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Set Pools of Silence (Matthew 14: 22-33)

Sarah Bachelard

We're beginning our year together at Benedictus in what seem like critical times. A new president has just been inaugurated in the United States – one whose capacity to lead responsibly and justly is in serious doubt. We've heard recently that the past year was, for the third year running, the hottest on record with the rate of climate change and the mass migration of those affected accelerating. And here in Australia, the recent Australia Day 'celebrations' reveal the extent of our own society's continued avoidance of the truth of our history and its legacy for our first peoples.

I know there are dangers in claiming that we live in uniquely difficult times – the crises of every age loom large for those living through them. Nevertheless, I think it's true to say that we face enormous challenges as an earth community and that in many of the places we may have looked for leadership to help us face these challenges with courage and truthfulness, it is seriously lacking. Evasion of reality, if not the outright intention to deceive, characterises too much of our political, institutional and communal life. In such a context, what is the vocation of a community such as ours? How are we called to be?

The poet James McAuley imagines contemplatives as 'pools of silence'. Heard in one way, this might seem an invitation to quietism and inaction, as if we're to turn our attention inwards rather than engaging in the rough and tumble of the world, as if we're to separate out and retreat from the fray. The old dualistic distinction between contemplation and the active life looms here. But it won't surprise you to know that's not what I think he means. Instead, these lines speak to me of the possibility of lives radically sourced in, fed by, the energy of God's life. This is an energy imaged sometimes

as flame, sometimes as water, and sometimes as silence more potent than any words. On this view, contemplatives are called to be so fully immersed in the fire of love, in the spring of living water, that we channel its availability for others – like pools in the desert welling up from the depths, offering refreshment and the means of life. And if that's so, then contemplative practice is directly connected with the life of the world. It is a political act.

Our reading tonight is also set against the background of distressing events. King Herod has had John the Baptist beheaded in prison, at the prompting (so the story goes) of his wife Herodias. It's a lonely and seemingly pointless end. John's prophetic call for repentance had been ignored and is now finally silenced – his severed head paraded on a platter before Herod's guests. Afterwards – Matthew says – John's disciples came, took the body and buried it, and then went and told Jesus (Matt. 14: 12). When Jesus heard it, so the gospel reports, 'he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself'. Little wonder. It must have been a profoundly sobering moment: this is what the powers that be are capable of, this is the risk of crossing them.

But the crowds won't leave Jesus alone. 'They followed him on foot from the towns', Matthew writes, and when Jesus got out of his little boat on the farther shore, he saw 'a great crowd' there ahead of him, 'and he had compassion for them and cured their sick'. Then they needed feeding, and from the five loaves and two fish the disciples managed to muster, he satisfied the hunger of about five thousand men 'besides women and children' in that deserted place. At last, though, Jesus sought solitude again. He made the disciples get into the boat and 'go on ahead' to the other side; he dismissed the crowds, and 'he went up the mountain by himself to pray'.

This whole passage is dense with allusion and metaphorical significance. The feeding of the five thousand in a deserted place recalls God's feeding of the Israelites in the desert with manna from heaven; Jesus' mountain top vigil recalls Moses' solitary

trek up Mount Sinai to speak with God; and if the sea is an image connected with chaos in the Hebrew imagination, then Jesus' walking across the stormy waters and saving Peter from sinking into their depths, signifies his lordship over all that would overwhelm life and God's purposes in creation. Matthew is letting us know in no uncertain terms that Jesus is the new Moses bringing a new law; that Jesus possesses the power of the Creator to set the bounds to chaos, that is he is – as his disciples proclaim him – 'truly ... the Son of God' (Matt. 14: 33). And against the background of what has just happened to John the Baptist, this too is a profoundly political and not just a 'religious' statement. What I'm struck by, though, what seems to be the still centre at the heart of it all, is Jesus' prayer.

We don't know anything really, about how *Jesus* prayed. But when the disciples asked him how *they* should pray, Jesus seems to emphasise three things. The first is to do with single-mindedness – which is a form of purity of heart. Don't be like the hypocrites, Jesus says, who pray with one eye on how they appear before others. That's a kind of double-minded prayer – looking at yourself, congratulating yourself on your piety. Rather, he says, 'whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret' (Matt. 6: 4). Look to God alone and let go self-consciousness.

The second thing Jesus emphasises is to do with generosity and whole-heartedness, the willingness truly to be vulnerable in prayer. This shows up in our acknowledgement of need: 'give us this day our daily bread'. It shows up in our perseverance, and in our willingness in and through prayer to let go what we hold against others: 'forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors'. And finally, the third thing Jesus emphasises is obedience – the desire truly and deeply to hear and obey the will of God: 'your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven'.

I've said we don't know how Jesus prayed exactly – what words he used, whether he used words at all, or whether his prayer was simply a silent communion. But we do know he was utterly focused on God – single-minded; he was utterly transparent to God – open-hearted; and he was given over to God – obedient. We too are called to pray in this way ... nothing held back, nothing hidden or refused. And just as even Jesus needed to keep returning to this still centre of his being, neither can we withstand the tempests of violence and unreason that threaten our world except in the resource of God's very life.

As it was for Peter in our gospel reading, part of the struggle of faith in our age, I think, is to keep trusting, keep believing that God is present and active, and that prayer itself is a powerful act that opens channels for grace and healing to come through. But this year, more than ever it seems to me, we must be faithful to our contemplative vocation to be with God in radical simplicity, stillness and silence, handed over that the life of God might flow through us to the life of the world. Today we commit ourselves anew to keeping faith together. Welcome back to Benedictus!

Maranatha, Come Lord Jesus.