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Therefore, Do Not Worry (Matt. 6: 24-34)

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I was a bit concerned when I first chose this reading. Although I have always loved the passage, I wondered if it would really speak to the things I want to share with you; but in the end I thought it was just right.

I guess you want me to start with some of the Wikipedia stuff. But you will understand that I am going to have to skip over a lot of this biographical detail, otherwise we will still be here this time tomorrow.

I think I can honestly say that I had an idyllic childhood. Now I know that no family is perfect and mine certainly wasn't; but I do remember being very happy just the same. It was in this idyllic phase of my childhood, at about the age of 10, that I had my first conscious encounter with tonight's reading. I remember reading it again at the age of 22 when, for some reason, I decided to read the New Testament from beginning to end. And I still find myself reading it on those long breaks between the formal sessions of a retreat. And I always have the same experience: of joy, a lifting of the spirit, that everything is OK.

Well, my idyllic childhood came to an abrupt halt when I was sent to boarding school at the age of 12. I was unlucky enough to win a bursary there. It was a harsh, austere environment. You have to remember that it was the pre-Vatican 11 era. In the case of my particular school, it was probably pre-Vatican 1. I believe I still bear the scars from those miserable 5 years. I am still a practising Catholic, despite the scars from the old religion, and despite the best efforts of some to take us back there. I figure that God must want me to stay there for some reason.

Very quickly: I came to Canberra; studied Law; met Judi; married; 3 children; 3 grandchildren; practised law for 30 years, mainly in private practice. And the years, and the hours of those years, flashed by as quickly as that.

My first call and response was in about 1999. We had been attending the usual round of suburban dinner parties with friends who were the parents of children who went to school with our own children. And the conversations at these dinner parties usually went along the following lines: what we had; what we didn't have; what we wanted; trips; how someone had been upgraded because they kicked up a fuss about something going wrong back in economy. You know how it goes. These were good people; they still are. And I have to tell you that we were up to our eyeballs in these conversations too. But I came home one night from one of these gatherings, and I distinctly remember saying to Judi that there had to be something better than this. But I didn't know what it was that I was seeking. So I remained dissatisfied with the direction of my life.

Which brings me to my 2nd call and response. In 2002 we were watching the ABC Compass program one night and Geraldine Doogue was interviewing Father Laurence Freeman. He spoke about the practice of Christian Meditation. And I thought 'Ah Ha'. This is what I've been looking for: a prayer practice. And we have been doing Christian meditation, in one form or another, since then.

My 3rd call and response was more a gradual awakening. We have been attending annual Centering Prayer retreats in Melbourne since 2008. At each retreat there is a Catholic Mass on the Saturday and an Anglican Eucharist service on the Sunday. Over 9 years I have seen up to 5 Catholic priests receive the Eucharist from an Anglican priest and I have seen Anglican priests and deacons receive the Eucharist at the Catholic Mass. And I thought: why aren't we together? Since then, I have often attended Anglican Eucharist services in Melbourne, Newcastle and Canberra. Every time I take Holy Communion at these Eucharist services I am very moved, and think: this is the way it should be.

My 4th call and response was on an intensive 10 days Centering Prayer retreat at Snowmass, Colorado last October. There we met 24 truly joyful people. In some cases, you could see the joy shine out of them. We soon found they all shared one thing in common: they had all experienced some great pain or suffering in their lives. We learnt this pain came from: divorce and its messy aftermath; the death of a partner; a failed business venture; the loss of a child in heartbreaking circumstances with 2 of the retreatants; the fallout from the toxic workforce which exists right across the United States whereby some retreatants had to leave their jobs and home towns to secure a decent work environment, but at the expense of social isolation and the inevitable loneliness. It then struck me that contemplative prayer has some magnetic attraction for those who have experienced pain in their lives. The two - pain and contemplative prayer - seem to recognise each other and seek one another out.

Which brings me back to tonight's gospel reading. The birds of the air and the lillies of the field are the most vulnerable of species. I too am vulnerable. And because I am vulnerable, flawed, human, and full of the false self I tend to cling to, and hide behind, things. Things like money, superannuation, assets and property. Now God knows I don't have a lot of those things anyway. But I am coming to believe these things don't cut the mustard: they are an illusion. I am coming to believe that, at the end of the day, my only true security is to be found in God.

You see, Matthew 6 seems to me to be a great contemplative passage promising a higher state of being [Jesus calls it ***The Kingdom of God***] provided I don't worry. For some reason, worry and anxiety seem to be fatal obstacles to Jesus' promise.

So that's how I come to be here tonight giving this reflection. And before I go I do not want to leave you under any misapprehensions. I am not good. And I have brought someone along with me tonight who will vouch for that. But I want to become good.

And I believe I have a chance of doing so through a daily practice of letting go and letting God. In my case, that is my daily practice of Centering Prayer. In the case of a lot of you, it will be your daily practice of Christian Meditation. I freely admit I have faults, shortcomings and defects of character. Some of these are so deeply ingrained that I am unable to do anything to change them myself. In those cases I tell God that I am willing for God to change me.

There is one gift that, to me, permeates the whole of tonight's reading. It is the gift of joy. And I want to conclude this reflection with a quote from one of my favourite theologians, Sarah Bachelard. Sarah had this to say about joy on Saturday, 13 December 2014:

As Christians we should have joy in all circumstances. Joy is not dependent upon how things are going; whether all is well in our life and there are no dark clouds looming. Joy is a gift.

I pray for that gift.