**St Andrews on The Terrace Sunday 14 May 2017 Spirituality of Life - Life and Breath**

**1 Kings 19: 1-15 Elijah Flees from Jezebel**

19 Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 2Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.” 3Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

4But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” 5Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, “Get up and eat.” 6He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. 7The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” 8He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. 9At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” 10He answered, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”

**Elijah Meets God at Horeb**

11He said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; 12and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. 13When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” 14He answered, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” 15Then the Lord said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus;

# Contemporary reading “Silence Is God's First Language' by Cynthia Bourgeault

**The Divine Indwelling**
… Christian theology makes very clear that the human being is not God and that the innermost core of our being is not itself divine. And yet theology has always upheld the reality of the "divine indwelling." As we move toward center, our own being and the divine being become more and more mysteriously interwoven. "There is in the soul a something in which God dwells, and there is in the soul a something in which the soul dwells in God," writes the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart, the subtlety of his words reflecting the delicacy of the motion. In our own times, Thomas Merton describes this "something" in a passage of astonishing clarity and beauty:

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our son-ship. It is like a pure diamond blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it, we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely. I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.

Notice how deftly Merton navigates the tricky theological waters here. His words are bold, in that he claims - to my knowledge more clearly than any other Christian mystical writer - that at the centre of our being is an innermost point of truth which shares not only the likeness, but perhaps even the substance of God's own being. And yet, following the bent of Christian tradition, he makes it absolutely clear that access to this centre is not at our command; it is entered only through the gateway of our complete poverty and nothingness.

The divine indwelling is the cornerstone of contemplative prayer. Thomas Keating refers to it as "our personal big bang," for it reveals the Source of our own being - the explosion of divine love into form which first gave rise to our personal life. It also reveals the direction in which our hearts must travel for a constantly renewed intimacy with this Source. As we enter contemplative prayer, we draw near the wellspring from which our being flows.

Read more at <http://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/faith-tools/meditation/2004/11/silence-is-gods-first>-language.aspx?p=3#Oi8PSbkDCazq2Mbl.99

It is tempting to believe that we are hopeless at prayer when we read passage like that in 1 Kings, where it seems God and Elijah have a matey kind of relationships where they are able to talk together like two human beings would. Or, failing God, some angels do the communicating, like a White House press secretary might.

Let us begin with the kinds of prayers you might have been taught as a child – mostly what we would call the intercessory type and, I suspect, what most people believe you are talking about when you use the word ‘prayer’. The term ‘Prayer’ seems to be conflated with the asking, intercessory or supplicatory kind of prayer, which usually starts “Please, God...” and may be shorter or longer depending on how much time you have or how serious the crisis is.

But a simple teaching about prayer contradicts this idea that prayer is just a Q and A session where we ask and hope God answers. A common teaching is to use the acronym ACTS – A,C,T,S to stand for the types of prayer which are suggested. Only one of those puts the pray-er in an asking position, that is, this teaching suggests only one quarter of what you do when you pray is asking. First, A stands for Adoration. We could use the word Awe. Beginning a time of prayer in awe of the world about you or of God or of the gifts you have been given is not a bad way to get into the right mindset for prayer. C stands for confession – tuis can be also called the examen, where the pra-yer examines the day – reviews what has happened particularly from their point of view – how did I act? What did I think? What orientation did I take to the world today? It might include times and actions on which we can congratulate ourselves as well as confession of how we allowed things to go wrong or actively made them go wrong. It is not a bad way to clear the slate. Self- reflection is usually very valuable. If you find yourself spending all your ‘C’ time on how irritating someone else was today, then you may not be doing this section in the right spirit! ‘T’ stands for thanksgiving – what came our way today or this week that was pure gift – maybe a great conversation or an act of love, or a breakthrough in our work, or a phone call from a friend. Practising gratitude is an activity that calms the soul and probably reduces blood pressure as well as cultivating an appropriate humility. Only then might we move on to S for supplication. (That’s the problem with acronyms to get everything to fit into the word you have chosen you often end up using strange words to fit the letters!)

Imagine how different your supplications to a Higher Power might be if you rush into prayer and only ask for things, compared with what you might say after you had spent time being in awe of how you are blessed, confessing how you might have contributed to your and others’ bad day and being grateful for what was good in the last 24 hours? Even if these three sections preceding supplication are short but sincere, they change our mindset and our greedy, needy, grasping intercessions take their proper place. We are a different person naming our needs and wants than we were a few minutes ago.

If this acronym, ‘A’ for Adoration or Awe, ‘C’ for confession, ‘T’ for thanksgiving and ‘S’ for supplication, is taken seriously and not simplistically or cynically it can change how we relate to that force outside of ourselves which we call God.

But what if your image of God is not of an external being to you – but something more amorphous or mystical and something more internal? There are two basic ways of thinking of the concept we call God – one as God transcendent – out there, beyond us and bigger and greater than us, transcending all our concepts and ideas. Another view of God is as God being immanent – within, hidden. Both views of God believe God to be ultimately mysterious – some aspects of God revealed to us, none so much as in Jesus’ life and teaching, but always we fall short of being able to completely describe and characterise exactly what God is like whether or not we view God as transcendant or immanent.

If you do believe God is more immanent than transcendent then Thomas Merton’s description quoted in the contemporary reading of that diamond bright centre begins to make sense. Cynthia Bourgeault, who quotes him, is careful to make the distinction between humans being human with divine indwelling and the human being God – a good distinction to keep in mind before we get too entirely above ourselves!

As Bourgeault points out in the reading, this centre point “...is an innermost point of truth which shares not only the likeness, but perhaps even the substance of God's own being.” And it is that point where the divine indwelling is the “cornerstone of contemplative prayer.” It is a paradox above all paradoxes. The divine dwells in us but we are not divine. To become intimate with this divine we would not speak as if to another being, we would instead fall silent and seek to connect with what is already in us. And yet, another paradox, in order to access this centre we need to push aside our own ego or our own operating system to make contact. Bourgeault in fact calls this our ego-ic operating system. It is a little like pushing aside the software that runs our computer to find the centre of the computer.

Our egos keep us going. They help us apply for jobs, get up in the morning, plan our days, keep our sense of self esteem and human dignity intact and keep us optimistic about what we can and will achieve. They are valuable. But when it comes to accessing the divine indwelling us, our ego will resist being pushed to the side. So to sit still and contemplate is a very, very hard thing to do. Some would say impossible. They would rather maintain the many activities which are generated by that egoic operating system. We are all different. Some are talking-prayer people, others are listening-prayer people. A relatively small percentage attend to the invitation to go deeper and quieter through those spiritual practices which are variously named as contemplative prayer, meditation, or centering prayer. The world would be better if more people attended to that second invitation to deeper consciousness.

All of these spiritual practices have a common feature – first, the quietening and stilling of the self, second, deepening and regulating our breathing to induce a calm state and third, silence in the prayer time. The methods differ mostly in the techniques they use for maintaining attention and ensuring mindfulness continues through the session whether it be 20 or 30 minutes. Some techniques include repeating in your mind one word and concentrating on that word or mantra to the exclusion of all other thoughts. Others use the word as a point to return to when you experience your mind wandering, and then once you are re-centred, you leave the word again and continue in silence contemplation until the next distracting thought.

Coming out of a session of contemplative prayer, the expectation is not that you will emerge with a mind-blowing thought or a universe-changing vision, but simply calmer, quieter, more rested, more relaxed and nearer to an experience of that divine indwelling. Slowly the ego begins to more frequently take second place and slowly our lives are more grounded and focused and aligned with that divine force. (A word of warning – that experience comes later, the first few sessions feel a little like a battle between silence and the many noises in your head which you discover when you stop still.)

I think of meditative prayer like placing myself in a sacred force-field. Some of you have heard me liken that to iron filings placed in a magnetic field created by a magnet. When the paper is shaken, they line up long the magnetic field force lines. In the same way, our thinking takes on a dimension which is greater or calmer or more compassionate that we might have achieved ourselves when we intentionally place ourselves in focused prayer. Or think of it as a person on a beach deciding to swim in the ocean which is God rather than just spectate from the shore. Once in the water, allowing the ocean currents to take us where they will, we are likewise more aligned with the divine flow, a current bigger than our own little trickle of stream or creek, a current which takes us where it will take us not necessarily where we plan to go.

Both ways of looking at prayer do have elements of giving up control. If you like to know exactly where and how and why your life is progressing, then this will be difficult. The secret is to simply keep trying. Keep creating meditation or centering prayer moments in your day, and once there, keep bringing your mind back from distractions to the word you have chosen as your prayer word. The point is not what you see you are achieving but being faithful and constant in the process.

Inbetween times if you have some sort of spiritual practice happening, especially one which involves noticing your breathing and slowing and deepening it, you can then, between meditation or prayer sessions, use the breathing technique to create mini moments during the day. Sitting at the traffic lights, on the train or bus, in a cafe or at your desk. Simply breathing slowly and deeply tells your body all is well, there is no need to panic or rush and will connect you in those brief moments with the longer practice you are doing morning and night. This is not particularly spiritual, in fact the reaction is more physiological, but if the calmer breathing associates in your mind with a deeper meditation sessions which are you regularly participating in, the divine-human connection is made.

What about all those things we want though – or about those people we care for if we are just sitting without any thoughts in our mind when praying? I have learned to approach intercessory prayer differently. I express what I yearn for or desire for friends or family and hold it in a prayerful moment. I might just name a person without telling the universe or an all knowing God all the details. If I believe that I am intentionally putting myself in the ocean current or in the sacred force field in prayerful moment, if I hold within my heart those for whom I wish good, they too are being brought within that influence. Who knows then what might happen?

I used to wonder why my music teacher knew I had not done much practice between teaching sessions. I know now how she could tell. My playing had not progressed. It was no better than the week before. Yet, if I did practice, in each practice session I couldn’t see much change. I think prayer of any sort is like that, the changes are incremental, invisible sometimes to our eye, but they happen. It is with beginning and worth persisting

Two stories to finish with – the first for those of you who pray to get answers:

Bishop **William Temple's reply to mocking that "answered prayer was a mere coincidence" was, "That may be true, but I've noticed that when I pray coincidences happen and when I don't, they don't."**

**And for those of you who like the idea of contemplative prayer but are unsure you want to empty yourself so you can be fully present to the divine which indwells you, hear this story:**

Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era (1868-1912), received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen.
Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring.
The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. "It is overfull. No more will go in!"
"Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

We might be full of our own opinions and speculations about prayer. How can we learn about it unless we are prepared to come empty handed to spiritual practice. Then we will slowly but surely connect with what Thomas Merton calls “This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty [which] is the pure glory of God written in us...”

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