

### SARAH BACHELARD – REFLECTION I

For over a thousand years, pilgrims in Europe have walked the many ways of St James, the Camino de Santiago. They have journeyed from as far away as Canterbury, Paris, Geneva, Granada, even St Petersburg, to the north-western Spanish city of Santiago de Compostela where the bones of the apostle James, the brother of the Lord, are allegedly housed. Participation in this pilgrimage has waxed and waned over the centuries; its revival in recent times seems an astonishing, if difficult to interpret, sign of a new search for meaning or connection, a deep movement in and of the human spirit.

Among the most popular of the mediaeval pilgrimages, and substantially encouraged and funded by the Benedictines at Cluny, the Camino de Santiago is estimated in its heyday to have attracted up to half a million pilgrims annually. It declined during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, with Martin Luther's remark about the Santiago shrine, 'No one knows whether what lies in the apostle's tomb is a dead dog or a dead horse', indicative of growing scepticism about relics and the salvific efficacy of pilgrimage, and not just among Protestants. And the cause at this time was not helped by the Spanish inquisition, instituted in 1478, which persecuted foreign pilgrims for alleged lapses in religious observance!

During the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, appetite for pilgrimage declined further under the influence of the new secular philosophies of the Age of Enlightenment, and in 1867 only forty pilgrims attended the Feast Day of St James in Santiago. A century later – in the 1960s and 70s – things were not much different, with only seventy to eighty pilgrims arriving in Santiago each year. But in the 50 or so years since then, the figure has grown to over 200, 000 pilgrims per year. Australian author, Dee Nolan, has written: 'There was no celestial brightness to herald the extraordinary late-twentieth-century rebirth of the *camino*. No angels came bearing messages, but it would seem to be nothing short of a miracle that, in our modern

times, people from all parts of the world and of every religious persuasion (or sometimes none) increasingly feel the need to retrace the steps of the mediaeval pilgrim'.<sup>1</sup>

Almost two years ago now, I joined the growing throng and walked the most frequented of the routes to Santiago – the Camino Frances – beginning in the French Pyrenees at St Jean Pied de Port and arriving after 800 km and 34 footsore days at Santiago de Compostela, only to continue for three more days on to Finisterra – the end of the earth. It was a profound experience – challenging, humbling, quotidian, and, like all contemplative experience, still changing me, 'I know not how'.

We are here in Rome, another famous pilgrim destination, to explore the question – to put it at its broadest – of spiritual renewal in our world. We are focusing on the role of the monastic tradition in encouraging renewal both within the church and beyond. We are reflecting, in particular, on how the gifts of contemplation might be recovered, deepened and communicated so as to engage with the needs of the modern world through a contemporary theology and practice of prayer. I wonder if fresh insight into these themes might be realised by bringing them into conversation with the spiritual hunger, confusion and renewal reflected in the surprising revival of pilgrimage in our day.

### Spiritual and/or Religious?

Most of the pilgrims I met were not, as they expressed it, 'religious' – but many were happy to describe themselves as 'spiritual'. They would have resonated with Father Laurence's aphorism: 'we are not human beings on a spiritual journey, but spiritual beings on a human journey'. They did not apparently feel the need for confessional faith or corporate belonging to support them on this journey; in fact, most would have understood such confession and belonging, particularly as embodied in the

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<sup>1</sup> Dee Nolan, *A Food Lover's Pilgrimage to France* (Melbourne: Lantern Penguin Group, 2014), p.7. I am indebted to this source for the historical sketch in the preceding paragraphs.

institution of the church, as more likely to block than encourage an authentically spiritual life.

The question of what's at stake in the distinction between 'the religious' and 'the spiritual' is actually quite complex. Rowan Williams has suggested that, as commonly drawn, it involves an interlocking set of values and concerns. For those who identify as 'spiritual not religious', 'religion' tends to be associated with self-interested institutions, rigid dogma, hierarchy and corporate discipline. To commit to one religion seems to imply rejection or hostility towards the claims and commitments of other traditions. On this view, religion is seen as exclusive, potentially intolerant – at worst, murderous. Personally, it can feel coercive and restricting, committing me (in the words of Williams) to practices that mean little to me, ... subjecting myself to codes of conduct that don't connect at all convincingly with my sense of who I am or what is creative and life-giving for me'.<sup>2</sup>

By contrast, the spiritual pole of this distinction seems intrinsically more flexible and open-hearted. It 'opens up and resources personal integrity at a new depth'<sup>3</sup> and puts human lives in touch with 'the sacred' dimension of reality, without sacrificing personal liberty and authenticity, or locking its practitioners into 'a tribal mentality, hostile to other sorts of meaning and commitment'.<sup>4</sup> Spirituality is seen to be non-sectarian, inclusive, its authority grounded in lived experience rather than atrophied tradition. No wonder it seems more attractive!

The Benedictine teacher of Christian meditation, Father John Main himself drew what at first glance looks like the same kind of distinction between the 'spiritual' and the 'religious'. He wrote of the 'searching hunger' of many in the younger generation for authentic, personal knowledge of the truth,<sup>5</sup> and explained their rejection of the 'Christian religious structures of the West' on the grounds that

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<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, 'The spiritual and the religious: is the territory changing?' in *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp.85-96, 85.

<sup>3</sup> Williams, 'The spiritual and the religious', 85.

<sup>4</sup> Williams, 'The spiritual and the religious', 86.

<sup>5</sup> John Main, *Community of Love* (London: Continuum, 1999), 7.

‘we in the West have become too religious rather than truly spiritual’.<sup>6</sup> In fact, I think, John Main’s distinction between the spiritual and the religious is subtly different from the one outlined above. This difference is important as we seek to articulate a contemporary theology and practice of prayer.

For John Main, as for all true teachers of prayer, the point of religious faith is not mere conformity to a belief system, doctrine or pattern of conduct, but the transformation of human life. He knew that communicating access to transformation is necessarily interdependent with lived experience of it. In this context, his criticism of ‘religion’ and ‘religiosity’ reflected his experience of a church that purported to speak of transformation, while all too often failing to live it. His distinction between the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘religious’ then, is to do with concern for the ‘livingness’ of faith – the Spirit vivifying what is otherwise a dead letter, a religious ‘husk’ from which the vital kernel has been lost.

In a letter from the new monastic community he founded with Father Laurence in Montreal, for example, he wrote: ‘We cannot rest content with past forms and formulas. We must be on the pilgrimage to find new ways of speaking old truths to contemporary men and women at the profoundest levels’.<sup>7</sup> In another reflection, he described the church as being like ‘a city without electricity ... lighting its streets with candles while a great power source lay untapped in its midst’.<sup>8</sup> And, he insisted, that the church can only proclaim what it is in the process of experiencing, the church can only proclaim what it is.

But this appeal to the necessity of a living encounter with the realities proclaimed and transformation promised by religious faith was in no way, for him, essentially incompatible with theological commitment, disciplined practice and corporate belonging. Yes, the truths of religious faith can only be verified and

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<sup>6</sup> John Main, *Monastery Without Walls: The Spiritual Letters of John Main* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2006), 90.

<sup>7</sup> Main, *Monastery Without Walls*, 88.

<sup>8</sup> Main, *Community of Love*, 7.

communicated authoritatively out of lived experience; yet he would have maintained, I think, that without our being answerable to a reality that transcends us, and our contemporary preferences and conceptions of life, neither is authentic spiritual realisation and growth possible.

Because the problem, of course, is the way contemporary so-called 'spirituality' can be self-enclosed and even narcissistic, annexed to projects of the self. When disconnected from its roots in a larger story, community and accountability, spirituality and spiritual practice can be (perhaps unintentionally) reduced to a lifestyle resource, 'wealth we can live by', to paraphrase the title of a recent book.<sup>9</sup> And although it is by no means necessarily a 'bad' thing that someone might pursue a personal experience of deeper peace, centredness or connectedness, there remains a question about how deep this kind of spirituality is allowed to take us, how critically it can engage our pre-existing desires, self-understanding and identity. As Williams has pointed out, 'post-religious spirituality' tends to begin with the assumption that we choose what we are going to do and what kind of life we want. The spiritual dimension of life might be sought as a kind of supplement to *augment* our experience or ameliorate our suffering – meditation as a practice for relaxation or performance enhancement, for example. But the sense that we might be answerable with our lives to a reality we did not originate, and a call whose ramifications we cannot see – well, that's another matter altogether.

Here, then, is the context for our seeking a renewed theology and practice of prayer. On the one hand, we must take seriously the holy impatience of our contemporaries with authoritarian, formulaic, self-righteous, self-sufficing religiosity and religious systems. On the other hand, we must seek to open the possibility of that encounter with transcendent reality which saves the 'spiritual' from being just another lifestyle option, a consumer preference in a marketplace of self-chosen

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<sup>9</sup> Williams, 'The spiritual and the religious', 85. Williams refers to Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall's book, *Spiritual Capital: wealth we can live by*.

identity and value. The concept of 'transformation' allows us, I believe, to engage both these aspects of our situation.

### Transformation

What is it that we contemplatives are called to offer our world? I claimed earlier that the invitation and gift of an authentic spiritual tradition is the transformation of human life. This might seem to suggest just another project of the self – a self-conscious program for achieving sanctity or Enlightenment. But the transformation in question involves a comprehensive decentring of the self which issues in a way of being that is life-giving, life-bestowing. Speaking in Christian idiom, it's a way of being that shares in the energy of God's own life, reconciling, liberating and loving.

But what does this mean in practice? The notion of 'transformation' is appealed to in many contexts, and can feel rather slippery. What are we really talking about?

One way or another, all the great spiritual traditions testify to the possibility of experiencing a profound shift in our human subjectivity, our personhood. This involves a movement from being unconsciously identified with our individual, separate, alienated selves and enslaved by what Richard Rohr calls our 'programs for happiness',<sup>10</sup> to awakening, receiving or realising ourselves such that we enter into a fundamentally different relationship with reality. Instead of being completely driven and obsessed by our ego-ic needs for security and approval, often fearful and threatened, we become open to a larger dimension and conscious of a deeper belonging. For someone on the journey of transformation, it's not that all suffering, frustration and disappointment goes away, but our perception and experience of it alters. New possibilities for being emerge, even though our circumstances may not appear dramatically to change.

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<sup>10</sup> In a talk, 'Emotional Sobriety: Rewiring Our Programs for Happiness' available through the Center for Action and Contemplation, ([http://store.cac.org/Emotional-Sobriety-Rewiring-our-Programs-for-Happiness-MP3\\_p\\_209.html](http://store.cac.org/Emotional-Sobriety-Rewiring-our-Programs-for-Happiness-MP3_p_209.html)).

This process of the transformation of our subjectivity can take the form of an apparently sudden breakthrough or realisation, but mostly it occurs in stages – which is why the spiritual life is often conceived of as a journey or pilgrimage. The first part of the journey is always to do with coming home to ourselves, ‘finding’ or knowing ourselves more fully. For although the ‘small’, separate self is called, ultimately, to be fully yielded, let go or transcended, we seem first to need to be *reintegrated*, restored to ourselves and to community. This involves the experience of deepening wholeness, the healing of wounds, a release from unhelpful scripts and patterns of behaviour. It’s a process that demands practices like acceptance, forgiveness, compassion and truth-telling, the acknowledgement of hurts and dividedness.

There are many examples of this dimension of the process of transformation in the gospels. I think of the Samaritan woman at the well, shunned by her community and seemingly adrift in her own life, empowered to relate differently to her history and her neighbours after she’s seen and accepted by Jesus (John 4. 7-30). I think of Zacchaeus converted from his grasping after financial security (he’s a greedy tax collector, remember). He is met in his shame and so released to offer restitution and hospitality to others (Luke 19. 1-10). And there’s the Gerasene demoniac liberated from tormenting self-alienation, restored to himself and so to playing his part in the well-being of his community (Mark 5. 1-20).

A particularly powerful expression of the dynamics of this process of reintegration is narrated in John’s gospel, in the final appearance of the risen Jesus to Peter (John 21. 1-19). In this episode, the disciples are depicted as having returned to their old lives, fishing again in Galilee, as if their life with Jesus had never been.<sup>11</sup> They share breakfast with him over a ‘charcoal fire’ like the fire (*anthrakia*) over which Peter had denied Jesus three times in the High Priest’s courtyard. And after breakfast, recapitulating this three-fold denial, Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves him.

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<sup>11</sup> Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, second edition (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2002), 27-28.

Rowan Williams notes that in this exchange Jesus addresses Peter as ‘Simon, son of John’ – the name he had when he was first called to discipleship. ‘Simon has to recognize himself as betrayer: that is part of the past that makes him who he is. If he is to be called again, if he can again become a true apostle, the “Peter” that he is in the purpose of Jesus rather than the Simon who runs back into the cosy obscurity of “ordinary” life, his failure must be assimilated, lived through again and brought to good and not to destructive issue’.<sup>12</sup>

In this story we see how the experience of being restored to ourselves is sometimes, and necessarily, painful. It’s not that Peter’s being led to own and acknowledge his betrayal is a precondition of being forgiven in the sense that Jesus requires a little groveling before being willing to show mercy. It is rather that, unless Peter can be present to the full truth of himself and what he has done, then he cannot be given back to himself and called into renewed relationship. Without this acknowledgement and naming, a part of himself would have to be resisted, avoided, covered over perhaps by self-loathing. He needed, as one author has put it, to ‘make peace with his actualities’ – and that’s not easy.<sup>13</sup> Forgiveness is freely offered to Peter, but it costs him something to receive the gift.

So the identities given back to those who encounter Jesus in the gospels are transformed. They are no longer enslaved in quite the same way by woundedness, fear, habitual responses or the projections of others, no longer uncritically enmeshed in what Thomas Keating has called the ‘false-self system’. Nevertheless, though enlarged, these identities remain (apparently) separate, ‘finite’, egoic.<sup>14</sup> And the New Testament, together with the spiritual wisdom of other traditions, proclaims the possibility of a further transformation of subjectivity. This involves not only the

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<sup>12</sup> Williams, *Resurrection*, 28-29.

<sup>13</sup> The words are Geoffrey Wolff’s in *The Duke of Deception*, cited in Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and the Story* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 111.

<sup>14</sup> Cynthia Bourgeault, ‘Beatrice Bruteau’s “Prayer and Identity”’: An Introduction with Text and Commentary’, in *Spirituality, Contemplation & Transformation: Writings on Centering Prayer*, Thomas Keating OSCO et al. (New York: Lantern Books, 2008), 120-121.

healing and partial liberation of the self, but the transcendence of finite, separate selfhood altogether through transforming union with God.

This is what Jesus prays for on behalf of his disciples as he prepares for his death. 'As you Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us ... I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one' (John 17. 21, 23). St Paul writes of his experience of having been divested of his separate self, 'crucified with Christ', such that 'it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me' (Gal. 2.19-20). And St Peter understands that through Jesus, we are given the possibility of becoming sharers 'in the very being of God' or (in the NRSV translation) 'participants of the divine nature' (2 Pet. 1.4).

John Main returns time and again to this theme of radical self-transcendence through transforming union with God. He is concerned that most Christians lack a felt sense that this is indeed the promise and authentic trajectory of every human life. We are too unambitious, too willing to settle for less than we are called to.<sup>15</sup> Main speaks of this journey into union in terms of the transcendence of self-preoccupation and self-consciousness.<sup>16</sup> He writes of experiencing our being as grounded in God by 'falling into the depths of love ... with a complete "letting go", knowing for ourselves 'the great fact of all existence' that our 'being is from Being itself' (with a capital 'B').<sup>17</sup> 'The human heart', he says, 'longs for union – with ourselves, with others, with God. One side of us seeks to preserve our separateness, but our Godlikeness is stronger than this egoism. It makes our hearts restless until we find the peace of union'.<sup>18</sup> 'In the depth of our being', he goes on, 'we are relentlessly summoned by a love that will not give up, to realize our union with God in whom we have our being'.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See 'The Christian Crisis' in *The Present Christ: Further Steps in Meditation* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985), 70-79, 71; and 'Belief and Faith' also in *The Present Christ*, 41-48.

<sup>16</sup> Main, *Monastery Without Walls*, 88.

<sup>17</sup> Main, *Monastery Without Walls*, 79.

<sup>18</sup> Main, *Monastery Without Walls*, 90-91.

<sup>19</sup> Main, *Monastery Without Walls*, 91.

Not many, perhaps, realise this union fully in their lifetime. And it is important to recognise that the reality of union and our realisation of it are distinct things. In one of his last talks, Thomas Merton said: 'In prayer we discover what we already have. You start where you are and you deepen what you already have, and you realize that you are already there. We already have everything, but we don't know it and we don't experience it. Everything has been given to us in Christ. All we need is to experience what we already possess.'<sup>20</sup> Indeed, 'at any moment you can break through to the underlying unity which is God's gift in Christ'.<sup>21</sup> In one sense, then, there is nowhere else to get to; we don't have to worry – we're already here, in God. St John of the Cross maintains that God is present in all souls, as in all created realities, in a "natural" union of God and the self'.<sup>22</sup>

And yet, it does make a difference whether we are on the way to what John of the Cross called the "supernatural" union of "likeness that comes from love", the union that comes from loving relation.<sup>23</sup> Commenting on why this matters, Williams explains: 'The question put to the believer is about the ultimate direction of his or her life. For the sake of *what* do we live? If the answer to that is in terms of self-directed concern or finite matters in general, the human subject is failing to respond to the deepest vocation of its being, the call to "likeness", the central paradox that human fulfilment is in going beyond the confines of the self and the tangible world to share the freedom of God'.<sup>24</sup>

The state of union, in other words, is the full truth of our existence if only we would come to know it. John Main writes, the 'realization of oneness is the *raison d'être* of all consciousness. Unless we are on the way to this realization our life lacks meaning and we live our life as if it were a battle against discontent rather than as a

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<sup>20</sup> From a talk that Thomas Merton gave at the Cistercian monastery, Our Lady of the Redwoods, as recorded by David Steindl-Rast - September, 1968 (accessed [http://www.gratefulness.org/readings/dsr\\_merton\\_recol.htm](http://www.gratefulness.org/readings/dsr_merton_recol.htm), 11 March 2015).

<sup>21</sup> Cited in Cynthia Bourgeault, 'Centering Prayer and Attention of the Heart'.

<sup>22</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to Saint John of the Cross*, second edition (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1991), 176.

<sup>23</sup> Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, 176.

<sup>24</sup> Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, 176.

celebration of joy in the fact that we *are*. The only ultimate tragedy in our life would be never to realize any part of this oneness and to remain bound by our limitations'.<sup>25</sup>

In our realisation of this joy and this union, or at least as we journey towards it, we increasingly make God known. The character of the divine life becomes visible to the extent we allow it to form and shine through our lives. The gift of this to others is that by offering ourselves up, opening ourselves for this radical transformation of our consciousness, the character of our love is profoundly changed. Cynthia Bourgeault writes: 'The reason for undergoing this transformation is not personal self-realization or even the personal experience of "transforming union", but to be able to participate fully here and now in the generative, kenotic energy of the Trinity, which makes itself fully manifest in the act of giving itself away'. She goes on: 'Nucleated selfhoods cannot do that. The [separate human self] is inherently unstable, anxiety-ridden, and prone to judgement (even violence) when it senses itself threatened. Only as we become free of this limited, "stuck" definition of ourself can we flow into one another and into life in true Gospel fashion, loving our neighbour as ourself'.<sup>26</sup>

This might sound abstract, a bit too ethereal, but it has concrete effects we can recognise. Think of the story of St Francis embracing the leper – not as an act of charity from a safe distance (good Francis sincerely reaching out to the poor), but as an expression of communion and his felt sense of identity, of at-oneness with everyone. Think, too, of Thomas Merton's famous account of his sudden realisation one day, in a shopping district in Louisville, 'on the corner of Fourth and Walnut', that 'I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers'.<sup>27</sup> In just the same vein, St John of the Cross understood that the state of union means that we see the world as

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<sup>25</sup> Main, *Present Christ*, 104.

<sup>26</sup> Bourgeault, 'Beatrice Bruteau's "Prayer and Identity"', 113-114.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1995), 156.

God sees it, and this necessarily involves a 're-conversion to creatures'.<sup>28</sup> To quote Merton again: 'Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, ... the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really *are*. If only we could see each other that way all the time'.<sup>29</sup>

### Dying to Live

So we have a gospel to proclaim! News of the possibility of the radical transformation of our identities; the realisation of our communion with the source of all life – God's life-generating love.

But how does this transformation happen? How do we give ourselves to it? As I've already intimated, the Christian tradition understands it as a movement of self-dispossession and not just self-fulfilment. We let go the ego-ic self and this means it is a paschal journey. We die into life. By his own journey through death and into resurrection life, Jesus has gone ahead to show us the way. He has created a path for us to follow and the confidence (through faith) to entrust ourselves to it. But all of us must make this passage for ourselves, surrendering to our own journey to life through death.

I want to highlight two elements in particular that distinguish this paschal journey from generic notions of spirituality or spiritual experience. First, this journey involves the dynamic of answerability, the experience of being responsive to a call we have not invented and which leads us always beyond our previous securities, beyond any illusion that we can master or control our progress. 'You did not choose me', Jesus tells his disciples, 'but I chose you' (John 15.16). On this understanding, the spiritual journey is not about aiming to achieve a particularly holy persona or enjoying a certain life-style experience, but responding to a reality that transcends us, a reality prior to us and authoritative over us.

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<sup>28</sup> Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, p.188.

<sup>29</sup> Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 158.

Almost always responding to this call involves a comprehensive and painfully ‘self-displacing process’;<sup>30</sup> it leads us into the desert, the night, beyond our settled belonging and identity into uncertainty and unknowing. Williams speaks of the decision to ‘obey’ Christ as ‘an acceptance of the hidden God and his strange work, the God who is attained only through stripping and the purgation of his “consuming fire”’ (Heb. 12.27).<sup>31</sup> And again – we must not ‘spiritualise’ this. It’s not about self-conscious holiness or anything particularly dramatic, but the transformation that is wrought in us as we bring our ordinary lives – including our sufferings, disappointments, boredom and disillusion as the place where God will work in and through us to open our hearts and deepen our love.

This means, then, that the spiritual journey demands the whole of us. We are always tempted to hold something back, to retain some foothold in the identity we have known till now, some backdoor for the fearful and controlling ego which constantly seeks to have life on its own terms. But Jesus says simply: ‘Follow me’, and he gives short shrift to those who seek to hedge their bets or hang onto some piece of their life not yielded to the way.<sup>32</sup>

In the process of transformation, John Main says, ‘no part of ourselves, no aspect of our total human sensitivity is lost or destroyed’.<sup>33</sup> Yet this is true only as we yield ourselves fully, receiving ourselves back as gift on the other side of what promises annihilation. We resist this total self-giving. ‘What we try to do’, he says, ‘is to maintain observation points, base camps along every stage of our development. Each of these little camps is an outpost of the central H.Q. of the ego’.<sup>34</sup> But as that great ‘spiritual teacher’ Judi Dench so wisely expresses it in *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, it’s like being in the surf – as long as we resist the waves, trying to stay in

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<sup>30</sup> Williams, ‘The spiritual and the religious’, p.92.

<sup>31</sup> Williams, *Wound of Knowledge*, 21.

<sup>32</sup> Consider, for example, the story of the rich young ruler who went away sad because he was unable to let go his many possessions, the injunction to ‘let the dead bury the dead’, and the ‘hard saying’ that no one who puts their hand to the plough and looks back ‘is fit for the kingdom of God’ (Luke 9.62).

<sup>33</sup> Main, *Present Christ*, 82.

<sup>34</sup> Main, *Present Christ*, 106.

control on the edge, we remain separate from the greater life. Only by diving in, going under ('dying'), do we come out alive on the other side.

Religious life offers an embodying structure for these twin imperatives of answerability and total self-giving. We are answerable to God alone, but we must learn how to hear aright. Ideally, a religious community draws us into practices of deep listening and true obedience, teaching us to discern between the whims and self-delusions of the alienated ego and the call of God. In the company of fellow pilgrims and guided by a tradition, we discover how God has spoken to others in and through the Scriptures, we enjoy communion with God and with others by sharing in the sacraments and prayer. And at the same time, the very bodiliness and materiality of religious life teaches us the ordinariness and whole-heartedness of the self-giving demanded by the journey of transformation.

Monastic life makes all this vividly apparent. St Benedict's Rule lays down a way of life by which, in every aspect of life, answerability or obedience to God may be practised. 'My words are meant for you, whoever you are', Benedict writes in the Prologue, 'who laying aside your own will, take up the all-powerful and righteous arms of obedience to fight under the true King, the Lord Jesus Christ'.<sup>35</sup> And off he goes to detail patterns of praying and sleeping, eating, working, leadership, dispute resolution and corporate life. Every feature of this life – the use of time, gestures of the body, patterns of silence and speech, solitude and community – is designed to make visible the reality of Christ's presence and open the monks more fully to transforming encounter with that presence.

Of course, we know that in religious life and religious institutions all this can go badly wrong. The embodying structure ends up becoming a complacent end in itself, stifling or shutting up the way of transformation, rather than intensifying and enabling it. Jesus made just this criticism of the religious establishment of his day:

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<sup>35</sup> Prologue, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, trans. Anthony C. Meisel and M.L. del Mastro (New York: Image Books, 1975), 43.

‘Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them’ (Matthew 23. 13). I’ll come back to this in a later talk. For now – the point I emphasise is that the journey of transformation into Christ-likeness, into radical union with self-dispossessing love, necessarily implicates the whole of us. And this is where even the so-called ‘non-religious’ pilgrims might be more attuned to the authentic spiritual journey than they’re given credit for; and more ‘religious’ than they themselves might recognise.

It’s not straightforward, of course. On the Camino, our feet got sore very quickly. One of our fellow pilgrims expressed her dismay at her preoccupation with her physical sufferings. ‘I thought it would be a more spiritual experience’, she said. On the account I have given, that *was* the spiritual experience. So there’s some confusion in it all. Nevertheless, pilgrims are responding to a call that comes, as it were, from beyond themselves. Yes, they’ve chosen to take a walk but most of the people I spoke to felt compelled in some sense to put themselves on this way. It had become an imperative, a ripeness. Something in them (and why not call it the Spirit?) knew they needed to be displaced, stripped of familiar surroundings and the trappings of an old identity, not quite knowing why, or how the journey was going to change them.

And they were there bodily, their whole selves vulnerable to what came, day after day of heat, rain, and glorious autumn light; mud, cobblestones and miles of foot-pounding asphalt; hunger, thirst, tiredness, despair and elation. And, if their experience was like mine, the sheer physicality, dailiness and single-mindedness of the pilgrimage took them deep into solitude – into painful memories and unhealed hurts, and unpalatable knowledge of themselves. As I discovered, despite years of meditation and spiritual practice, if I’m cold, tired and hungry – I’m just cranky. To be a pilgrim is to be humbled, even at times humiliated. It brings us to poverty of spirit.

More and more people in our world are being drawn, one way or another, to the pilgrim way. The institutional church in Spain seemed largely oblivious to the significance of this. Most parish churches were locked as we passed them. When I asked why, I was told it was because they didn't have the personnel to protect the treasures stored inside them. When we got to the Cathedral at Santiago itself, we discovered that pilgrims (as well as not being allowed inside with our backpacks) were no longer allowed to touch the statue of St James. A rite of arrival hundreds of years, the church is concerned that too many hands are wearing the statue away. Instead of putting some renewable resin in the affected part to allow the corporeal practice of thanksgiving to continue, the statue is now locked away out of view – you have to pay money, even to be allowed to see it.

So the church was, in many places and to say the least, disappointing – not exactly attuned to or enabling the journey. And let me say, the pilgrims weren't all paragons of virtue either! But many are authentically, vulnerably on the way – yielding themselves to the journey of transformation even if often lacking a theology, a community and a practice of prayer that can support them in their deep intuition of its necessity, and sustain them to continue the work begun in them when they return to daily life.

This is why I think our gathering is important – for the church, for a hungry world. What practice of prayer and common life can lead all of us into and sustain us on the deep and challenging undergoing of radical transformation? How might this practice become part of the renewal of a church capable of meeting and nourishing the many pilgrims in our world who are seeking God, seeking to be blessed so that they in turn might be a blessing? To these questions I turn in my next talk!