresh chance to discover God? Noting a possible link with Baptism in the first verse, how can we renew our sense of being consecrated and dedicated to Christ each morning?
2. *"I rise today in the power of Christ's birth and baptism..."* Christ's life is ours – bound up and throbbing in our life. How can we relate and connect with the events of Christ's life which are, in a sense, distant in time? Looking in turn at each of the eight Christ-events mentioned in this verse, describe what *power* or influence they might have in your tasks and responsibilities today.
3. *"I rise today... in the prayers of patriarchs"*. The Apostles' Creed says "I believe in the communion of saints" – a *union with* the saints, and here verse three speaks of a personal relationship to the angels and saints, placing the individual "I" of the prayer in the context of a community which transcends heaven and earth. What is your experience of the saints and the angels? If you have a saint's name, how could you develop a prayerful *relationship* with your name-saint?

4. *"I rise today ...with the power of God to pilot me"*. Patrick was a traveller who knew the presence of Christ as a companion. In what sense is our spiritual life a journey, a pilgrimage, an adventure? Recall Biblical journeys that could inspire this idea.
5. *"May your salvation, Lord, be with us always"*. What is your understanding of salvation – from what, for what? How should it affect our daily tasks and outlook?

### **Prayer Exercise**

#### *Either*

Express the sixth verse as an "action prayer" or "enacted prayer" using your hands and body expressively while it is very slowly spoken.

#### *Or*

Reflecting on verse six identify the different ways Christ is present in the world today. Look up these presences of Christ in the Bible: Matthew 25::35–40; Luke 22:19; John 1:3; I Corinthians 12:27.

### **FOR FURTHER READING**

**Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality** ( P. Newell). London, SPCK, 1997.

**The Cry of the Deer: Meditations on the Hymn of St Patrick** (D.Adam)  
Triangle 1987

**Restoring the Woven Cord: Strands of Celtic Christianity for the Church Today.** (Michael Mitton) DLT

**The Celtic Way** (Ian Bradley) Darton,Longman & Todd

**Praying with Celtic Christians** (by G. McLean). Triangle,London, 1996.

**The Celtic Way of Prayer: The Recovery of the Religious Imagination** (Esther De Waal) Hodder and Stoughton

**Prophetic Lifestyle and the Celtic Way** (Andy & Jane Fitz-Gibbon) Monarch

**Celtic Daily Prayer** (Northumbria Community) Collins

**Exploring Celtic Spirituality. Historic Roots for Our Future** New edition with study guide. ( Ray Simpson) Kevin Mayhew

**Celtic Spirituality. Rhythm, Roots and Relationships** ( Ray Simpson) Grove  
**The Book of Creation: The Practice of Celtic Spirituality** (J.Philip Newell)  
Canterbury Press

**Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation** (J.Philip Newell) Wild Goose

**The Music of What Happens;** ( John J.O’Riordain) The Columba Press

**Sacred Spaces: Stations on a Celtic Way** (Margaret Silf) Lion

**New Celts: Following Jesus into Millennium 3** (Roger Ellis & Chris Seaton)

## **UNIT 5 PROPHETIC SPIRITUALITY: Francis of Assisi**

### **AIMS OF THIS UNIT**

**1 We begin with an overview of key characteristics of Francis’ spirituality**

**2 We look at the life of Francis through the lens of the theme of liberation**

**3 We engage with a key text from Francis**

**4 We explore the relationship of suffering & spirituality in the life of Francis**

**5 We consider the theme of reconciliation in Francis’ life**

**6 We attempt to describe qualities of prophetic spirituality**

**7 We conclude with a prayer exercise**

## INTRODUCTION

Francis, turning his back on his well-to-do family at Assisi, first interpreted literally his call *“Rebuild my Church”*, repairing the ruined chapel of San Damiano. But it was to a restoration of the Church to the Gospel values of simplicity and generosity that Francis was being summoned, realised when he heard the words of Matthew 10:7–9. He soon gathered an ever-growing band of followers prepared for this commitment to poverty and evangelism, while St Clare led a similar society for women. His journeys led him to Rome, Spain, Eastern Europe and Egypt. Retiring to Mt Alverna in 1224, he received the gift of the stigmata, the wounds of Christ appearing on his hands and feet. Like the Dominicans, the Franciscans established houses close to where people lived, worked and studied, the friaries as places of welcome and counsel complimenting the itinerant ministries of the brothers.

St Francis, though he lived in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, is a strikingly relevant saint for contemporary times. But we need to get beyond the easy ‘birdbath’ sentimentality that attaches itself to him and discover the real values that speak to us today. Seven things stand out:

- Conversion: Francis had a number of conversions or moments of transformation: in a time of illness, meeting the leper on the road, praying before the cross at San Damiano all radically shifted his attitudes and thinking, reminding us that we should always stay alert to the God of surprises, who might turn up anywhere!
- Creativity : Francis was the first poet in the Italian vernacular when he penned his famous ‘Canticle of Creation’
- Connection: unlike his merchant father who displayed a grasping materialistic and even consumerist approach to God’s world, and saw nature as something to be exploited for one’s own gain, Francis came to respect and reverence God’s creation, calling the elements ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ – brother sun, sister moon, sister water, brother fire. He has been hailed as the patron saint of ecology!
- Community: Francis saw goods as gifts from God to be shared, so lived a life marked by simplicity and a light touch towards possessions. He kept giving away his threadbare clothes to the poor!

- Compassion: ever since Francis embraced the despised leper and recognized Christ in him, he felt impelled to go to the aid of the broken and the hurting
- Conciliation: Francis reached out to others, famously in his encounter with Islam in his meeting with the Sultan in Egypt in 1219, when he crossed the enemy lines in order to converse and engage with the so-called 'enemy'. He is sometimes regarded as the patron saint of interfaith dialogue, and when Pope John Paul wanted to gather together the leaders of world religions for a World Day of Peace in 1986 of course there was only one natural place to do this – Assisi!
- Communion: Francis said time and again that the source of his inspiration was the Eucharist where he encounter the living Christ empowering him

## FRANCIS: A MODEL OF HUMAN LIBERATION

This phrase comes from a major study by the liberation theologian Leonardo Boff. It reminds us that Thomas of Celano gives us several dimensions of the freedom into which Christ led Francis. In the earliest *Life of St Francis* (1229) Thomas describes Francis in these terms: 'Those who experienced the greatness of his soul know how well how free and freeing (*liber et liberalis*) he was in everything, how intrepid and fearless in all circumstances.'<sup>29</sup> This offers a hermeneutical key with which to unlock the inner mystery of Francis: he is both liberated and liberator.

Francis is described as 'Swift to forgive, slow to grow angry, free in nature.'<sup>253</sup> His purpose is described as 'Like a second David, in the name of the Lord God of hosts, from the long-standing abuse of its enemies, he might liberate Israel.'<sup>186</sup>

Thomas states: 'More than anything else he desired to be set free and to be with Christ. Thus his chief object of concern was to live free from all things that are in the world, so that his inner serenity would not be disturbed'<sup>243</sup>. Is this a self-centred pursuit of freedom? Francis seeks to be free in order to liberate others as a 'Herald of the Great King'. Francis was concerned that

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<sup>29</sup> Page references are to the translation in R.J. Armstrong, J.A. W. Hellman & W.J. Short (eds.), *Francis of Assisi: the Saint – Early Documents* (New City Press, N.Y., 1999), here 290

people 'had abandoned true joy and were running here and there, wandering through the fields of an empty freedom. So he prayed for God's mercy to set his sons free.' He was concerned to lead people into true liberty. What would this look like? For Thomas, his own life held clues.

## FRANCIS liberated

- *Freed from ambition.* Prior to his conversion, trapped by his ambitions to be a soldier and imprisoned within the routines of working as a merchant's son 'he had not yet been freed from the bonds of vanities nor had he thrown off from his neck the yoke of degrading servitude.' 185
- *Freed from avarice.* An early liberation was from possessiveness, leading him to give a quantity of money to the ruined church of San Damiano: 'Feeling the heavy weight of carrying that money even for an hour, and reckoning all its benefit like so much sand, he hurried to get rid of it.' 189. Thomas says he became 'the richest poor man.' 247
- *Freed from persecutors.* Facing misunderstanding, he hid from oppressive opponents in a pit: 'He prayed with flowing tears that the Lord would free him from the hands of those persecuting his soul' 191
- *Freed from his father.* His conversion is described in terms of being liberated from the captivity of his father and his business: 'he had gained his freedom from the hands of his carnally-minded father' 196  
Represented in divesting clothes. As Bonaventure put it: 'Now he was free from the bonds of all earthly desires in his disregard for the world, Francis left the town; he was free and without a care in the world and he made the forest resound, as he sang God's praises.'
- *Freed from prison.* After being physically incarcerated in a prison by his father, his mother stepped in: 'She broke his chains and let him go free. ..Since he had passed the test of temptations, he now enjoyed greater freedom...' 193
- *Freed from prejudice.* Francis overcomes his fear of lepers: 'Made stronger than himself, he came up and kissed the leper...he came to a complete victory over himself. '195
- *Freed from fear.* In his witness to the Muslim Sultan on the battle-lines of Damietta in Egypt, 'before he reached the Sultan, he was captured by soldiers, insulted and beaten but was not afraid. He did not flinch at threats of torture nor was he shaken by death threats....The Sultan was

overwhelmed with admiration and recognised him as a man unlike any other. He listened to him very willingly.’ 231

- *Freed by the Gospel.* The reading of the Gospel at St Mary of the Angels (Matt 10:9–10) led him to a sense of abandonment and freedom in regard to all possessions: ‘Overflowing with joy, he hastened to implement the words of salvation.. Immediately he took off the shoes from his feet, put down the staff from his hands, and satisfied with one tunic, exchanged his leather belt for a cord...For he was no deaf hearer of the gospel... he was careful to carry it out to the letter.’ 202

- *Freed by forgiveness.* He discovered a liberating forgiveness for the sins and indulgences of his youth: ‘certainty of the forgiveness of all his sins poured in... renewed in spirit, he now seemed to be changed into another man’ 205

- *Freed by prayer.* Francis faced on-going spiritual struggles, including combat with dark forces: ‘He used to struggle hand-to-hand with the devil.’ 244 Prayer was the place of his liberation: ‘Not prayer of a fleeting moment, empty and proud, but prayer that was prolonged, full of devotion, peaceful in humility... Walking sitting, eating, drinking he was focussed on prayer... in abandoned churches and in deserted places, with the protection of divine grace, he overcame his soul’s many fears and anxieties.’ 244

- *Freed for mission.* ‘From the injuries inflicted he received a more confident spirit and now, free to go anywhere, he moved about with an even greater heart. 193 Released from a double captivity, physical bonds and from the expectations (to succeed materially) placed on him by his father, Francis uses his freedom for an apostolate: ‘In all his preaching, before he presented the word of God to the assembly, he prayed for peace saying “May the Lord give you peace.” ‘ 203.

- *Freed for a foretaste of the new creation.* Celebrating God’s goodness in creation, he lived ‘like someone who has already passed into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.’ 251

- *Freed for mystical prayer.* After receiving the stigmata 2 years before his death, ‘he could more freely explore in frequent ecstasy of Spirit the blessed dwelling places of heaven.’ 271 Indeed, ‘His noble spirit was aimed at heaven and he only desired to be set free and to be with Christ.’ 267

- *Freed for heaven.* Seeing the Crucified One appear as a six-winged Seraph bearing the marks of the passion, the angel becomes a symbol of the total freedom to which Christ is calling him: 'Francis had both the image and the form of the Seraph, and remaining on the cross, he merited to fly away to the highest order of spirits.' 283

## Francis liberator

- *Freeing for mission:* Francis released his brothers from family ties so as to be available for a wider mission. 'Go, my dear brothers, through different parts of the world, announcing peace to the people and penance for the remission of sins.' 207
- *Freeing his followers from anxiety about food and possessions.* 'As followers of holy poverty, since they had nothing, they loved nothing; so they feared losing nothing...Disturbed by no fears, distracted by no cares, they awaited the next day without any worry.' 218
- *Freeing for reconciliation:* 'He always proclaimed God's peace to men and women, to those he met to and to those who met him. Accordingly, many who hated peace along with salvation, with the Lord's help wholeheartedly embraced peace. They became themselves children of peace.' 203
- *Freeing for fellowship:* 'What more can I say? There were chaste embraces, delightful affection, a holy kiss, sweet conversation, modest laughter, joyful looks, a clear eye, a supple spirit, a peaceable tongue, a single purpose.' 217
- *Freeing for simplicity of life:* 'In this way holy simplicity filled them, innocence of life taught them, and purity of heart so possessed them...Just as there was in them one faith, so there was one spirit, one will, one charity, continual unity of spirit, harmony in living, cultivation of virtues, agreement of minds, loyalty in actions 223
- *Freeing for health.* Throughout his ministry, Francis' liberating touch brought healing to the sick. For example, a paralytic, 'believed that seeing him and being in his presence would free him from the bonds of that paralysis. And so it did!' 240
- *Freeing 'from the hand of death'.* This is the phrase Thomas uses of Francis' setting free a tormented women from a demon: Liberated, 'she

kissed his very footprints, giving thanks to God and his holy servant Francis, who had freed her from the hand of death.’ 242

*Q What strikes you most about these features? What do they tell you about the relationship between spirituality and action?*

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#### A READING FROM FRANCIS OF ASSISI

The friars should be delighted to follow the lowliness and poverty of our Lord Jesus Christ, remembering that of the whole world we must own nothing; *but having food and sufficient clothing, with these let us be content* (1 Tim. 6:8), as St Paul says. They should be glad to live among social outcasts, among the poor and helpless, the sick and the lepers, and those who beg by the wayside. If they are in want, they should not be ashamed to beg alms, remembering that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the living, all-powerful God *set his face like a very hard rock* (Is. 50:7) and was not ashamed. He was poor and he had no home of his own and he lived on alms, he and the Blessed Virgin and his disciples...

The friars should have no hesitation about telling one another what they need, so that they can provide for one another. They are bound to love and care for one another as brothers, according to the means God gives them, just as a mother loves and cares for her son...

Remember the words of our Lord, *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you* (Mt. 5:44). Our Lord Jesus Christ himself, in whose footsteps we must follow (cf 1 Pet. 2:21), called the man who betrayed him his friend, and gave himself up of his own accord to his executioners. Therefore, our friends are those who for no reason cause us trouble and suffering, shame or injury, pain or torture, even martyrdom and death. It is these we must love, and love very much, because for all they do to us we are given eternal life. ....

We have left the world now and all we have to do is to be careful to obey God's will and please him. We must be very careful, or we will turn out to be like the earth by the wayside, or the stony or thorn-choked ground, as our Lord tells us in the Gospel (Lk. 8:11-15)...we should beware especially of the

malice and wiles of Satan; his desire is to prevent man from raising his mind and heart to his Lord and God...By the anxieties and worries of this life he tries to dull man's heart and make a dwelling for himself there.. And so we must all keep close watch over ourselves or we will be lost and turn our minds and hearts from God, because we think there is something worth having or doing, or we will gain some advantage.

In that love which is God (cf 1 Jn. 4:16), I entreat all my friars, ministers and subjects, to put away every detachment, all care and solicitude, and serve, love, honour, and adore our Lord and God with a pure heart and mind; this is what he seeks above all else. We should make a dwelling-place within ourselves where he can stay, he who is the Lord God almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit...

Our extract is from *Rule of 1221 in English Omnibus of Sources – Writings and Early Biographies* ed. M.A.Habig (Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago, 1973).

### Questions arising from the Reading

1. “...with these let us be content”. We may not be called to poverty but we are called to *simplicity of lifestyle*, travelling light in a spirit of joyful thankfulness and trustfulness. What does this mean for life today? How can we simplify the way we live?
2. “...we must be very careful”. Francis calls us to watchfulness, and identifies some of the dangers along the pathway. What pressures from society must we resist today?
3. “...glad to live among social outcasts”. Who are today's lepers? In what sort of ways is it possible to live in solidarity with the marginalised who may be some distance from our homes, and overseas? How does the Gospel, especially Matthew 25: 35– 41, shape our attitudes and reactions? How can the way we live show support?
4. Are there people around us who “*cause us pain and suffering*”? How can our prayer lead us to respond to them differently? Can we be agents of reconciliation in our own community?
5. “...this is what he seeks above all else”. Part of the secret of simplicity is singleheartedness, discovering an over-arching vision and priority in life

which gives unity and meaning to all our different activities. How would you express the main focus of your lifestyle?

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## **SPIRITUALITY & SUFFERING**

Our challenge is to develop a spirituality which starts to respond to suffering and loss. What difference does the Christian Gospel make to our search for meaning? How can the Christian vision of the Incarnation of God in Christ lead us to some answers? What does the Cross, central to the Christian faith, have to say to us? A poor, wounded man of the twelfth century can help us in our struggle.

Francis was born into a household overflowing with the trappings of worldly success. His father was a rich cloth merchant, and fully expected Francis to share in the fruits of his prosperity, and follow the same career in commerce. This Francis began to do, but the experience of illness prepared him for a completely new perspective on life. Bonaventure takes up the story: 'As yet, however, Francis had no idea of God's plan for him. He was completely taken up with the affairs of his father's business and his mind was intent on the things of earth [...] Adversity is one of the best means of sharpening a person's spiritual perception [...] God brought him low with a prolonged illness, in order to prepare his soul to receive the Holy Spirit.'<sup>30</sup> Francis's conversion began with an encounter with Christ on the Cross.

### **Francis before Cross of San Damiano**

Entering the half-ruined church of San Damiano, his eyes were immediately drawn to the figure of Christ crucified above the altar. Francis became transfixed with a sense of wonder and astonishment that God should share our human pains in this way. He felt Christ speaking to him from the cross, calling him to 'rebuild my church'. This was not a call to repair the broken building of San Damiano, but to call the church away from worldly success to true gospel values. Carlo Carretto puts Francis' response like this: 'I must confess that in that moment I was thunderstruck at the mystery of Christ's incarnation. .. the idea of God's incarnation that became the only answer to all the self-questionings hitherto in my life. Jesus was the epitome

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<sup>30</sup> Habig, p.636.

of all: in him heaven and earth resolved all their contradictions in one stupendous, vital act of divine unity, satisfying every human thirst. Jesus' cross was humanity's happiness, love's answer to all the questions, the resolution of every conflict, the overcoming of every tension, God's victory over death.'<sup>31</sup>

What was it about the Cross that so transfixed Francis? He glimpsed that God himself comes to share and transfigure our pain. God is not immune from suffering – he freely chooses to embrace it, and to transform it from the *inside* – not from the outside as some external power reaching down from the balcony of heaven, but *as one of us*. 'Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows' (Is.53.4). Francis put this later in his own words: 'Our Lord Jesus Christ is the glorious Word of the Father, so holy and exalted, whose coming the Father made known by St Gabriel the Archangel to the glorious and blessed Virgin Mary, in whose womb he took on our weak human nature[...] And it was the Father's will that his blessed and glorious Son, whom he gave to us and who was born for our sake, should offer himself by his own blood as a sacrifice and victim on the altar of the cross; and this, not for himself, through whom all things were made (Jn. 1.3) but for our sins, leaving us an example that we may follow in his steps (1 Pet.2.21)[...] how peaceful, delightful, loveable and desirable above all things it is to have a Brother like this, who laid down his life for his sheep (Jn.10.15).'

<sup>32</sup>

### **Francis and the leper**

Francis' whole attitude to illness was to be turned upside down by a chance encounter with a leper on the road outside Assisi. Normally, he recoiled at the sight of the disfigured and disabled sufferers. In fact, he had an absolute horror of them and would avoid going near their colonies at all costs. But something stirred within his heart when he met this tortured man in the lane, with bandaged hands and dressed in rags. He felt impelled, constrained by something within, not only to approach the man, but to touch him tenderly, to embrace him. Later he wondered if he had not met Christ

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<sup>31</sup> Carretto, C. I, *Francis*. (Fount, London, 1982), p.33.

<sup>32</sup> Habig, pp.93& 96.

himself in this encounter. Poignantly, in his own words, Francis describes this as a turning point in his life:

‘This is how God inspired me, Brother Francis, to embark upon a life of penance. When I was in sin, the sight of lepers nauseated me beyond measure; but then God himself led me into their company, and I had pity on them. When I had once become acquainted with them, what had previously nauseated me became a source of spiritual and physical consolation for me.’ And in the same breath he went on: ‘we bless you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.’<sup>33</sup>

Francis saw a connection between present human suffering and the Cross of Jesus Christ on Calvary. He saw God sharing and *redeeming* – literally ‘buying back’ or ‘taking ownership’ – our pains. Revulsion at suffering turned to compassion in the literal meaning of that word – as Francis learned to *suffer with* those who were hurting. Francis too, woke up to the idea that God is speaking to us in suffering, calling us to face up to the most important things in life, as C.S. Lewis was to put so powerfully last century: ‘God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts to us in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world ...it gives the only opportunity the bad man can have for amendment. It removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul.’<sup>34</sup>

Lewis suggests that the experience of pain can shatter the illusion that all is well with us, destroying the false idea that we can get very nicely by without God. Pain shatters the illusion of self-sufficiency, for it causes us to reach out to God either in petition or complaint. It makes us wake up to the big questions of God and evil, and can draw us into a new surrender to God, the communion for which we were created.

Francis, of course, would not put it in these terms, but he came to see in every suffering person a glimpse of Jesus Christ. Francis believed that suffering does indeed have a revelatory character, for those with eyes to see it. For Francis God speaks most powerfully through the experience of poverty and pain, calling us to simplicity and trust. For him, though he delighted in the wonders of creation, God’s love was revealed most clearly in the passion of Jesus. He came to see the cross, an instrument of torture, as a symbol of

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<sup>33</sup> Habig, p.67.

<sup>34</sup> Lewis, C.S. *The Problem of Pain*. (Fontana, London, 1976), pp.81, 83.

hope: 'by his wounds, you are healed' (1Pet.2.22). From this self-same cross flows forgiveness and grace which can change our attitudes to pain profoundly.

Francis' whole life was marked by the experience of suffering, hardship and debilitating illness. He looked on these experiences as a way of uniting himself with Jesus Christ, whom he understood as God's love and compassion incarnate. He accepted that his vocation was to walk in the steps of the Crucified one, and to reveal to others the power of the Cross. Francis reminds us that we cannot choose what happens to us in life, but we can choose how we are to respond to it. The experience of loss or suffering can be resented and faced with bitterness. Or it can be accepted as part and parcel of living on this earth as 'strangers and pilgrims' (1 Pet.2.11). It can even be embraced in a spirit of hopefulness as a bridge that can take us closer to God. God himself enables this attitude of openness, this ability to receive from the experience of suffering something positive. Brother Thomas of Celano, Francis' first biographer describes how he was graced to see pain in such a light:

'Since Francis was thus worn out in every part by sufferings, it is surprising that his strength was sufficient to bear them. But he looked upon these trials not under the name of sufferings but of *sisters* [...] I think the best way to understand his suffering is this, that, as he said of others, in bearing them *there is great reward*' (Ps.18.12).<sup>35</sup>

### **Francis and the stigmata**

It was in solitude on Mount Verna, praying for the grace to feel in his heart the intense love enkindled in Christ, that Francis received the gift of the stigmata, receiving in his feet and hands, and in his side, an impression of the five wounds of the crucified Christ. This was the culmination of a life dedicated to penetrating the mystery of the Cross. For him the words came literally true: 'I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal.3.20). Carretto puts it: 'When I realized that I had holes in my hands and feet, and especially that I had a wound in my side, I understood what it meant to live without trifling. Love is indeed a serious thing, a terrible challenge.'<sup>36</sup> Francis realised in that

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<sup>35</sup> Habig, 532.

<sup>36</sup> Carretto, p.130.

moment that the Christian is invited to be fired, energised, empowered, transfigured, healed by such love.

Two years later Francis embraced death joyfully and hopefully; he called it 'the gateway of life'. He was an Easter person, not only filled with wonder of the crucifixion of Christ but also delighting in the Resurrection. As he lay dying, Francis requested that the story of Christ's Passover from death to life be read, from the account of beginning at John 13. Francis was ready to greet 'Sister Death' as a friend to be welcomed, not as an enemy to be feared. Brother Elias questioned how he could be so confident in the face of death. He replied, 'Brother, let me rejoice in the Lord [and sing his praises in the midst of my infirmities:] by the grace of the Holy Spirit I am so closely united to my Lord, that, through his goodness, I can indeed rejoice in the Most High himself'<sup>37</sup> The key to Francis' hope, then, lay in his unshakeable experience of being united to Jesus Christ.

And so Francis points us to a spirituality in the midst of suffering that comes face to face with the paradox and the power of the Cross and the mystery of the Resurrection. He teaches us that God speaks most powerfully to us through the experience of weakness. He teaches us that the path to wholeness is through brokenness – there is no other way. He also reminds us that the path to compassion is the way of vulnerability, fragility. We do not minister to others from a position of strength, but from our own weakness. As Christ promises: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness' (2 Cor.12.9). The paradox of suffering is the paradox of the Cross, which confounds human reasoning and logic. Once again, it is the upside-down Gospel which tells us that 'whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake will save it' (Mk.8.35).

### **The Canticle of Creation**

Francis found it possible to praise God in the very midst of suffering. Francis is most remembered for his beautiful *Canticle of Creation* which celebrates God's goodness in creation, popularised in the hymn *All Creatures of my God and King*. How did this come to be composed? An early eye-witness account explains:

'One night, as he was thinking of all the tribulations he was enduring, he felt

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<sup>37</sup> Habig, p. 1041.

sorry for himself and said interiorly: “Lord, help me in my infirmities so that I may have the strength to bear them patiently!” And suddenly he heard a voice in spirit: “[...] be glad and joyful in the midst of your infirmities and tribulations: as of now, live in peace as if you were already sharing my kingdom.” ‘The next morning on rising, he said to his companions: “If the emperor gave a kingdom to one of his servants, how joyful the servant would be! But if he gave him the whole empire, would he not rejoice all the more? I should, therefore, be full of joy in my infirmities and tribulations, seek my consolation in the Lord, and give thanks to God the Father, to his only Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the Holy Spirit. In fact, God has given me such a grace and blessing that he has condescended in his mercy to assure me, his poor and unworthy servant, still living on this earth, that I would share his kingdom. Therefore, for his glory, for my consolation, and the edification of my neighbour, I wish to compose a new “Praises of the Lord”, for his creatures. These creatures minister to our needs every day [...] Every day we fail to appreciate so great a blessing by not praising as we should the Creator and dispenser of all these gifts.”’<sup>38</sup>

Francis, struggling to keep on going, and tempted to self-pity, had his eyes opened to two realities. First, he realised afresh that he was loved and cherished by God, and that he was already an heir to God’s kingdom. This was a moment of re-assurance for him, as he discovered the great truth that even in the midst of suffering, he belonged to God and the promise of eternal life was his. Secondly, he awakened to the reality of God’s providence in the world, so easily taken for granted. He did more than count his blessings – he realised the abundance of God’s provisions in the world, and reached out to the creatures as his brothers and sisters. This helped him to see his own plight in a new perspective, and set in the larger context of God’s unfailing love. Francis discovered the grace which Paul commended when he wrote: ‘Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you’ (1 Thess.5.16,17). Praise transformed his outlook, took him out of himself, and lifted his heart to God:

‘Most High, Almighty, good Lord,  
Thine be the praise, the glory, the honour,

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<sup>38</sup> Habig, pp. 1020–21.

And all blessing. [...]  
Praise to Thee, my Lord, for all Thy creatures,  
Brother Sun [...] for Sister Moon [...] for Brother Wind [...]  
for Sister Water [...] for Brother Fire [...] for our sister Mother Earth [...]  
Praise to Thee, my Lord, for those who pardon one another  
For love of Thee, and endure  
Sickness and tribulation.  
Blessed are they who shall endure it in peace,  
For they shall be crowned by Thee,  
O Most High...' <sup>39</sup>

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## **SPIRITUALITY & RECONCILIATION: Francis & the sultan**

Let us return to a story about how St Francis of Assisi exemplified this Christlike spirit in courageously crossing impossible-looking barriers. In 1219, during the Fifth Crusade, the Christian knights were besieging the city of Damietta on the Nile, an important entry point for pilgrims travelling towards the Holy Land. The Crusaders' mission was to open up the routes of pilgrimage to the Church of the Resurrection, which were in Muslim hands. Their strategy, of course, was the way of violence: they aimed to slaughter as many followers of Islam as they could. When Francis arrived in Damietta, he tried to dissuade the Crusaders from their bloody action, but nobody listened. So, accompanied by one brother, Illuminato, Francis crossed the battle-lines.

First he left the relative safety of the crusader military camp. Francis had to step into no-man's land which separated the warring factions, and, in order to reach the enemy camp, had to traverse forbidding defensive ditches and heavy-armed enemy barriers. On reaching the city of Damietta, he fearlessly crossed three walls. His aim was to reach the Sultan of Egypt himself, Malek al Kamil, nephew of Saladin the Great who had taken Jerusalem in 1187. He

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<sup>39</sup> Habig, p.1259.

was turned back at every point, but was resolute and somehow got past the soldiers guarding the walls that kept the two camps apart.

He succeeded in having an extended dialogue with the Sultan, who received him with deep respect. For his part, Francis saw the Sultan as a brother, and in the process learned a great deal about the foreign world of Islam, glimpsing new perspectives on 'the infidel religion' which had been viewed in the west through the eyes of prejudice and fear. Francis was changed by this meeting, and it left an abiding mark on his own spirituality. The litany on the divine names, *The Praises of God* which he composed later, after receiving the stigmata at Mount La Verna, looks like a meditation on the Islamic ninety nine Names of God: 'You are holy, Lord, the only God...You are strong, you are great, you are the Most High, you are almighty...You are Good, all Good, supreme Good.'

In the event at Damietta, Francis emerges as an intrepid and audacious risk-taker, energised by the love of Christ, as he breaches the walls that divided two peoples. His encounter with the Sultan is sometimes considered to be the first example of genuine Christian-Islam dialogue. Certainly it has inspired many to realise how walls can be breached. It is understood that Francis later made it to the Holy Land itself, and the presence of Franciscans here went on to achieve by peaceful means what the Crusaders had sought by brutal means: to this day the Franciscans open up access to the holy places.

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#### **CONCLUSION: WHAT IS PROPHETIC SPIRITUALITY?**

- Exemplified in St Francis – and the leper; the wolf; the Sultan; stigmata
- Forget about prediction of the future: this is about engaging with the struggles of the present, naming the idols and illusions of contemporary society in the tradition of Amos, Jeremiah...
- Hands uplifted in prayer become hands outstretched in care, hands that may become dirty, bruised, wounded (as J on cross, as stigmata of Francis)
- Our two ears: one to listen to God, one to listen to the cries of the poor, the screams of the exploited – which might turn out to be the cry of God himself

- Envisions an alternative consciousness (Walter Brueggeman, *The Prophetic Imagination*), a different vision of things as Jesus' Kingdom of God, which brought conflict with the status quo (Kingdom of Rome; Judaism)
- This alternative vision is subversive, questioning, compassionate
- Reveals itself in counter-cultural lifestyle and political choices

### Ten Questions for personal reflection

1. Are there danger signs that my spirituality is becoming narcissistic, self-centred, closed in on itself?
2. Is my spirituality about self-fulfilment or about empowering sacrificial living?
3. If the measure of spiritual maturity is increasing solidarity with the hurting, an enlarging capacity for compassion, what are the signs that I am maturing? Is my heart getting bigger?
4. Can I allow the pain of the world to enter their prayer? Does my prayer have room for the oppressions and injustices of the world?
5. What place is there in me for costly intercession, open to the wider world and inseparable from self-offering (does not let you 'off the hook')?
6. Indeed, what is my understanding of intercession? Advising the Almighty or 'coming before God with the people on your heart' (Michael Ramsey)
7. What place is there in my prayer for the Cross – not only in terms of seeking personal forgiveness but in realising that God suffers?
8. What does Matthew 25 look like in my experience? What is the evidence?
9. 'He will go before you to Galilee, *there* you will see him' Am I drawn to the margins in any way?

10. A 'time to speak out, a time for silence' (Eccles. 3:7). Is this balance revealed in my life? Contemplatives in action; contemplation and struggle; God in *all* things?

## PRAYER EXERCISE

Use the 'cross-prayers' devised by Francis of Assisi. Open your arms wide – extend them as far as you can. This is first to embody a solidarity with the cross. Think of Jesus opening wide his arms on the cross to embrace all who suffer, all who are in any form of distress. Think of Christ's all-encompassing love and acceptance. Second, think of the Risen Christ and the way he longs to enfold whole of creation, the little ones and marginalised ones of the earth. Third, offer this prayer as an act of intercession. It is a prayer that hurts – in the sense that your arms will grow weary and ache. Moses prayed like this and had to have others hold his arms up (Exodus 17:11,12). As you feel the ache, let it connect you to those who are in pain, those who are hurting: the sick, the dispossessed, those whose human rights are trampled on. Finally, use this prayer-action as an act of self-offering. Offer yourself afresh to God for the part he has in store for you in his mission of reconciliation in the world.

Close by giving thanks in the words of the *Canticle of the Sun*.

Or

Place a large cross or crucifix on the floor or low table. Take a flower or bud and hold it in your hand. See it as representing both our frailty and beauty. Let it stand for some particular situation your own life or in the life of others that concerns you deeply. Place it silently upon the cross or upon the figure of the Crucified in a gesture of surrendering the situation to Christ who suffers and hopes in the lives of his little ones. End by reading Philippians 2.1–11. Maybe you can also use a prayer of St Francis:

*Most High and Glorious God enlighten the darkness of our hearts:*

*Give us true faith, certain hope and perfect love.*

*Give us a sense of the divine and knowledge of Yourself*

*that we may do everything in fulfilment of your holy will,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*

#### **FOR FURTHER READING**

L. Boff, *Saint Francis; A Model for Human Liberation* (Crossroad, N. Y., 1990)

R. Foster *Freedom of Simplicity* (Triangle, 1981)

P. Moses, *The Saint and the Sultan: the Crusades, Islam and Francis of Assisi's Mission of Peace* (Doubleday Religion, New York, 2001)

R. Rohr, *Eager to Love: the alternative way of Francis of Assisi* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2014)

R.J.Sider *Rich Christians in An Age of Hunger* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1990).

J.M.Stoutzenberger & J.D.Bohrer *Praying with Francis of Assisi* (Saint Mary's Press, Minnesota)

#### **UNIT 6 MYSTICAL SPIRITUALITY: JULIAN OF NORWICH**

##### **AIMS OF THIS UNIT**

- 1 We begin by asking 'what is a mystic'?**
- 2 We consider Jesus as a mystic**
- 3 We recall the flowering of mysticism in the 14<sup>th</sup> century**
- 4 We explore the teaching of Julian of Norwich**
- 5 We ask how we can encourage the mystic in us**
- 6 We engage with key texts from Julian**
- 7 We conclude with a prayer exercise**

## WHAT IS A MYSTIC?

So, what is a mystic? Is it someone who has been captivated by what Rudolf Otto called *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, in his classic *The Idea of the Holy*? Barreau affirms: 'mysticism is an existential attitude, a way of living at a greater depth.'<sup>40</sup> Jones states: 'the mystic is in touch with an 'object' which is invisible, intangible and inaccessible, beyond sensual contact.'<sup>41</sup> 'The Christian of the future will be a mystic, or he will not exist at all' wrote Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner, affirming that mysticism is 'a genuine experience of God emerging from the very heart of our existence.'<sup>42</sup>

Evelyn Underhill declares that mysticism 'is the direct intuition or experience of God; and a mystic is a person who has, to a greater or lesser degree, such a direct experience – one whose religion and life are centred, not merely on an accepted belief or practice, but on that which he regards as first hand personal knowledge.'<sup>43</sup> William Wainwright in his work *Mysticism* notes: 'While modern English speakers use 'mystical experience' to refer to a wide variety of preternatural experiences, scholars have tended to restrict the term to 'unitary states.'<sup>44</sup> Scholars speak of mysticism in terms of an experience of 'undifferentiated unity' where there are no distinctions between human and divine, between subject and object: these are transcended in a consciousness of union with God where all is one. As we explore Jesus' mysticism we shall note some significant differences: while Jesus has a vision for the wholeness of creation, he sees this as the coming together of different elements that had been separated: their reconciliation, not their merger.

Mystics...in all religious traditions (Christian, Hindu, Sufi ...) have an overwhelming awareness of being loved by God: 'God is love & s/he who

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<sup>40</sup> J.-C. Barreau, 'Preface' in O. Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* (New City, London, 1993), p. 8

<sup>41</sup> C. P.M, Jones, 'Mysticism, human and Divine' in C. Jones, G. Wainwright & E. Yarnold (eds.), *The Study of Spirituality* (SPCK, London, 1986), p. 19

<sup>42</sup> K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations* 20 (Crossroads, New York, 1981), 149

<sup>43</sup> E. Underhill, *Mystics of the Church* (James Clarke & Co., Cambridge, 1925), p. 9

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in W. P. Alston, *Perceiving God: the Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cornel University Press, London, 1991), p. 25

abides in love abides in God' (1 John 4 v 16). Mystics come to the experience of being radically accepted by God – 'Self is permanently established in God' (Evelyn Underhill in her book *Mysticism*). This theme is celebrated in Jesus' prayer: 'I pray that all may be one' (John 17:21). Julian, as we shall see, speaks of the 'Oneing' of God: the goal is Divine Union.

Only language of lovers describes what's going on...mystical vocabulary speaks of mystery, tenderness, specialness, nakedness, risk, ecstasy, incessant longing, great suffering & great love. There is an encounter– not just a change in some religious ideas – everything shifts position. There is a movement beyond rules and doctrines – the emphasis no longer 'sanctuary, sanctuary, sanctuary' (Jer 7:11) but becomes 'You have seduced me' (Jer. 20:7). God becomes known through presence, contemplation, prayer--- not merely believing in doctrines or living inside church structures ---there is a move from external belief systems to inner experience. In the English mystics, there is a movement away from scholastic theology to movement of affectivity---- love as opposed to fear.

Those experiencing mystical prayer discover that there is no need to exclude or set up barriers or eliminate others: mystics have experienced radical inclusivity, which cracks open previous rigid barriers, especially in relation to awareness of God and of self.

## **JESUS AS A MYSTIC**

### **Seeing things differently**

In Jesus' experience, his mystical openness to the Father is not only a question of first-hand knowledge of God, but also triggers and enables a new and different way of knowing altogether: a different way of seeing the world. The essential thing about his mystical prayer, it seems, is its ability to encompass and enfold into one, into a unity, the diverse and often

competing elements of life. Jesus is a seer in more than one sense.<sup>45</sup> He opens his eyes to view the world, its divisions and possibilities, with insight and longing.

As we have seen, Jesus goes *up into the hills* to pray. There he will glimpse a new perspective on things. On the shoreline at Capernaum and the lakeside villages, one can see either one coast of Galilee or another. It is not possible to see both opposite coasts at the same time. One can look west and see the city of Tiberias and the nearby northern shore: mainly Jewish, conservative traditional communities. Or, alternatively, one can look east across the waters of the lake to the other side and glimpse enemy territory, the heathen and pagan land of the Decapolis, Hellenistic and gentile lands where lurk demoniacs and unclean pigs! One may set one's eyes on one side or another, and an 'either/or' choice is involved.

But when you climb up into the hills you see things differently. The higher you climb, the more you see: physically and mystically. You see vistas and panoramas that are able to encompass, in one single view, both sides. You can see both the safe traditional towns that Peter and the disciples dwelt in, and you can see the steep looming cliffs of the Golan Heights to the east – the other side. In his experience of prayer on these very hills, Jesus glimpses a new reality. The lake does not divide, after all – it unites! Both sides, both peoples, both cultures are within the Father's embrace. It is not a question of dualistic 'either/or' thinking. It is 'both/and.' Note how Jesus will often say: 'let us go over to the other side.' He wants to enfold into his Kingdom all sorts and conditions of people. He longs to criss-cross the lake repeatedly: there is space in the Kingdom for all. Jesus develops a vision for wholeness – for the healing of divides. Jesus, like Julian, lived in a bitterly divided and polarized world. In the first century society was falling apart and riven by conflict and opposing forces. It was a painfully polarized society in which the sick and maimed were excluded from the Temple and where those who did not 'fit' were mercilessly marginalized.

## Discovering a unifying vision

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<sup>45</sup> B. Witherington, *Jesus the Seer: The Progress of Prophecy* (Hendrickson, 1999).

It is precisely in a context of prevailing dualistic mind-sets that Jesus develops his radical unifying and inclusive vision of the Kingdom of God. With all his heart he longs to bring all people together as one in their dignity as beloved and cherished children of God. In the holy city Jesus will cry out his heart's longing: 'Jerusalem Jerusalem...How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!' (Lk. 13:34). Jesus' desire is for the unity of the world: 'Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God' (Lk.13:29).

Notice how many of Jesus' sayings are about overcoming separation, loss and division. He sees the potential for things once separated coming together:

The woman is reunited with her lost coin.

The shepherd once again embraces his sheep.

The yeast is mixed with the flour.

The vine is joined to the branches.

The birds come to roost in the branches.

Things old and new are to be treasured.

The enemy is to be loved.

The prodigal is restored to his father.

The wounded Jewish traveller finds himself in the arms of a hated Samaritan.

God's will is to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Love of God and love of neighbour are inseparable.

The kingdom is both now and not yet, here and still to come.

Where did these ideas come from? For Jesus, the self-same mountains of prayer, the hills above Galilee become the mountains of teaching. In Matthew's perspective, Jesus goes up the mountain to teach (Matt. 5) and the Sermon on the Mount follows. But this hillside is precisely the same place

where Jesus went up into the hills to pray. His teachings flow from his prayer.

### **Discovering a sacramental universe**

As Jesus prayed in the hills above Galilee, he looked at the world sacramentally and contemplatively. 'Consider the flowers of the field' – take a long, slow look at them and discover how they reveal the secrets of the Kingdom. Time and again Jesus glimpses the unity of creation. Jesus sees a wholeness to creation: there is no place for dualistic polarized thought.

'Both / and' thinking reveals itself again and again. Looking up at the sun and feeling on his skin the rain falling on the lush Galilee hills, Jesus announces: 'He makes the sun rise on the righteous and unrighteous alike and the rain on the just and unjust' (Matt. 5:5). Looking at the earth below him and seeing how wheat and weed become intertwined, he declares: 'Let both of them grow together' (Matt. 13: 24–30).

For Jesus, the key is in the looking – how we see the world contemplatively, what we notice and what we miss. Jesus rejoices: 'blessed are your eyes, for they see' (Matt. 13: 16). In the *Gospel of Thomas* (113), his disciples ask him, 'When will the kingdom come?' Jesus replies: 'the Father's kingdom is spread out upon the earth, and people don't see it.' In another saying from this source, words are placed on the lips of Jesus that testify to a unifying vision of the world: 'When you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower,... then you will enter the kingdom' (*Gospel of Thomas* 22).

## **MYSTICISM IN THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY**

The fourteenth century was a time of deep distress in the Church and beyond, but also witnessed a remarkable flowering of spirituality in Greece, along the Rhine, and in England.

The western church was unsettled by the removal of the seat of the papacy to Avignon in France, and by a forty year period of schism when a rival pope was elected in 1378. Europe was devastated by the bubonic plague which

raged from 1348. The “Black Death” killed about one third of the population, robbing churches of their pastors and leaders, and leading to a new focus on the Passion and death of Christ in popular prayer, and a fear of the wrath of God.

But it was during this period that, in different parts of the world, there bubbled up the new springs of a hopeful spirituality. In Greece, new monasteries flourished on Mount Athos, representing almost the world Orthodox world, as monks came from Russia, Serbia, Bulgaria, and beyond. Among the outstanding teachers of prayer that emerged in the fourteenth century were St Gregory of Sinai and St Gregory Palamas. Their search for stillness in prayer, *hesychasm*, led to the use of the Jesus Prayer “*Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner*” as a tool for uniting mind and heart in contemplation.

In Germany, a succession of spiritual teachers known collectively as the *Rhineland Mystics* began with Meister Eckhart (1260–1327). In powerful and direct writing he stressed man’s capacity for union with the transcendent Creator, but he was accused of the heresy of overstating the affinity between God and the soul.

An England fraught by the double horrors of disease and war produced spiritual writings which reveal a deep thirst for the God who never changes, the God beyond.

The anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing* (c 1375) describes prayer as entering a darkness where concepts fail, where we need to go beyond words and reach God by longing and loving, not by thinking: ‘The most godly knowing of God is that which is known by unknowing’

Walter Hilton (c1340–1396) maps out the spiritual journey in his *Ladder of Ascent*, *inviting the reader*: ‘Become a lover of Jesus fully united to him in softness of love’.

Richard Rolle (c1300–1349) depicts prayer as a *Fire of Love* in the soul leading to the ‘breakthrough’ of knowledge when one is “*aware of a heavenly secret infused into his sweet love, and known only by himself*”. He goes on: ‘I

have found that to love God above all else requires but three things: warmth, song and sweetness.’

## **JULIAN OF NORWICH**

Julian of Norwich (c 1342 – 1413) stands within this English mystical tradition. Living as a hermit attached to a parish church, she discovers God through a series of vivid revelations in 1373 which she records and reflects upon. While she glimpses immense suffering in the heart of God as seen on the Cross, her vision of the divine is supremely optimistic, delighting in a God whose love can conquer all human foibles. In the midst of all the vicissitudes in society she was able to affirm: “All shall be well, all shall be well & thou shalt see it thyself that all manner of things shall be well”. She stayed in her tiny cell with her window onto the world for over 20 years (not unusual....over 30 anchoresses in Norwich at this time as well as Julian). After near-death experiences, following a serious illness, she had a series of ‘shewings’ published as ‘Revelations of Divine Love’ – this was the first book written by a woman in England.

### **Julian’s image of God: three features**

#### **1.Theological optimist**

She was not caught in the theology and obsession with sin of the Middle Ages – God’s will shall ultimately be worked out – ‘All shall be well....’ She sees no wrath in God – God is not judge – sin has no substance – God cannot forgive because God has already forgiven (this speaks to guilt-ridden Christians of today!). She asked for wound of contrition....God’s gaze – “with pity not with blame”

#### **2.Conversant with God as Mother**

There was already a long tradition (Scripture, Augustine, Anselm, Mechtild, Catherine of Sienna). Julian herself was a mother – for her, Motherhood means wisdom & loving-kindness: ‘Jesus, My kind mother, my gracious mother, my beloved mother, have mercy on me.’ In another place she writes: ‘What tenderness is in this fair & lovely word, mother.’ Julian asked for the wound of natural compassion.

### **3. Homely images**

She writes of the Blood of Christ crucified – falling & spreading like herring scales or rain from the eaves of a house. God always wraps us in love as a mother swaddles her child. Jesus in his passion is hung out to dry like a cloth left out in the cold wind. (These were not traditional church imagery of the times – images were mediated through her direct life experience --- the personal breakthroughs in her perception and understanding).

How might this look in our spiritual experience?

## **ENCOURAGING THE MYSTIC IN US**

### **1 Review your image of God**

Julian ‘saw’ , in her Shewings, that there was a distortion in the way we see God – God surrounds us, encloses us, enfolds us, swaddles us in love ---- and most of the time we’re not looking – we are blind to this. She invites us to move deeper into an awareness of God in our daily life – and begin to see God in all things.

We need to reflect on how we approach and perceive and receive God in our life situations. How do we picture or image God– what is our default God–image. Some see God as taskmaster or heavenly schoolmaster, always

marking us down – revealed in such throw away lines as: ‘I feel so bad about myself....Oh, I’m so stupid!’

Our image of God will flow from our early experiences (initial gaze/bonding) and this will be a major factor that will support or hinder or harm our inner journey. If, unlike the mystics, one has an image of a remote God, one is less likely to be honest, and early childhood patterns, teachings, critical voices will fill the gap. If one has low self-esteem, one won’t be able to imagine God (an authority) noticing or caring about you – or interested in one’s apparently trivial, modest hopes.

Is God a prosecuting or defence lawyer ? Julian teaches that the wraith is not in God but in ourselves: – we project it – and she adds that ‘the judgement is not heavenly but earthly’. The mystic experience knows divine embrace, a radical acceptance by God, even in the midst of our poverty and state of fragmentation.

Mystical experience can be the best possible cure for low/poor self-esteem ! As one’s self-image heals, one opens to the new possibilities of love from others and God. As one experiences value, worth and significance in and through God’s direct love, there takes place a transformation, conversion, metanoia. We can make one’s own the hymn ‘I once was blind but now I see’.

One can echo St Francis’ questions – ‘Who , are you God? Who am I?’ We need to remember that my image of God and my image of self are always partial, and capable of development. My prime relationship to myself will determine how I think about God: there is an inevitable link between the two. As Karl Rahner puts it: ‘Our image of God & our image of self are a unity.’

Q What is my usual image of God?

## 2 Slow down

'Prayer is the true, gracious, lasting intention of the soul one-d & made fast to the will of our Lord by the sweet, secret working of the Holy Spirit' (Julian)

Julian invites us to foster the contemplative dimension within ourselves .... alert to gifts of time...of calls to silence, stillness in our life.... We need to beware of a Christian life which has a persistent pattern of doing everything but making time for God in prayer. 'We are a circumference people with little access to the centre - living on the boundaries of our life. We must allow the Divine gaze...' (p74 Rohr in *The Naked Now*). What slows YOU? We must be capable of self-reflection, of honest self-disclosure with God and with others.

*Q What are the spiritual practices that support our/my inner mystic?*

**A READING FROM JULIAN OF NORWICH**

Our good Lord showed me a spiritual sight of his familiar love. I saw that he is to us everything which is good and comforting for our help. He is our clothing, who wraps and enfolds us for love, embraces us and shelters us, surrounds us for his love, which is so tender that he may never desert us. And so in this sight I saw that he is everything which is good, as I understand.

And in this he showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed to me, and it was as round as a ball. I looked at it with the eyes of my understanding and thought: What can this be? I was amazed that it could last, for I thought that because of its littleness it would suddenly have fallen into nothing. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the love of God.

In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it, the second is that God loves it, the third is that God preserves it. But what did I see in it? It is that God is the Creator and the protector and the lover. For until I am substantially united with him, I can never have perfect rest or true happiness, until, that is, I am so attached to him that there can be no created thing between my God and me...

I understand three ways of contemplating motherhood in God. The first is the foundation of our nature's creation; the second is his taking of our nature, where the motherhood of grace begins; the third is the motherhood at work... This fair lovely word 'mother' is so sweet and so kind in itself that it cannot truly be said of anyone or to anyone except of him and to him who is the true Mother of life and of all things....

And in our spiritual bringing to birth he uses more tenderness, without any comparison, in protecting us. By so much as our soul is more precious in his sight, he kindles our understanding, he prepares our ways, he eases our conscience, he comforts our soul, he illumines our heart and gives us partial knowledge and love of his blessed divinity, with gracious memory of his sweet humanity and his blessed Passion, with courteous wonder over his great surpassing goodness, and makes us to love everything which he loves for love of him, and to be well satisfied with him and with all his works. And when we fall, quickly he raises us up with his loving embrace and his gracious touch. And when we are strengthened by his sweet working, then we shall be his servants and his lovers, constantly and forever.

Our Lord is most glad and joyful because of our prayer; and he expects it, and he wants to have it, for with his grace it makes us like to himself in condition as we are in nature, and such is his blessed will. For he says: Pray wholeheartedly, though it seems to you that this has no savour for you; still it is profitable enough, though you may not feel that. Pray wholeheartedly, though you may feel nothing, yes, though you think that you could not, for in dryness and in barrenness, in sickness and in weakness, then is your prayer most pleasing to me, though you think it almost tasteless to you. And so is all your living prayer in my sight.

#### QUESTIONS TO PONDER WITH JULIAN

1. *"He is everything that is good"*. Recall experiences when God has spoken to you through the things of nature. How can we train ourselves to see God in all things, and at the same time allow *"no created thing between my God and me"*? What is your experience of seeing the world sacramentally, as Julian did, with the example of the hazelnut?
2. *"...contemplating motherhood in God"*. Julian boldly pioneers the idea of the feminine in God. Join her in exploring the various ways Jesus can be

mother to us. How do these ideas enrich and balance your understanding of God?

3. "*in sickness and in weakness...is your prayer most pleasing to me*". Julian prayed in an age of disease and death, and was familiar with illness. What is your experience of praying *in weakness*, even *in dryness and barrenness*? Can our vulnerability lead us into a deeper relationship with God? How can we pray when we don't feel like it?
4. Julian could not conceive of anger or wrath in God, only compassion and love. Is her view balanced biblically, too soft, or just right?
5. Julian was above everything a person of hope and confidence in God. Underline parts of the text which express such hope and trust. How do they help you?

## PRAYER EXERCISE

*Either*

Reflect on and celebrate ways in which God's love surrounds and sustains us. Write intercessions on pieces of paper and place them at the centre of a cloth. Slowly and gently enfold these prayers in the cloth, and perhaps place before a cross, while reading the first paragraph above. Conclude with thanksgivings, using Psalm 130.

*Or*

Hold in the palm of your hand a flower, shell, or something from creation – even a hazelnut! Using *the eyes of your understanding* reflect on its beauty and on its fragility. Let it speak to you of your life precious in God's hands. Read Psalm 139 and give thanks.

## FOR FURTHER READING

Our extract is from *Julian of Norwich: Showings* trans. E. Colledge and J. Walsh, Classics of Western Spirituality (SPCK, 1978), Chapters 5, 59, 60, 61, 41 (Long Text).

R. Llewelyn: *With Pity Not With Blame* (DLT, 1982).

J. Julian, *The Complete Julian of Norwich* (Paraclete Press)

E. R. Obbard, *Through Julian's Windows* (Canterbury Press)

D., S. & M. Linn, *Good Goats : Healing our Image of God* (Paulist Press)

R. Rohr, *The Naked Now : Learning to See as the Mystics See* (Crossroads)

## UNIT 7 EVANGELICAL SPIRITUALTY

### AIMS OF THIS UNIT

- 1 We identify key characteristics of evangelical spirituality
- 2 We engage with an example from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, John Bunyan
- 3 We engage with an example from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, John Wesley
- 4 We conclude with a prayer exercise

*Q What do you think are the characteristics of Evangelical spirituality?*

They might include

- Individual faith and the experience of conversion: a direct and personal relationship with God
- Ongoing sanctification and growth in the Spirit: quest for personal holiness
- Private devotion centred on reading of Scripture: 'the Quiet Time'

- Family prayers and observance of Sunday Sabbath
- Commitment to belong to a fellowship
- Resolve to witness to one's faith before others
- Keen sense of personality and morality arising from one's piety
- Responding to the needs of the poor
- Spiritual disciplines might include fasting and retreat, midweek prayer meeting, with open extempore prayer, and Bible study group

In this unit we will look at two classic examples

## THE SEVENTEETH CENTURY

The seventeenth-century witnessed the redrawing of the religious map in the wake of the Reformation, and the emergence of distinctive elements within Protestantism, the origins of later separate denominations.

While the Mediterranean countries remained mainly Catholic and Scandinavia and the Netherlands embraced Protestantism, central Europe became a battleground both ideologically and literally. The Thirty Years' War (1618–48) became a bitter struggle between Catholics and Calvinists, ending in a compromise treaty which urged peaceful co-existence.

In England, James I succeeded Elizabeth and gave encouragement to a new translation of the Bible – the Authorised Version published in 1611. But he continued Elizabeth's intolerance of the Puritans. They were determined to 'purify' the English Church of anything resembling Catholic practice, and to bring it a deeper reformation on Calvin's Geneva model. Wanting to change the church from within, they became alienated and found themselves forming separate congregations, the precursor of the congregationalist

churches. As many as twenty thousand were to emigrate to the New World, the first 'Pilgrim Fathers' setting out in the *Mayflower* in 1620.

Other dissenting bodies emerged during this century: Baptists, promoting adult baptism and influenced by radical continental thinking; Quakers, encouraging individual religious experience, led by George Fox; and the Presbyterians, unsuccessful in trying to rid the English church of bishops but becoming the established church in Scotland. It was not until the Toleration Act of 1689 that these groups began to win official recognition in England and the right to build chapels. Before then, they had suffered hard in the turbulent years of civil war in England when the High Churchman Charles I sought to rid his kingdom of Calvinists. After his execution in 1649, Puritans come to prominence under Oliver Cromwell, but suffered badly under Charles II when the monarchy was restored in 1660. His Act of Uniformity established the use of a version of the Book of Common Prayer still in use today, but drove out of the Church of England those who would not conform – the 'Nonconformists'.

**JOHN BUNYAN** (1628–88) found himself caught up in these events. The son of a tinker, he became a soldier on the Parliamentary Army in the 1650's. These were years of intense spiritual struggle for Bunyan, who tried to outwardly change his life without an inner experience of Christ. His conversion in about 1655 was a major turning point, and he became a preacher for the congregation of Independents in Bedford. He was jailed for

some twelve years during the persecution of Charles II, and began his first books during the imprisonment, *Grace Abounding* appearing in 1666.

After his release, he went back to preach for the Bedford congregation and began an evangelistic ministry which took him further afield. He wrote *Pilgrim's Progress* in 1678, reflecting something of his own eventful spiritual journey.

#### A READING FROM JOHN BUNYAN

As I walked through the wilderness of the world, I came to a place where there was a den. There I lay down to sleep; and as I slept, I dreamed a dream. In my dream I saw a man clothed with rags, standing by a path with a book in his hand and a great burden upon his back....

Christian finally came to the little gate. Over the gate was written, in bold letters: "KNOCK, AND IT SHALL BE OPENED UNTO YOU." Christian knocked...At last one came to the gate whose name was Goodwill. He asked, in a deep voice, "Who's there, where did you come from, and what do you want?"

CHRISTIAN: I am a poor, burdened sinner. I come from the City of Destruction, and I want to go to Mount Zion, that I may be safe from the coming wrath of God. I am informed that through this gate is the way to Zion. I would like to know, therefore, if you will let me in.

**GOODWILL...**We do not reject any who come. No matter what they have done before coming, they are in no wise cast out. And now, my good pilgrim, come with me a little way, and I will show you the way to go. Now look yonder. Do you see that narrow way? That is the road you must take. It was travelled by the patriarchs in olden times, and by the prophets, and by Christ and His apostles; and it is as straight as a line can make it.

**CHRISTIAN:** But are there no turnings or windings by which a stranger may lose his way?

**GOODWILL:** Yes, there are many roads branching off from this one, but you can distinguish the right way from the wrong, for the right way is the only road that is straight and narrow.

Then Christian asked Mr Goodwill if he would remove the burden from his back, for he was still carrying it and could by no means get it off without help. Goodwill counselled: "Be content to bear your burden a little longer, until you come to the place of deliverance. Then it will fall from your shoulders of itself." Now Christian began to prepare for his journey...

Now I saw in my dream Christian walking briskly up a highway fenced on both sides with a high wall. He began to run, though he could not run fast because of the load on his back. On top of the hill, he came to a cross. Just as he got to the cross, his burden came loose, dropped from his shoulders, and went tumbling down the hill. It fell into an open grave, and I saw it no more.

Now Christian's heart was light. He had found relief from his burden. He said to himself, "He has given me rest by His sorrows, and life by his death." He stood gazing at the cross, wondering how the sight of the cross could so relieve one of guilt and shame...He was so thankful.

At a great distance, Christian could see a magnificent mountainous country. In this faraway land were great forests, green vineyards, sparkling fountains, broad fields... He asked the name of the country. They said, "It is Immanuel's Land, and it is for all pilgrims, just as this hill is, and from there you will be able to see the gate of the celestial City, as the shepherds will show you."

He expressed his desire to go, and they were willing. "But first," they suggested, "let us go again to the armory." There they equipped him from head to foot with what he would need most on his journey. Being thus clothed, he walked out with his friends to the gate...

At the foot of the hill, Christian's good companions gave him a loaf of bread, a bottle of wine, and a large bunch of raisins. Bidding them good-bye, he went on alone.

From Thomas, J.H., *The Pilgrim's Progress in Today's English*. (Victory Press, Eastbourne, 1972)

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER WITH JOHN BUNYAN

1. In Christian's journey to the City of God, Bunyan develops a rich biblical image. God calls Abraham to step out in faith (Genesis 12.1–9); Moses leads the Israelites out of slavery, through the wilderness towards the promised land. In his Gospel, Mark depicts Jesus going on ahead of the disciples to lead them to the cross and beyond (10.32). The first Christians were called 'people of the Way' (Acts 9.2 cf John 14.6). Paul loves the metaphor of moving forward (Galatians 5.16, Philippians 3.12). How can the idea of spiritual journey/pilgrimage/adventure inspire our understanding about relating to God?

2. 'there are many roads branching off from this one...' On his journey, Christian comes to several junctions where he must make a choice about the direction to take. How does your faith inform the decisions you must make, when you find yourself at a cross-roads?
3. In his trek, Christian encounters rough terrain, places of temptation and trial, and people who would side-track him – with names like 'Ignorance', 'Talkative' and 'Superstition'. But God provides companions to bring him through – friends Bunyan calls 'Hopeful', 'Faithful.' How can we, as a pilgrim people, support one another more effectively in the spiritual journey? What forms of encouragement can you give –and receive – from others?
4. 'Christian's good companions gave him a loaf of bread, a bottle of wine..' What provisions does God give us for the spiritual journey? How can we make better use of them?
5. Have you been on a pilgrimage of some sort? How can holy places inspire us?

## THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

The eighteenth-century was a time when a sense of spiritual emptiness and need opened the door to an unprecedented revival springing up in different places. In Germany, Lutheranism's descent into a dry orthodoxy – a sort of 'protestant scholasticism' was met by a recovery of devotion and commitment in the Pietist revival, which emphasised the necessity of a new birth and personal faith, pioneered by Philip Spener. His godson Count Zinzendorf helped to establish a Moravian community at Herrnhut near Dresden which sent missionaries to England in the 1720's.

John and Charles Wesley first met the Moravians on a voyage to Georgia. The brothers, both Anglican priests, were on a mission to New England but their own spiritual experience was dim. They were struck by the Moravians' warmth of devotion, and on their return John sought them out again, making

a pilgrimage to Herrnhut to discover their secret. He was urged to set aside his own efforts at salvation and rely on Christ's grace alone. In May 1738 Wesley experienced a conversion experience that was to redirect his life.

From now on, he was determined to bring an evangelistic message of repentance to the people of England, whose religious commitment was so shallow. He rode thousands of miles on horseback to address vast open-air meetings, and followed these up by having local 'class meetings' organised for the continuing instruction and fellowship of believers. Originally within the Church of England, they were to become the origins of the new movement of 'Methodism.'

The 'Evangelical Revival' was born, while the American colonies experienced their own 'Awakening', Wesley's colleague the great preacher George Whitefield going over to build on the foundations begun by Jonathan Edwards (1703–58). Both these movements resulted in new dedication to missionary enterprise, competing with powerful Catholic missions which had begun earlier with the explorations into the 'New World'. Missionaries followed traders and colonialists into undiscovered lands, Catholics establishing missions as far-flung as Latin America and China, Evangelicals beginning their efforts on the continent of Africa.

But this century was to see a deep questioning of the Christian faith which would shake the churches to the core. The Enlightenment produced a generation of influential thinkers who questioned the foundations of faith in their search for a rational explanation for everything. Reason and logic were their yardsticks. In France, the seeds sown by people like Voltaire were to germinate in the violent overthrow of the *Ancien Regime* in the Revolution of 1789. Meanwhile, in Britain, the Industrial Revolution was to change forever both the physical and ideological landscape, creating unforeseen new challenges and opportunities for the churches.

**JOHN WESLEY** (1703 – 91) was not only a courageous preacher, but also an articulate theologian. His search for an authentic, consistent Christian experience began in his university days at Oxford, where he tried to work out a ‘method’ or plan of spiritual disciplines, and found inspiration in the early Church Fathers and in later mystics like Thomas a Kempis. We have seen how his personal quest led him to an awareness of deep inner need, and prompted a new look at the Scriptures. At a time when spiritual mediocrity and superficiality were commonplace, he became insistent on the necessity of a continuing repentance to allow God to make radical changes in the heart of man. He expressed these ideas, sometimes controversially, in his doctrine of ‘Christian Perfection’ or ‘Scriptural Holiness’.

#### **A READING FROM JOHN WESLEY**

Perhaps the general prejudice against Christian Perfection may chiefly arise from a misunderstanding about its nature. We willingly allow, and continually declare, that there is no such thing as a perfection in this life that implies either a dispensation from doing good, and observing all the ordinances of God, or a freedom from ignorance, mistake, temptation, and a thousand weaknesses which are necessarily connected with flesh and blood...

But whom then do you mean by ‘one that is perfect’? We mean one in whom is ‘the mind which was in Christ,’ and who so ‘walks as Christ also walked’; a man ‘who has clean hands and a pure heart’ (Ps.24.4), or who is ‘purified from everything that contaminates body and spirit’ (see 2 Cor.7.1), one in whom ‘there is nothing to make his brother stumble’ (see I John 2.10), and who, accordingly, ‘cannot go on sinning’ [‘he cannot sin’ AV] (I John 3.9).

To explain this in a little more detail: we understand that the scriptural expression, 'become mature' ['a perfect man'] (Eph. 4.13), refers to the person in whom God has fulfilled his faithful word, 'you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols' (Ezek.36.25). We understand from this one whom God has made holy throughout in body, soul, and spirit; one who 'walks in the light, as he is in the light, in whom there is no darkness at all; the blood of Jesus, his Son, having purified him from all sin' (see I John 1.7,5).

This man can now testify to all mankind, 'I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me' (Gal.2.20). He 'is holy as God who called him is holy' both in heart and 'in all he does' (see I Pet. 1.15–16). He 'loves the Lord his God with all his heart,' serves him 'with all his strength.' He 'loves his neighbour,' every man, 'as himself' (see Luke 10.27)...Indeed his soul is all love, filled with 'compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience' (Col. 3.12). And his life agrees with this, being full of 'work produced by faith, labour prompted by love, and endurance inspired by hope' (see I Thess.1.3). 'And whatever he does, whether in word or deed,' he does, 'it all in the name , ' in the love and power, 'of the Lord Jesus' (see Col.3.17). In a word, he does 'the will of God on earth, as it is done in heaven' (see Matt.6.10).

This is what it is to be a perfect man, for God has 'made perfect for ever those who are being made holy' (Heb. 10.14), even 'to have a heart so all-flaming with the love of God' (to use Archbishop Usher's words) 'as continually to offer up every thought, word, and work, as a spiritual sacrifice, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (see I Pet.2.5)...In other words, to be inwardly and outwardly devoted to God; all devoted in heart and life.

Lord, I believe, thy work of grace

Is perfect in the soul!

His heart is pure who sees thy face,

His spirit is made whole...

He walks in glorious liberty,

To sin entirely dead;

The Truth, the Son hath made him free,

And he is free indeed.

Throughout his soul thy glories shine,

His soul is all renewed,

And decked in righteousness divine,

And clothed and filled with God.

This is the rest, the life, the peace,

Which all thy people prove;

Love is the bond of perfectness,

And all their soul is love...

Come, o my God, thyself reveal,

Fill all this mighty void;

Thou only canst my spirit fill;

## **Come, O my God, my God!**

From Backhouse, H.C. (ed), *A Plain Man's Guide to Holiness: Wesley's Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1988)

### **QUESTIONS TO PONDER WITH JOHN WESLEY**

1. 'Come O my God, thyself reveal, Fill all this mighty void.' Is awareness of need the prerequisite of personal and corporate revival? In what ways can a sense of spiritual dissatisfaction be a good thing?
2. Wesley was concerned to describe a perfect Christian. How adequate do you find his account? What words or biblical ideas would you use to depict the goals of holiness and spiritual maturity?
3. A key passage for Wesley was Philippians 2.1–13, especially the phrases 'the mind of Christ' and 'work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you...' What do you think Paul means by these words?
4. 'Inwardly and outwardly devoted to God.' What steps can we take to maintain a consistent Christian life? How can we fulfil in our working lives in a secular world the injunction 'Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus' (Colossians 3.17)? How can the offering up of 'every thought, word, and work' transform ordinary tasks?
5. 'His soul is all love.' For Wesley, the heart of the matter of Christian perfection was 'perfect love.' In what sense could it be true 'love is all we need'? Compare the two Great Commandments in Luke 10.27.

### **PRAYER EXERCISE with John Bunyan**

Either

Reflect on your faith-journey. On a piece of paper draw a time-line, with decades marked off 0 –100 (!). Above the line put a plus sign (+) to indicate positive moments and below the line place a minus sign (–) where there has been a difficult period. Thank God for the people who have helped you on your pilgrimage, led you into faith or deepened your commitment. Look forwards in hope by writing on a card a target or objective for your life of discipleship for the next twelve months. Make your goal challenging but realistic. Surrender this to God by placing your card before a cross in silent trust. Close by reading the last paragraph of our extract.

Or

Jesus urged his disciples to travel light and be single-minded in their journey (Matthew 10.5–10). Place before you a cross. Read Matthew 11.28–30. Take a stone in your hand and feel its weight. Let it represent a burden you are carrying, a concern that weighs heavily upon you. Prayerfully place it at the foot of the cross. Let go of your worry and yield it to God. Read the third paragraph of our extract, and join Christian in giving thanks. Recommit yourself to walking forwards with Christ.

### **PRAYER EXERCISE with John Wesley**

Either

For fifty five years, Wesley kept a daily Journal in which he recorded his spiritual progress – and setbacks. Famously, in his entry for 24<sup>th</sup> May 1738 he relates his conversion in the words: ‘in the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s *preface* to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was

describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away *my* sins, even *mine...*' Consider beginning a spiritual journal for yourself, allowing time for daily self-examination and reflection on God's work in your life. Start now by penning the story of your conversion – write out your 'testimony' of discovering Christ.

Or

John's brother Charles wrote over 5500 hymns, powerfully expressing both doctrine and experience, and they played an important part in the Evangelical Revival. Take a hymnbook and checking the index of authors, choose one that is used today. How does it help you? Sing it!

#### FOR FURTHER READING

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## UNIT 8: MONASTIC SPIRITUALITY: BENEDICT

### AIMS OF THIS UNIT

- 1 We set Benedict in his historical background
- 2 We engage with a reading from the *Rule* of St Benedict
- 3 We unpack the text through questions for discussion, seeing how Benedictine wisdom speaks to our life today
- 4 We conclude with a prayer exercise

### HISTORICAL SETTING

The sixth century was an age of turmoil and deep insecurity, the Roman Empire continuing to disintegrate at the hands of successive barbarian invasions from the north. It was in an Italy devastated by famine and attack that Gregory the Great began his papacy. He organised relief, new administration, and promoted missions for the conversion of barbarians, sending Augustine to Britain in 597. He represents the struggle of the Church to witness to charity and order in an age of conflict.

Gregory is our chief source for details about Benedict's life. At the start of the century Benedict sought solitude at Subiaco, where a community formed around him. In 525 he moved to Monte Cassino where he composed his *Rule* for the guidance of monks. His aim was to provide a structure and framework for a life of seeking God. The vow of *stability* required monks to

stay in one place for life, providing a rootedness in a turbulent world, while the vow of *continual conversion* required the monk to stay always open to the changes and challenges a life of prayer may bring.

#### **A READING FROM BENEDICT OF NURSA**

**As the Prophet says: *Seven times a day have I spoken your praise* (Psalm 119:164). We will fulfil this sacred number of seven if at Lauds, at the first, third, sixth, ninth hours, at Vespers and Compline we render the obligation of our office...**

**The oratory is to be what it is called, and nothing else should be done or kept there. When the Work of God is finished all should go out in complete silence and with reverence for God, so that a brother who wishes to pray by himself will not be impeded by another's insensitivity. But if he wishes to pray in solitude, he should enter to pray with simplicity, not in a loud voice but with tears and attentiveness of heart. And therefore one who is not performing this work is not permitted to remain in the oratory after the Work of God, so that, as was said, no one else is impeded.**

**Idleness is the enemy of the soul; and therefore the brothers should be occupied at certain times in manual labour, and at certain other hours in sacred reading. We therefore believe that the times for each may be ordered thus: from Easter to the first of October, on coming out of prime they are to labour at whatever is necessary from the first until about the fourth hour; from the fourth hour until about the time they say Sext they are to devote themselves to reading; after Sext upon rising from table they are to rest in their beds in complete silence, or if anyone wishes to read to himself he may read, but without disturbing the others; and None is to be performed rather early at the middle of the eighth hour; then they are to work at whatever needs to be done until Vespers.**

**If however, local necessity or poverty require that they themselves are occupied with gathering the harvest, they should not be saddened; for they**

are then truly monks when they live by the labour of their hands, as did our fathers and the apostles. But everything is to be done with proper measure on account of the fainthearted.

The monastery cellarer is to care for the sick, for children, for guests, and for the poor with all solicitude, knowing without doubt that for all these he will have to give an account on the Day of Judgement (Cf Luke 16:2). He is to look upon all the vessels and goods of the monastery as though they were the sacred vessels of the altar.

All guests who present themselves are to be received as Christ, for He will say: *I was a stranger and you took me in* (Matthew 25:35). And to everyone fitting honour is to be shown, especially to those of the household of faith (Galatians 6:10) and to pilgrims.

Extract is from *The Rule of St Benedict* trans. L. Dyingier (Source Books, California).

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER

1. The *Rule of St Benedict* aims to enable a structured life, where there is time and space for all tasks to be done, within a rhythm or pulse of prayer. What different aspects are allowed for in paragraph three? Do we maintain such a balance and perspective in our lives, juggling the demands of work, recreation and home?
2. Benedict directs that the Oratory should be respected as a space for prayer, never cluttered with items for storage. What steps can we take to safeguard such a space, physically or inwardly, which will not be over-run or eroded?
3. Why do you think Benedict calls the services in Church "*the Work of God*"? What does he mean by "*attentiveness of heart*"?
4. Key words in the *Rule* are *respect* and *reverence* – for all things and for all tasks. The cellarer is to handle all things as *sacred vessels* and humdrum jobs are as important as "noble" ones. How can we train

ourselves to live with such a sacramental view of life today? What ideas do you have for seeing God in all things?

5. Although his *Rule* encourages a keen sense of order in life, Benedict allows compassionately for human weakness and for unexpected events. Guests are to be welcomed *as Christ*, not resented as intrusions. What sort of happenings or people “interrupt” our day? How can we deal with them positively?

## PRAYER EXERCISE

### *Either*

On a clean piece of paper draw a circle to represent your life. Divide it up into different sized segments representing the proportions of time you normally spend on tasks and commitments. Reflect on whether there is a right balance between work and play, prayer and activity (this can be done in pairs in a group). Notice the tension between possible fragmentedness and the wholeness of the circle. Close by placing the papers under a cross as a sign of surrendering our often frantic lives to the Lordship of Christ.

### *Or*

Make a review of the last 24 hours. Reflect on how you used your time. Where was God in all this? How did you handle interruptions or unexpected challenges? Did you find yourself resenting any task? Be penitent for negative attitudes or opportunities missed. Praise God for the times you were aware of his presence.

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## **UNIT 9 TERESA OF AVILA: METAPHORS IN SPIRITUALITY**

### **AIMS OF THE UNIT**

**1 We begin to consider the significance and role of metaphor in spirituality and in spiritual writing and spiritual conversations**

**2 We encounter Teresa of Avila's image of the Interior Castle**

**3 We explore her image of the Waters**

**4 We explore her image of the Silkworm**

**5 We conclude with questions to ponder & a prayer exercise**

### **Finding the right words...**

How can we describe to others what is happening to us on our spiritual journey? How can we depict, for the benefit of ourselves and for others, the spiritual road that we are taking: experiences of prayer, transitions that we travel through, impediments that we face? How can we find images for the

intangible, 'naming' the invisible, bringing to visualization the unseen; expressing the silences? How can we externalize into words the interior emotions and movements in the soul?

We find ourselves lost for words, tongue-tied, dumbfounded, longing to find an expression. Barry and Connelly put it:

most people are inarticulate when they try...to describe their deeper feelings and attitudes. They can be even less articulate when they try to describe their relationship with God....For to begin to talk about this aspect of their lives requires the equivalent of a new language, the ability to articulate inner experience. <sup>46</sup>

In the sixteenth century Francisco de Osuna wrote: 'some matters of mystical theology cannot be understood in ordinary language.'<sup>47</sup> The Franciscan writer composed three *Spiritual Alphabets* which introduced the seeker to key ways of approaching the passion, spiritual disciplines and the practice of prayer. As Giles explains: 'We must become as little children, learning our ABCs of spirituality.'<sup>48</sup>

We need to equip and inspire *spiritual literacy*. We need to be able to read our soul. We need to access appropriate vocabulary depict the inner life of prayer: images and pictures, often stunning and unnerving, which help us describe and clarify what is happening to us; language and terms that will develop our awareness, and make the abstract concrete, make transparent what is opaque, cloudy. We need interpretive frameworks. We need to develop proficiency in the use of appropriate language, linguistic competency.

### **The power of metaphor**

As we seek to bring to expression aspects of our inner, spiritual life, we discover that we need we need metaphors, frameworks, reference points.

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<sup>46</sup> W. A. Barry & W. J. Connelly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (New York: Seabury Press, 1982), p.67

<sup>47</sup> M.E. Giles (tr.), *Francisco de Osuna: The Third Spiritual Alphabet* (NY: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 39

<sup>48</sup> Giles, *Osuna*, p. 7

Moltmann affirms how vital it is to use metaphors or images to describe spiritual experience: 'In the mystical metaphors, the distance between a transcendent subject and its immanent work is ended...the divine and human are joined in an organic cohesion. <sup>49</sup>

We can access feelings and aspects of our godward relationship by metaphor and stumble on insights that we can't approach in a more analytical or abstract conceptual mode. They open up rich seams to explore in spiritual direction or conversations with a trusted 'soul friend' or one who is walking with us on the spiritual journey. Janet Ruffing notices the natural emergence of metaphor in the sharing of stories and experiences between directee and director:

By uncovering the latent meanings and logical implications of the images and symbols emerging in the spiritual-direction conversation, we glimpse the plot and affective attitudes implicit in this language. We often say more than we fully grasp when such feeling words and images pour out of our mouths. Examining the dominant symbols and patterns of imagery with people in spiritual direction gives them access to what they already know about themselves in some vague way... (inviting) sufficient elaboration of the significant key images or symbols to ensure the possibility of grasping their meanings.<sup>50</sup>

The use of metaphors in expressing Christian insights is inescapable. Avis argues: 'All the significant assertions of theology are expressed in a language that is irreducibly metaphorical.'<sup>51</sup> Avis points out that metaphors drawn from the natural world have been used by poets as a hermeneutical key to help map the landscapes of the mind: 'Metaphor is generated in the drive to understand experience... Metaphor is not just naming one thing in terms of another, but seeing, experiencing and intellectualising one thing in

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<sup>49</sup> J. Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: an universal affirmation* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2001), p. 285

<sup>50</sup> J. K. Ruffing, *To Tell the Sacred Tale: spiritual direction and narrative* (New York:, Paulist Press, 2011), p. 90, 91

<sup>51</sup> P. Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology* (Routledge, London, 1999), p.102. See also P. Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* (University of Toronto Press 1978); D. Cooper, *Metaphor* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); J. Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (London: SCM, 1993); L. Fainsilber, and A. Ortony. 1987. "Metaphorical uses of language in the expression of emotions". *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity*. 2:4, pp. 239-250.

the light of the other.’<sup>52</sup> There is also an heuristic potential in metaphor: seeking discovery or exploration of an issue. As Brian Wren puts it: ‘Metaphors can organize language, encourage a transfer of associations and feelings between the matrices they intersect, extend language, generate new insights, and move us at a deep level by their appeal to the senses and imagination.’<sup>53</sup> Metaphors have the power to shift us from left-brain analytical thinking to creative right-hemisphere imagining – and imaging. Teresa of Avila gives us a vivid and accessible range of metaphors in her writings. We will look at how she develops an architectural metaphor, a nature metaphor and an organic metaphor in this unit.

## TERESA OF AVILA

Teresa of Avila (1515–1582) was twenty when she entered the Carmelite Order. She found monastic life tedious and unfulfilling until she experienced a ‘second conversion’, occasioned by encountering a statue of the suffering Christ, which moved her to new depths of repentance. Reading Augustine’s *Confessions*, she recognised Christ calling her to a new commitment. At the age of forty she realised that her mission was to encourage a radical reform of the religious life and to lead people into greater expectancy and fruitfulness in prayer. She went on to establish sixteen convents, latterly with the help of St John of the Cross.

## IMAGE OF THE CASTLE

Teresa of Avila uses vivid images to describe the changes that can take place in prayer.<sup>54</sup> Teresa develops the patristic concept of the Triple Way which

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<sup>52</sup> Avis, *Creative Imagination*, p.97

<sup>53</sup> B. Wren, *What Language Shall I Borrow? God –Talk in Worship* (London: SCM, 1989), p 92

<sup>54</sup> Stages of development in Christian spirituality are represented in the pioneering work of psychologists Erikson and Fowler. See E. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (Pelican, 1969), and *Identity and the Life Cycle* (Norton & Co, 1994). J.W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (Harper, San Francisco, rev. ed., 1995). For a recent reworking of the Triple Way in the psychology of spirituality, see B.J. Groeschel, *Spiritual Passages: the Psychology of Spiritual Development* (Crossroad, N.Y., 1995). See also E. Liebert, *Changing Life Patterns: Adult Development in Spiritual Direction* (Chalice Press, St Louis, 2000).

suggests that the spiritual journey will go through three major phases of purification/repentance, illumination/ receptive prayer towards union. Teresa uses this as a basis to shape the spiritual journey she describes in *The Interior Castle*. Depicting the soul as a crystal castle with many rooms, Christ dwelling at the centre, she invites the reader to trace a journey through successive stages in order to reach a state of mystical union.

## Reading

I began to think of the soul as if it were a castle made of a single diamond or of very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms, just as in Heaven there are many mansions. Now if we think carefully over this, the soul of the righteous one is nothing but a paradise, in which, as God tells us, He takes His delight. For what do you think a room will be like which is the delight of a King so mighty, so wise, so pure and so full of all that is good? I can find nothing with which to compare the great beauty of a soul and its great capacity...(though) the very fact that His majesty says it is made in His image means that we can hardly form any conception of the soul's great dignity and beauty...

Let us imagine that this castle contains many mansions, some above, others below, others at each side; and in the centre and midst of them all is the chiefest mansion where the most secret things pass between God and the soul.<sup>55</sup>

The image conveys the beauty and potential of the soul; the door to the castle, and indeed its weaving corridor, is the experience of prayer. As Williams observes:

If the soul is a home for God, it is a home with an enormous abundance of rooms, and we shall need to know where we are if we are not to be deceived and think we have encountered God when we have not...the journey inward is a journey to the place where God's love meets and mingles with the life of the soul, and thus we need to keep moving through the rooms until we find the middle of what sounds remarkably

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<sup>55</sup> A. Peers (tr.), *St Teresa of Avila: Interior Castle* (Sheed & Ward, London, 1974), p. 1, 2

like a maze...We do not know where the boundaries are if we never move forward and walk into them.. We need to know what we are capable of, positively and negatively.<sup>56</sup>

***Q When Teresa calls God ‘His majesty’ and images God as a King within a castle, she is reflecting the culture and society of 16<sup>th</sup> century Spain. What images of metaphors for the ‘soul’ or human dignity arise for us today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?***

### **The Three Ways**

The adventure of prayer begins with the *Purgative Way* of prayer in the first three rooms of the Teresa’s interior castle. They represent an increasing detachment from the things of the world and a process of deepening repentance and humility. In the first room of self-knowledge, Teresa’s cries: ‘O souls redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ! Learn to understand yourselves!... The soul’s capacity is much greater than we can realise.’<sup>57</sup> The soul must understand both its darkness without Christ’s purgation, and its capacity for union with God. In the second room Teresa calls the reader to have ‘a very determined determination’ – a deep resolve to conquer the pull to turn back to the attractions of the world, in order to remain very focussed and single-minded in the interior journey. The third room describes the stability and predictability of respectable routines and normal disciplines of the Christian life, like active discursive meditation. A sign or indicator that the soul is ready to move on from these reveals itself in a holy restlessness or discontent with unfulfilling dutiful praying – a craving for a greater interior freedom and a desire to jump off the treadmill of Christian life. This marks a turning point in the journey, and a readiness for transition into the next phase. It is time to learn new ways of praying.

The journey takes a major step forward into the *Illuminative Way* through Teresa’s fourth room, a place of new discovery which opens us up to ‘supernatural prayer’. Humphreys explains: ‘Supernatural prayer is where

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<sup>56</sup> R. Williams, *Teresa of Avila* (Continuum, London, 1991), p. 113, 114

<sup>57</sup> Peers, *Castle*, p. 6, 8. See a recent translation in K.Kavanaugh & O. Rodriguez (trs.), *Teresa of Avila: The Interior Castle* (Paulist Press, N.Y., 1979).

God takes over. It is also called infused contemplation, passive prayer, mystical prayer, or infused prayer. All labels, again, mean the same thing. This type of prayer means that God is communicating with the person.’<sup>58</sup> Teresa advises: ‘ if you would progress a long way on this road and ascend to the mansions of your desire, the important thing is not to think much, but to love much; do, then, whatever most arouses you to love.’<sup>59</sup> Here Teresa introduces her readers to ‘the Prayer of Quiet’. The heart becomes enlarged (c.f. Psalm 119:32); there is a greater capacity for prayer, a letting-go of former restrictive practices of prayer and a movement from the primacy of ego to the initiative of God.

But, says Teresa, there is no need to rest even here. The *Unitive Way* beckons: we may go deeper into God in Teresa’s remaining mansions, which explore different dimensions of contemplative prayer. The fifth mansion is a place of liberation where the soul learns to ‘fly’ in a new freedom, as we will explore below.

The sixth mansion opens the pilgrim-soul to the discovery of a glittering treasury in the inner reaches of the castle. The soul is approaching the place where Christ dwells in splendour in the inner room, and it stumbles on his storehouse of breath-taking treasures, which may include extraordinary spiritual experiences: locutions ( a sense of a divine ‘inner word’), a sense of ecstasy, rapture or unexpected sudden awareness of God’s presence within; visions of different kinds; the gift of tears. Teresa insists that all should be tested, and gives clear guidelines for discernment. She is adamant that God should not be sought for these experiences, but for God alone.

However, in these Mansions, there is also an experience of pain. There are both inner spiritual distresses and external assaults – unfriendly gossip, misunderstanding, rejection, and sometimes physical pains too, including illness. As Bielecki puts it: ‘Suffering places us in a crucible, and like gold, we emerge refined, purified and strengthened... The meaning of suffering is

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<sup>58</sup> C. Humphreys, *From Ash to Fire: A Contemporary Journey through the Interior Castle of Teresa of Avila* (New City Press, N.Y., 1992), p.80

<sup>59</sup> Peers, *Teresa*, p.33

summed up in the mystery of the cross: Teresa believed that the cross is the gift God gives to his intimate friends.<sup>60</sup>

In the sixth mansion Teresa speaks of the soul's betrothal to God, while in the seventh she uses the daring language of mystical marriage to describe union with God as an abiding awareness and permanent consciousness of unity with the indwelling Christ. But this is not at the cost of total withdrawal from the world: Teresa recalls the story of Martha and Mary to call for an integration between action and contemplation: 'This I should like us to attain: we should desire and engage in prayer, not for our enjoyment, but for the sake of acquiring this strength which fits us for service.'<sup>61</sup>

We must not see rigidity of thought regarding successive stages in a spiritual journey where there is, in fact, fluidity. Teresa is clear: 'You mustn't think of these dwelling places in such a way that each of you would follow in file after the other.'<sup>62</sup> In another place she writes: 'this castle has, as I said, many dwelling places: some up above, others down below, others to the sides...'<sup>63</sup> Teresa provides a map or a sketch of the spiritual life. The main point is: whatever room of prayer you find yourself in, this room has a door facing you right now, beckoning you to yet-unexplored reaches of prayer. Don't get stuck in one room. Go on, try the next door, see where it leads!

She wrote *the Interior Castle* in 1577 towards the end of her life, and in many ways it is autobiographical. She depicts the soul as a crystal castle of great beauty, Christ dwelling in the inner-most chamber, calling the Christian into an ever-deeper realisation of his presence. The experience of prayer is described as a progression in awareness of 'His Majesty', as we move from the outer Mansions of humility and self-knowledge, the rooms of talkative prayer filled with busy thinking, towards the inner Mansions of silent, contemplative, receptive prayer where the voice of Christ can be heard.

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<sup>60</sup> T. Bielecki, *Teresa of Avila: An Introduction to her Life & Writings* (Burns & Oates, Tunbridge Wells, 1994), p.115

<sup>61</sup> Peers, *Teresa*, p.148

<sup>62</sup> Kavanaugh & Rodriguez, *Teresa*, p.42

<sup>63</sup> Kavanaugh & Rodriguez, *Teresa*, p.36

This is no theoretical book, but springs from Teresa's own experience and struggles. She writes in an often humorous, down-to-earth way, for she knows, only too well, human foibles and temptations. That is the reason that this work, penned originally for nuns, has been enjoyed by generations of ordinary Christians as a practical and inspiring guide to the spiritual life.

## IMAGE OF THE WATERS

Teresa of Avila writes of the Prayer of Quiet using the picture of the fountain:

### Reading

Let us suppose that we are looking at two fountains, the basins of which can be filled with water...These two large basins can be filled with water in different ways: the water in the one comes from a long distance, by means of numerous conduits and through human skill; but the other has been constructed at the very source of the water and fills without making any noise. If the flow of water is abundant, as in the case we are speaking of, a great stream still runs from it after it has been filled; no skill is necessary here, and no conduits have to be made, for the water is flowing all the time. The difference between this and the carrying of the water by means of conduits is, I think, as follows. The latter corresponds to the spiritual sweetness which, as I say, is produced by meditation. It reaches us by way of the thoughts; we meditate upon created things and fatigue the understanding; and when at last, by means of our own efforts, it comes, the satisfaction which it brings to the soul fills the basin, but in doing so makes a noise, as I have said.

To the other fountain the water comes direct from its source, which is God, and, when it is His Majesty's will and He is pleased to grant us some supernatural favour, its coming is accompanied by the greatest peace and quietness and sweetness within ourselves.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Peers, *Teresa*, p. 37

In this passage from the *Interior Castle* Teresa suggests there are two ways of receiving the water of God. Either, we can stand at a distance from the fountain of God and receive the water of the Spirit as it were mediated through man-made and lengthy aqueducts and conduits, miles of pipelines of active, often noisy, talkative prayer. This in fact creates a distance from the fountain. Or, we can stand very close to the fountain of God, quieten our spirit, and change our prayer from an active thinking and striving style to a more receptive passive, drinking-in style. In what Teresa calls 'the Prayer of Quiet', we can drink directly and immediately of the river of the Spirit bubbling up in front of us. How close, she asks, are you to the fountain?

### **IMAGE OF THE SILKWORM**

Using another memorable image, Teresa describes how the soul, like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis (representing prayers of human effort), leaves behind the silkworm's cocoon, dies to its former way of life and arises metamorphosed into new liberty. 'It has wings now: how it can be content to crawl along slowly when it is able to fly?'<sup>65</sup> But there are new dangers to face: the butterfly soul is vulnerable to increased spiritual conflicts at this stage.

### **Reading**

You will have heard of the wonderful way in which silk is made – a way which no one could invent but God – and how it comes from a kind of seed which looks like tiny peppercorns. When the warm weather comes, and the mulberry-trees begin to show leaf, this seed starts to take life; until it has this sustenance, on which it feeds, it is as dead. The silkworms feed on the mulberry-leaves until they are full-grown, when people put down twigs, upon which, with their tiny mouths, they start spinning silk, making themselves very tight cocoons, in which they bury themselves. Then, finally, the worm, which was large and ugly, comes right out of the cocoon a beautiful white butterfly...

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<sup>65</sup> Peers, *Teresa*, p.55

The silkworm is like the soul which takes life when, through the heat which comes from the Holy Spirit, it begins to utilize the general help which God gives to us all, and to make use of the remedies which He left in His Church – such as frequent confessions, good books and sermons, for these are the remedies for a soul dead in negligences and sins and frequently plunged into temptation. The soul begins to live and nourishes itself on this food, and on good meditations, until it is full grown – and this is what concerns me now...

When it is full-grown, then it starts to spin its silk and to build the house in which it is to die. This house may be understood here to mean Christ. I think I read or heard somewhere that our life is hid in Christ...

Here, then, daughters, you see what we can do, with God's favour. May His Majesty himself be our Mansion as He is in this Prayer of Union which, as it were, we ourselves spin...And, before we have finished doing all that we can in that respect, God will take this tiny achievement of ours, which is nothing at all, unite it with His greatness and give it such worth that its reward will be the Lord Himself...

On, then, my daughters! Let us hasten to perform this task and spin this cocoon. Let us renounce self-love and self-will, and our attachment to earthly things. Let us practise penance, prayer, mortification, obedience, and all the other good works that you know of. Let us do what we have been taught; and we have been instructed about what our duty is. Let the silkworm die –let it die, as in fact it does when it has completed the work which it was created to do. Then we shall see God and shall ourselves be as completely hidden in His greatness as is this little worm in its cocoon...

And now let us see what becomes of this silkworm, for all that I have been saying about it is leading up to this. When it is in this state of prayer, and quite dead to the world, it comes out a little white butterfly...By comparison with the abode it has had, everything it sees on earth leaves it dissatisfied, especially when God has again and again given it this wine which almost every time has brought it some new blessing. It sets no store by the things it did when it was a worm – that is, by its gradual weaving of the cocoon. It

has wings now: how can it be content to crawl along slowly when it is able to fly?<sup>66</sup>

*Q What images from the natural world would you use to describe the inner life?*

## QUESTIONS TO PONDER

1. The Reformation debate centred on the role of God's grace and man's efforts, and here Teresa describes prayer as a partnership with God, in which we have a certain part to play, but it is God who brings metamorphosis, inner transformation. What spiritual disciplines does Teresa commend? What is their role today? How would you explain the place of such 'good works' in building a relationship with God?
2. 'Let us renounce self-love and self-will, and our attachment to earthly things.' Is this the heart of the matter, the most important thing we can do? If so, why?
3. In her image of the silkworm/butterfly Teresa describes the need for death and resurrection in the spiritual life. What do you understand by the words of Paul she alludes to: 'For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God' (Colossians 3:3)?
4. Teresa describes the contrast between a period in which our prayer-life is very hidden, God working secretly in us as within a cocoon, when we become almost dead to external stimuli and wrapped up in Christ, and a period when our prayer-life becomes more visible, like a butterfly which is both beautiful and vulnerable – in *The Castle* she goes on to talk of the need for 'a perfect love of neighbour.' How does this correspond to your experience? Do times of withdrawal lead to times of witness? How important is the 'cocoon' stage in the spiritual life?
5. Teresa is teaching in this 'Mansion' or stage of the spiritual life, about the 'Prayer of Union.' The butterfly-soul 'has wings now: how can it be content to crawl along slowly when it is able to fly?' Into what sort of freedoms does God want to lead us in our prayer-life and discipleship?

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<sup>66</sup> Peers, *Teresa*, pp.53-55

## PRAYER EXERCISE

Either

Teresa uses a vivid image to describe God at work in her life. Draw a picture or describe an image or parable to express an important moment or stage in your spiritual experience. Place it before God in a spirit of gratitude.

Or

Reflect on your discipleship. Have you known Teresa's experience of spiritual breakthrough, or are you at a 'cocoon' stage? Is it time to find wings, to fly? Take time to give thanks that God is uniquely at work in your individuality. Don't compare yourself with others, but do ask God to lead you forwards in the adventure of prayer.

## FOR FURTHER READING

Bielecki, T., *Teresa of Avila: An Introduction to her life and writings*. Burns and Oates, Tunbridge Wells, 1994.

Humpheys C., *from Ash to Fire: A contemporary journey through the Interior Castle of Teresa of Avila*. New City Press, New York, 1992.

## 10 STRUGGLE & HOPE IN SPIRITUALITY

A significant cluster of metaphors in the describing our relationship with God involves the language of struggling; the spiritual combat, which turns out to be a blend of wrestling and hope in the spiritual experience.

## AIMS OF THIS UNIT

1 We begin with the archetypal story of Jacob's wrestling with God (Genesis 32)

2 We look briefly at John Donne's poems of struggle

3 We examine three major themes in the poem-prayers of George Herbert, looking at prayer as a place of transparency, prayer as a place of transformation, prayer as a place of encounter with the incarnate, suffering and rising Lord. We look in some depth at an example of each theme.

4 We conclude with a prayer exercise and questions to ponder

## WRESTLING WITH GOD

The story of Jacob's wrestling with God in the swirling waters of the Jabbok (Gen.32: 22–32) has become symbolic of the struggle of prayer.<sup>67</sup> From the outset, as von Rad notes, the story was archetypal and representative: 'It contains experiences of faith that extend from the most ancient period down to the time of the narrator...as it is now related it is clearly transparent as a type of that which Israel experienced from time to time with God.'<sup>68</sup> It is the struggle of humanity with God. Jacob wrestled and fought with a Stranger, an unknown figure; he later described this encounter as saying 'I have seen God face to face.' It was indeed a divine-human combat.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> The account will be approached in spirit of *interpretive obedience* commended by Brueggemann, involving 'an act of imaginative construal to show how the nonnegotiable intentions of Yahweh are to be discerned and practiced in our situation.' W. Brueggemann, *Interpretation and Obedience; From Faithful Reading to Faithful Living* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1991),1

<sup>68</sup> G. von Rad, *Genesis* (SCM, London, 1972, 3rd revised ed.), 325

<sup>69</sup> for a different view see C.Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary* (SPCK, London, 1985). Westermann sees this as an encounter with a river demon, and the divine elements as late additions. Similarly, Gunkel is reluctant to see this as a prayer-struggle. H.Gunkel, *Genesis* (Mercer University Press, Georgia, 1997), 349

<sup>22</sup> The same night he got up and took his two wives, his two maids, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. <sup>23</sup> He took them and sent them across the stream, and likewise everything that he had. <sup>24</sup> Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. <sup>25</sup> When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. <sup>26</sup> Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." <sup>27</sup> So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." <sup>28</sup> Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." <sup>29</sup> Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. <sup>30</sup> So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." <sup>31</sup> The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip. <sup>32</sup> Therefore to this day the Israelites do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the hip socket, because he struck Jacob on the hip socket at the thigh muscle.

***Q What is going on here? Name the different elements of the story (only look at this endnote <sup>70</sup>when you have finished that!) How does it resonate with your experience?***

Amidst the swirling currents Jacob experiences a barrier or frontier becoming a threshold or place of transition.<sup>71</sup> When seen as an encounter

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<sup>70</sup> Journey: 'The same night he arose..'; Frontier: 'He crossed the ford of the Jabbok'; Waters: across the stream...'; Solitude: 'Jacob was left alone..'; Darkness: 'And a man wrestled with Jacob until the breaking of the day'; Wounding: ' he touched the hollow of his thigh; and Jacob's thigh was put out of joint as he wrestled with him'; Identity: 'You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel'; Blessing: 'Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." '

<sup>71</sup> It evokes both the creation account of order emerging from the waters of chaos (Gen.1) and the Exodus story of liberation where foes were drowned in the waters of the Red Sea and where a barrier became a crossing-place. It also recalls the O.T. theme of dragons and demons lurking in the dark waters (c.f. Job 41:1, Ps.74:14). However, there is a debate about the extent of the symbolism in the text. Fokkelman, for example, sees symbolism in

with God, this story casts light on the experience of prayer in formation because it is precisely in the waters of struggle, in the darkness and in the experience of being wounded by God, that Jacob receives his new name and new identity: no longer is he 'Grasper' (Jacob) but 'One who struggles with God' (Israel). This profound affirmation comes in the midst of solitude: 'Jacob was left alone' (Gen.32:24). For Jacob this meant a letting go of attachments to people and possessions and standing alone before God. Prayer becomes a place of honesty and naked exposure to God, a place of risk and vulnerability where God is allowed both to wound and to bless. Henri Nouwen put it: 'Solitude is thus the place of purification and transformation, the place of the great struggle and the great encounter. Solitude ...is the place where Christ remodels us in his own image and frees us from the victimizing compulsions of the world. Solitude is the place of salvation.'<sup>72</sup>

Jacob is brought to a point of brokenness. His running symbolised his independence, his desire to escape uncomfortable truths and conflicts, his evasion of God and his determination to stay in control of his life. Such running and exhaustion resonates with the often self-inflicted stresses which are experienced in Christian life. Now Jacob can run no longer: now he can only limp, for God touches him and disables him. He is reduced to a state of new dependency on God himself. This wounding of Jacob represents God finally melting his wilfulness and paralysing his defiant ego. For the moment, at least, he crumples up: God has the mastery.

In giving Jacob a new identity God affirms the role of struggling in an evolving relationship with him. It is not to be avoided but faced: those who embrace their struggles with God can emerge with a clearer sense of identity and mission. Jacob's experience in the dark waters actually equips him to face the next stage of his journey. The torrent of prayer is experienced as a place of profound growth, and we become wounded healers: 'For a deep

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the crossing, the darkness/ the sun rising. J.P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (JSOT Press, Sheffield, 1991), 208ff

<sup>72</sup> H.J.M Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1981), 31

understanding of our own pain makes it possible for us to convert our weakness into strength and to offer our own experience as source of healing.<sup>73</sup> As Brueggemann puts it, noting the significance of Jacob's struggle for ministry:

This narrative reflects some of Israel's most sophisticated theology...God is God...Jacob is a cripple with a blessing...This same theology of weakness in power and power in weakness turns this text towards the New Testament and the gospel of the cross.<sup>74</sup>

## LANGUAGE OF STRUGGLE IN ENGLISH POETS

Seventeenth century England gives us outstanding examples of how struggles can be turned into prayer.

### JOHN DONNE

John Donne's (1572–1631) *Holy Sonnets* invite God to overpower him:

Batter my heart, three-personed God

And he goes on:

Overthrow me, and bend  
Your force, to break, blow, burn and make me new

His language in such poems has been described as 'warlike, military, destructive, dividing'<sup>75</sup>

### GEORGE HERBERT

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<sup>73</sup> H.J.M. Nouwen, *Ministry and Spirituality* (Continuum, New York, 1998), 161

<sup>74</sup> W. Brueggemann, *Genesis: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (John Knox Press, Atlanta, 1982), 271

<sup>75</sup> A. L. Clements, *Poetry of Contemplation* (Albany: State University of New York, 1990), p. 72

Prayer is the place where we can bring to God the trials, joys, questions and paradoxes of ministry. We come before God in our fragility and vulnerability, and in our brokenness, and we surrender to him the woes and heartaches of ministry for him to touch and transfigure. Thus all the struggles of ministry flow into prayer, which becomes a place of inner transformation by the Holy Spirit. Thus renewed, we are ready for the second movement of prayer, as we return to the world and to ministry re-energised, re-invigorated by God. George Herbert will help us look at these processes.<sup>76</sup>

The Anglican poet-priest of the seventeenth century, George Herbert wrote that his poems were 'a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed betwixt God and my soul.' His poems testify to an on-going struggle to accept personally within himself God's unconditional love. Herbert was born in 1593 to an aristocratic family. After studies at Cambridge University he became a lecturer in Rhetoric and for seven years held the prestigious post of Public Orator to the university. He seemed destined for high office, and set his hopes on a privileged career in the royal court, but God had other plans for him. Secular ambitions wrestled with a persistent and nagging sense of vocation to the priesthood, and Herbert finally gave in and was ordained deacon in 1626. But things were not to be straightforward for him. Illness and indecision delayed Herbert from entering full-time ministry and he was not ordained a priest until 1630. Some of Herbert's most poignant and questioning poems were composed during these four 'wilderness' years. Herbert found himself appointed to a small and undistinguished parish church at Bemerton near Salisbury, and to a vicarage in a state of disrepair.

For just three years he was to exercise his ministry, until his death in 1633. He embraced the life of a parish priest with extraordinary devotion and dedication, and expressed his ideals for pastoral ministry in his work *The Country Parson*. He even found it possible to provide a place in his home for three orphaned nieces, even though he was on greatly reduced means. But

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<sup>76</sup>See A. D. Mayes, *Spirituality of Struggle: pathways to growth* (London, SPCK, 2002) George Herbert, *the Complete English Works* (Everyman's Library, 1995). F. E. Hutchinson, (ed.), *The Works of George Herbert* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1970) P. Shel Drake, *Love took my hand: the spirituality of George Herbert* (London, DLT, 2000) Poems available on [www.ccel.org](http://www.ccel.org)

he faced different struggles during this period. Now he was no longer fighting against his vocation but, dogged with ill-health, found himself questioning his usefulness. Though he valued the presence of Christ in the scriptures and in the sacraments, he wrestled with a sense of spiritual confusion, the dilemma of unanswered prayer, and found himself echoing the sentiments of Jeremiah and the psalmists.

It is instructive to set *The Country Parson* side by side with Herbert's *Poems*. In *The Country Parson* we see the high ideal of parish ministry: what we should aim for, the highest standards of pastoral care visiting, preaching, his study and library, home life, even dealing with Churchwardens. But in the *Poems* we glimpse the reality, the struggle, the heartache, the *angst* of ministry... and how Herbert comes to terms with this, and makes sense of this.

In *Affliction I* he tells the story of his spiritual journey:

When first thou didst entice to thee my heart,  
I thought the service brave

He experienced a time of happiness in God's service:

What pleasures could I want, whose King I served,  
Where joys my fellows were?

But joys passed to sorrows as he encountered both physical and spiritual distress, and having had enough, he explodes with anger to God:

Well, I will change the service, and go seek  
Some other master out.

### **Prayer as a place of transparency**

Immediately we see that Herbert experienced prayer as the place of utter transparency before God. In prayer there is no place for false pleasantries, no place for masks, no pretending. In prayer we come before God just as we are, we lower our self-protective barriers (those shields we put up to protect ourselves from others); indeed, another tradition spoke of prayer as the

desert, where there is no place for hiding. As a Christian minister, Herbert comes before God with all his woundedness and fragility, all his questions. At the end of a day of ministry, Herbert the parson collapses into his stall in the parish church and takes stock:

What have I brought thee home  
For this thy love? have I discharged the debt,  
Which this day's favour did beget?  
I ran; but all I brought, was foam.

Thy diet, care, and cost  
Do end in bubbles, balls of wind;  
Of wind to thee whom I have crossed,  
But balls of wild-fire to my troubled mind.

Herbert encourages us here to bring to God whatever we face – struggles, burdens or questions – after a day of ministry or giving out. We can tell God about our struggle for holiness; our perception of failure; a sense of unworthiness; a sense of frustration, in not being effective or successful, not having accomplished what we wanted. We can bring to God a sense of guilt regarding those things ‘left undone’, people unvisited. We can surrender to God our financial worries, health worries, or family concerns. Maybe we will be able to join Herbert as he concludes his *Evensong* prayer:

My God, thou art all love.  
Not one poor minute escapes thy breast,  
But brings a favour from above;  
And in this love, more than in bed, I rest.

In his poem *Prayer I* Herbert employs a range of vivid metaphors to communicate the wonder of prayer:

Read *Prayer I*

*Prayer the Church's banquet, angels' age,  
God's breath in man returning to his birth,*

*The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,  
The Christian plummet sounding heaven and earth;*

*Engine against the Almighty, sinner's tower,  
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,  
The six-days-world-transposing in an hour,  
A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;*

*Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,  
Exalted manna, gladness of the best,  
Heaven in ordinary, man well dressed,  
The milky way, the bird of paradise,*

*Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,  
The land of spices; something understood.*

**Q 1 Reflect in pairs: what phrase strikes you?**

Certain phrases stand out:

*The soul in paraphrase* – putting into words, expressing before God the longings of the spirit

*Heart in pilgrimage* – a sense that we might move, go places with God in prayer, even change!

*Engine against th' Almighty* – siege engine – throwing at God our feelings

**Prayer as a place of transformation**

In the poem *The Collar*, Herbert expresses a sense of desperation at God

I struck the board, and cried, No more;  
I will abroad.



Love bade me welcome, yet my soul drew back,  
Guilty of dust and sin.

Herbert argues with God and expresses some self-pity, but finally submits  
and gives in to  
God's unconditional grace

"You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat."

We too can experience transformation, changes in perception, taking place  
as we pray.

Read *LOVE III*

Love bade me welcome, yet my soul drew back,  
Guilty of dust and sin.  
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack  
From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning  
If I lacked anything.

"A guest," I answered, "worthy to be here";  
Love said, "You shall be he."

"I, the unkind, the ungrateful? ah my dear,  
I cannot look on thee."

Love took my hand and smiling did reply,  
"Who made the eyes but I?"

"Truth, Lord, but I have marred them; let my shame  
Go where it doth deserve."

"And know you not," says Love, "who bore the blame?"  
"My dear, then I will serve."

"You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat."  
So I did sit and eat.

*Q What is your experience of transformation, of changes taking place in you through prayer?*

**Prayer as a place of encounter with the incarnate, suffering and rising Lord**

Herbert is surprised again and again at the wonder of God's Incarnation in Christ, which seems to break into his consciousness at his bleakest moments: the reality that God comes to us to share our pain in the life and death of Jesus. In *Redemption*, he pictures himself as a tenant seeking to submit a petition to his Lord:

In Heaven at his manor I him sought:  
They told me there, that he was lately gone.

So Herbert looks for God amidst the privileged places of society which he himself had known so well: 'in cities, theatres, gardens, parks, and courts.' But God is not to be found here.

At length I heard a ragged noise and mirth  
Of thieves and murderers: there I him espied,  
Who straight, *Your suit is granted* said, and died.

God waits to be discovered in the most unlikely places, amidst social outcasts, sinners and well within the arena of suffering. Christ tells us that he waits to meet us in the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and in even in the imprisoned villain (Matt. 25.35–40). All these, he says, are 'my brethren'. In this poem, Herbert finds his Lord not in places of security and beauty, but upon a rough-hewn cross. God is not remote from suffering but in the midst of it. As he puts it in *Affliction III*

My heart did heave, and there came forth,  
*O God!*  
By that I knew that thou wast in the grief,  
To guide and govern it to my relief.

In his powerful composition *The Cross* Herbert comes to realise that the paradoxes of his life are, indeed, cross-shaped. He reaches the limit of his own strivings:

And then when after much delay,  
Much wrestling, many a combat, this dear end,  
So much desired, is given, to take away  
My power to serve thee: to unbend  
All my abilities, my designs confound,  
And lay my threatnings bleeding on the ground.

His angers, his frustrated plans, and the experience of being pulled in different directions all meet in the Cross. Indeed, on the Cross God has already enfolded and experienced them; he has *felt* them:

Ah, my dear Father, ease my smart!  
These contrarities crush me: these cross actions  
Do wear a rope about, and cut my heart:  
And yet since these thy contradictions  
Are properly a Cross felt by thy Son,  
With but four words, my words, *Thy will be done.*

These insights help us to shape a spirituality of struggle in the face of confusion and even disillusionment. Like some of the psalms, Herbert is able to register a movement in his poems from complaint to acceptance, from rebellion to submission. In his struggles he discovers crucial things about God and humanity that cannot be learnt from textbooks and sermons, but only from the experience of struggle.

About humanity: that we are called to walk by faith, not by sight (2 Cor. 5.7). We are called to tread a path of costly discipleship, not to luxuriate in self-absorption. Jesus calls us to take up our cross daily and follow him (Mk 8.34). We never cease to be loved by God, wanted by God as his child, even when we do not feel his presence. Facts, not feelings, should guide our Christian pilgrimage. When tempted to give up, we should return to the basics, go back to the fundamental reality that no distress can ever fully take away: I am God's child.

About God: Herbert reminds us that God is inscrutable, which means that he is annoying and baffling, as he is beyond the limits of our logic and reason. God constantly surprises us. Everything seems upside down, topsy-turvy in God's ways. He, the mighty one, is to be found precisely in the midst of suffering ones. God himself embraces suffering on the Cross and declares himself to be our brother. In prayer, we bring our puzzlement and wonder to God and find our attitudes transformed.

His poem *Priesthood* sums up his discoveries in vivid metaphors. We see ministry, and prayer in particular, as a crucible or furnace where God's Spirit changes our humanity into God-bearing potentiality, as clay is transformed to china by the action of fire.

Thou art fire, sacred and hallowed fire  
And I but earth and clay.

God longs to form from the clay a beautiful vessel and instrument fit for his use (cf 2 Corinthians 4:7; 2 Timothy 2:20-21).

...God doth often vessels make  
Of lowly matter for high uses meet,  
I throw me at his feet.

The place where we 'throw ourselves at his feet' to be remade and re-energized is the place of prayer.

Imagine Herbert collapsing into his stall in the parish church at the end of a day's ministry, of visiting, sermon preparation, meetings. He reflects over the day, hoping to celebrate his achievements and successes, his triumphs and breakthroughs.

Read out loud in the group his *Evensong* prayer to God...

**Blest be the God of love,  
Who gave us eyes, and light, and power this day,  
Both to be busy, and to play.  
But much more blest be God above,**

Who gave me sight alone,  
Which to himself he did deny:  
For when he sees my ways, I die:  
But I have got his Son, and he hath none.

What have I brought thee home  
For this thy love? have I discharged the debt,  
Which this day's favour did beget?  
I ran; but all I brought, was foam.

Thy diet, care, and cost  
Do end in bubbles, balls of wind;  
Of wind to thee whom I have crossed,  
But balls of wild-fire to my troubled mind.

Yet still thou goest on,  
And now with darkness closest weary eyes,  
Saying to man, *It doth suffice:*  
*Henceforth repose; your work is done.*

Thus in thy ebony box  
Thou dost enclose us, till the day  
Put our amendment in our way,  
And give new wheels to our disordered clocks.

I muse, which shows more love,  
The day or night: that is the gale, this the harbour;  
That is the walk, and this the arbour;  
Or that the garden, this the grove.

My God, thou art all love.  
Not one poor minute escapes thy breast,  
But brings a favour from above;  
And in this love, more than in bed, I rest.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

1 What images in this chapter resonate most strongly with your own spiritual journey?

2 What metaphors come to mind for you as you attempt to put into words aspects of the spiritual struggle?

3 What is your experience of 'wrestling with God?'

### PRAYER EXERCISE

In some moments of quiet, reflect on your own day. Where did you meet God today, and where did you miss him? Where did you most sense his presence? What parts of the day energized you, and which parts drained you? What struggles, burdens or questions might you bring to God after a day of ministry or 'giving out' to others? (E.g. struggle for holiness; failure & sin; sense of frustration, re not being effective, not having accomplished what we wanted; sense of guilt re. those things 'left undone', people unvisited; financial worries, health worries, family).

Celebrate, give thanks and compose your own evensong or 'end of day' prayer.

### FOR FURTHER READING

A.L Clements., *Poetry of Contemplation: John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan & the Modern Period* (State University of New York Press, 1990)

L.W.Countryman, *The Poetic Imagination: An Anglican Spiritual Tradition* (Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1999)

P.Hardwick, 'The Inward Struggle of the Self with God: Gerard Manley Hopkins and George Herbert', *The Way* (WS 66, 1989), 6–41

F.E.Hutchinson, (ed.), *The Works of George Herbert*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1970.

A.D. Mayes, *Spirituality of Struggle: pathways to growth* (London, SPCK, 2002)

P.Sheldrake, *Love Took My Hand: The Spirituality of George Herbert* (Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 2000).

For contemporary writers on this theme see H.M. Nouwen; also E.de Waal, *Living with Contradiction* (Canterbury Press, Norwich, 1989).