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**Set Pools of Silence (John 4. 5-15)**

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Incarnate Word, in whom all nature lives,  
cast flame upon the earth: raise up contemplatives  
among us, those who walk within the fire  
of ceaseless prayer, impetuous desire.  
Set pools of silence in this thirsty land.

I love these words by the Australian poet, James McAuley and they seem particularly apt for a contemplative community in our context. I'm not the only one to have thought this. You'll find them on the website of a number of contemplative communities in Australia including Jamberoo Abbey near Kiama, and The Gathering Place here in Canberra.

This much quoted stanza is actually an excerpt from a very long poem, called 'A Letter to John Dryden'. In preparation for our service tonight I thought I should have a look at the rest of it. Having done so, I can see why most focus on these few, most famous lines! It must be admitted that the poem as a whole, which is addressed to the 17<sup>th</sup> century poet John Dryden, is curmudgeonly and argumentative. McAuley long-windedly complains of the 'neurotic modern world'; he laments the loss of the religious and poetic sensibility Dryden could take for granted. In the process, he takes a swipe at pretty much everyone – communists, liberals, people he calls 'mediocre democrats', and other religious traditions.

But then, out of the midst of this rather unappealing text, these lines seem suddenly to soar. Addressed directly to Christ – 'Incarnate Word, in whom all nature lives' – they let go of argument and express simply the poet's profound thirst for God, for life sourced in God. They reflect the unfettered, 'impetuous' desire of Psalm 63: 'O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water' (Ps 63.1). McAuley

understands that it's this desire for God, this deep yearning to be sourced in and fed by the spring of God's life that is the heart of the contemplative vocation and its gift to our world. As we begin our year together at Benedictus, it's good to remind ourselves of this, our fundamental need and call.

There's a long tradition in the Hebrew scriptures of imagining God as the One who supplies water in the desert. It happens literally as, for example, in the story of Hagar and her son Ishmael, saved from dying of thirst when God opens her eyes to see a well in the wilderness of Beer-sheba (Gen. 21. 19). Metaphorically in the writings of the prophets and the psalms, the human soul is time and again imagined as arid, parched and incapable of fecundity without the replenishing, vitalizing inflow of God's life.

Tonight's reading from John's gospel plays with this imagery at both levels. There's the literal sense in which Jesus and the Samaritan woman are in need of water. He's tired and thirsty from a long journey; she's drawing water for her household. They meet at a well, Jacob's well, where Jesus transgresses a whole set of religious and moral boundaries, subverting them by the simple means of requesting from her a drink. At the same time, as John tells the story, Jesus calls forth another kind of thirst in this woman, a thirst which can be slaked only by another kind of water – the living water of God's energy and life. John makes this point with characteristic irony, juxtaposing the woman's literal take on Jesus' words – "Sir, you have no bucket and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" – with Jesus' deeper meaning.

What I find significant about this play of imagery is its imaginative sense of the possibilities of human life. We *can* live purely according to nature, as it were, apart from God. We can eat, drink, live and die, drawing not on the abundant energy of God's life, but relying on our limited and finite resources alone. Jesus implies that's the condition of the Samaritan woman coming day after day to the well, her deepest needs never fully satisfied. But that's not all that's possible. We can also drink from,

be watered by, the infinite life of God – our deeper thirst for love, communion, belonging finally quenched.

But what does this actually look like? What does the promise of being given ‘a spring of water gushing up to eternal life’ amount to? Well, clearly it’s not about living in some parallel universe, three feet above the ground and magically freed from the consequences and constraints of creaturely life. Jesus lives our common life – he *is* tired, hungry, thirsty, at times clearly frustrated, sad and misunderstood. And yet, he doesn’t respond to these hardships as we tend to, seeking to secure his life on his own terms, or to defend himself against scarcity and threat. He’s not governed by fear and the fear of death – whether literal or social. Think of how he risks ostracism by his hospitality to this woman. He therefore makes visible the possibility of a different quality of human existence – a life sourced in, received from unlimited abundance, beloved, unafraid and free. This is the experience of eternal life in human form. It’s what it looks like to live *here and now* from the energy of generosity and trust.

How do we get access to this energy of the divine life, which Jesus calls ‘living water’? How do we experience this freedom and abundance for ourselves? Jesus teaches that it’s gift, grace – it’s available because of the giving-ness of God. The Issue is to do with our capacity to receive. And this, I think, is where prayer comes in, the ‘ceaseless prayer’ of which McAuley writes. Let’s not misunderstand what this means.

‘Praying without ceasing’ does not mean spending our entire lives saying prayers. Nor does it mean spending all our time on our meditation stools, or thinking about God. In one sense, this prayer is not something we do at all. ‘We have to realize’, John Main wrote, ‘that when we talk about “our prayer” we are really talking about our disposing ourselves for the full liberation of the life of the Spirit within us, which is the prayer of Jesus and his vital connection with the Father’.<sup>1</sup> In other words, praying without ceasing is about growing in availability to the Spirit of God, so

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<sup>1</sup> John Main, *Monastery Without Walls: The Spiritual Letters of John Main*, p. 47.

to be drawn into the same relationship with God as Jesus enjoys. It's about our whole lives dwelling within, sourced in this dynamic of love. It's true that part of 'disposing ourselves' for this involves a disciplined *practice* of prayer. But our practices of prayer, our words and our silence, are ultimately just the means by which we offer ourselves to be prayed through.

As McAuley recognized, this is the fundamental vocation of the contemplative life, of a contemplative community – to be available at this level. In silence, beyond words and images, we let go our agenda, our plans, and ultimately our selves to become radically open to the divine life. We offer ourselves to become conduits of grace – channels of God's hospitality and compassion – bringing refreshment to places dessicated and made lifeless by fear, hostility and despair.

So here we are, gathered again, as this community of prayer and practice. It is such a joy to be with you, and to anticipate the promise and possibility of the coming year.

Let us pray, as we begin our year together at Benedictus, that we will encourage one another to be ever more available to the fire of ceaseless prayer, ever more surrendered to our impetuous desire for God, and so by the grace of God set as a pool of life-giving water in our land.