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Second Sunday After Epiphany (John 1. 29-42)

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Christian life is experienced by us as a kind of paradox. On the one hand, we are already at home in God, already at one with God. 'Union with God is not something we are trying to acquire', writes Augustinian friar Martin Laird. 'God is already the ground of our being'.¹ And yet, as Laird also says, we experience ourselves not yet at home, as looking for God and somehow not being fully there yet. The spiritual journey, then, is a journey to where we already are; it is the task of *realising* in our lives the deep truth of our lives so that this deep truth becomes operative, so that we live from its resources rather than in reaction to our oft-felt experience of alienation, sadness and isolation.

Something of this paradox is visible, I think, in our gospel reading for today. The disciples think that they are the ones who have discovered God's anointed, and begun their journey into relationship with him: 'We have found the Messiah', Andrew tells his brother Simon. But all along it is God who is finding them. Jesus knows who Simon is more truly than Simon knows himself, and though Simon doesn't yet realise it, his being drawn into relationship with Jesus will call forth from him an identity and calling which he cannot yet imagine: 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas'.

As we begin a new year at Benedictus, this feels to me an important paradox to hold and live into. We are seeking God – we are seeking to become more and more completely who we are in God, and to enter into union with God. We commit ourselves

¹ Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.4.

to this journey and we feel our longing and distance. Yet God is seeking us and God is already within and among us. We are here, we are home, we are known. The invitation is to relax into and trust that assurance, and to let the vital and loving presence of God *be* realised in our lives. The gift is given – our task is to learn to receive it. And that is true for us as individuals, and for us as a community.

Contemplative practice keeps us profoundly in touch with both dimensions of this paradox of faith. On the one hand, the practice of stillness and silence opens us into the silence of God at the centre of our souls and in whom we live and move and have our being, and teaches us to entrust ourselves patiently to God's working in us. It deepens our listening and our self-knowledge, just as John the Baptist's deep awareness of who he is in God ('I am not the Messiah', he has earlier said), enables him to recognise God's presence when he sees it and testify to what he knows.

And on the other hand, the practice of stillness and silence opens us to the noisiness and distractedness of our minds, the extent to which our whole life is consumed and constituted by what seems to keep us separate from the peace and love of God: our chaotic thoughts and reactions, our commentaries on our thoughts and reactions, our feelings and justifications for and suffering over our thoughts and reactions. Many times, when we attempt to be silent and still, all hell breaks loose and we are made profoundly aware of the journey there is to take if we are to realise more completely our communion with the vast and silent ground of ourselves which is God.

And yet, the good news is that these two aspects of our contemplative experience are not ultimately opposed or separate from each other. It is our slow and piecemeal learning to be still and silent in the midst of our interior whirlwind, which is actually the engine of our deepening capacity for being present and receptive. All that distraction and noise, suffering and woundedness, only *appear* to separate us from the peace and love of God. They have no ultimate power and, if we engage them

contemplatively and with awareness, meeting them with stillness rather than anxiety or more commentary, they become the very doorways by which over time we enter the experience of communion with God, ourselves and each other.²

All of which is to say, that we start where we are. The disciples are drawn one day, maybe they themselves don't quite know why, to go after Jesus and then to stay with him awhile. It is 'about four o'clock in the afternoon' – a momentous beginning which happens in ordinary time. John suggests that in this apparently simple meeting, there is an experience of seeing and being seen, glimpses of a deeper dynamic. The number of 'seeing' verbs in our passage is striking: John 'watches' Jesus walk by; Jesus 'turns and sees' the disciples following, and asks them 'what they are looking for?' When they recognise him as teacher (Rabbi) and ask him where he is staying, he invites them to 'Come and see'. And then when Andrew brings his brother Simon, Jesus 'looks' at him and gives him his new name. But there is a long way to go before these glimpses of a new reality, new possibility, will bear life-giving fruit in the disciples' understanding and their lives.

And, here's the paradox again, it is precisely through that which is not yet healed or integrated in them, that their deeper transformation is enabled – in the same way that the grit in the oyster forms the pearl, or that our distractions provide the occasion for our growth in attention and fidelity and quietness. Simon is to be called Cephas, Peter, the rock on which the church will be built. But John knows that we know how much in him is yet to be redeemed – his impetuosity, his bravado, his fear and longing to belong at any cost, his self-loathing. Yet these very 'sins' and 'wounds', as they are acknowledged, owned and forgiven, are the means by which Peter will become capable (at the end of John's gospel) of being entrusted by Jesus with 'feeding my

² Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, Chapters 4 and 5.

sheep' and 'tending my lambs'; they are the means by which he becomes who in Jesus' eyes he already is.

Christian discipleship is not about pre-existing perfection or disembodied enlightenment. It is about wholeness – the healing and integration of all that we are and suffer through our deepening encounter with and transformation by the love of God. And being a Christian community is about companioning one another in and through this demanding, sometimes painful and confusing, journey of discipleship – so that our lives, singly and together, witness to and make available the promise and possibility of wholeness in a broken and suffering world.

We are beginning a new year together and we are starting, each of us, where we are. Our contemplative practice draws us more and more deeply into the paradoxically dynamic stillness of the life of God, the 'luminous darkness', which encounters our frenzy and blindness and gently draws us, through our wounds and fears and sins, into relationship with Christ, to be healed and then sent into the world as agents of healing. Our first task is simply to want to come home to God and ourselves.

'When Jesus turned and saw them following him, he said to them, 'What are you looking for?' They said to him, 'Rabbi' (which translated means Teacher), 'where are you staying?' He said to them, 'Come and see'.