

Trinity (Ephesians 3. 8-19)

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The passage we have just heard was one of John Main's favourite readings – the images of being 'rooted and grounded in love' and being 'filled with the fullness of God' were central to his understanding of the way of meditation as a way of radical discipleship. Christian life, Christian prayer, is not about us speaking or relating to God as an object, but about us so becoming one with God that we are radically transformed. Prayer is above all else the desire for intimacy with God and involves the longing to be freed from all that separates us from God. Meditation, wordless openness to the living flame of God, is a practice that dismantles and dissolves the things which separate us – prime among them, our self-consciousness and illusory ego identity.

A question that is often asked about this practice of meditation, though, is what makes it Christian? If meditation belongs to all spiritual traditions, then what is its connection with the human life, death and resurrection of Jesus? How does it relate to the New Testament proclamation that he somehow makes possible a wholly new way of being engrafted into God's life? Or, to put it directly, why do we need Jesus? Can't we simply place ourselves in the presence of 'God', say our mantra, and be drawn beyond ego and into reality? The feast of the Trinity, the celebration of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier) seems an opportune time for us to contemplate this question for a little while.

Let me quote again from our passage from Ephesians: 'Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the

boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things ... This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him’.

What is being spoken of here is the intersection of time and eternity, a divine plan carried out in human history at a particular time and place. God – by definition – is eternal. There is no time when God is not; God was and is and is to come. Jesus – as a human being – was time-bound, finite. The extraordinary claim of the New Testament is that in this particular, time-bound, historical life of Jesus, the eternal God is not only revealed, but enters wholly into finite life. Jesus Christ reveals the mystery hidden for ages, *and* carries out ‘the eternal purpose’ which is to reconcile creation to its creator, humanity with the source of its life, from within.

This is, to put it mildly, a radical claim. ‘The problem was, is and always will be’, Rowan Williams has said, ‘the Christian attitude to the historical order, the human past’.¹ Because to say that *God* entered into history, participated in a series of events in first century Palestine, is not only very difficult to believe, but also means that our relationship to God cannot be seen in terms simply of connecting to ‘timeless truth’ in some spiritual realm which floats above the mess of history and the flesh. The Christian doctrine of salvation *just is* that God became flesh, human, historical, finite and that through this God-life in Jesus the whole of created life is being drawn into its fulfilment. Redemption *means* wholeness and transformation, on the Christian understanding; it does not mean ‘beam me up, Scotty’.

And that has implications for how we approach and understand the prayer of meditation. Because any prayer that is Christian will draw us not away from the world,

¹ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross*, second revised edition (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1991), p.11.

but towards it; will not rescue us out of the world and its suffering, but will draw us into the dynamic of God's desire to heal and reconcile and transform.

The Celtic cross is, I think, one of the most powerful symbols we have of this proclamation – one of our most powerful symbols of God, and of Christian life and prayer. In the encompassing circle, we see the infinite and eternal life of God; in the cross, we see this God-life intersecting with the life of the world. The cross is the price God pays for loving the world – for the world, as T.S. Eliot said, 'cannot bear very much reality'. Much easier to expel, or ignore or crucify its unwelcome messengers.

The great insight of Trinitarian theology is that the cross is not only the fate suffered by Jesus, but belongs to the life of God eternally. God's nature is to love, to reconcile, to go out to meet what is not God (the Son is eternally 'sent'); and what is not God always resists, and is afraid and murderous. This is just how it works – love encounters fear and death, and love suffers and is rejected. The cross is the price God pays for loving the world – for the world 'cannot bear very much reality'.

When we meditate, this is the reality we encounter and open our hearts to receive. We encounter God who is, was and always will be compassionate, crucified love and who is always coming out to meet us, to heal us and call us to share in this same mission of reconciliation. And when we meditate and allow ourselves to be more and more completely in contact with, changed into God's likeness, it will not be long before we discover ourselves in some way or another in the place that Jesus did.

Maybe what confronts us first is darkness and alienation in our own hearts and lives – the wounds we cannot forgive and which haven't healed; the persona and the self-protections we struggle to let go. As we continue in this way of prayer, maybe we become more deeply present to the immeasurable pain of the creation and begin to suffer the tears of the world against which we can no longer insulate ourselves except at

the cost of untruthfulness. And after a while, maybe we find that being drawn into deeper truthfulness and compassion, and refusing to play along with the way power is humanly disposed, becomes so threatening to others, that we are misunderstood or expelled, cast into the place of shame and death.

What is Christian about meditation is that it draws us into sharing the way of Christ – the journey which love makes to fulfil all things, to reconcile all that is estranged from the love and life of God. So why do we need Jesus? How does Jesus help? Well, who is it that enables us to face up to and ‘own’ the truth about ourselves knowing that we are already forgiven? Who is it that sustains us as we seek to remain faithful to love and truth in the face of rejection, misunderstanding and violence? Who is it that comes alongside us as friend and companion, whose Spirit works within us to transform our own fear and defensiveness? Who teaches us the absolute ‘*for-usness*’ of God and so makes ‘possible the comprehensive act of *trust* without which growth is impossible’?²

Jesus has gone ahead of us, revealing what the love of God looks like in a human life, *and* creating the path along which we too are called to travel if we wish to be fully ourselves, fully alive, fully real. John Main writes that in Jesus the Passover from finite to infinite life is accomplished and that ‘it is his courage, his faithfulness and his love that take us into the infinite expansion that is God’. He is our guide, the man wholly open to God. ‘As we meditate each day we may not recognize our guide. That is why the Christian journey is always a journey of faith. But as we approach the centre of our being, as we enter our heart, we find that we are greeted by our guide, greeted by the one who has led us’. In him, through him and with him, we come to union with life of God and find ourselves sent into the world God loves. This is the dynamic of our prayer of meditation and our participation in the Trinitarian life. Listen again to the Letter to the Ephesians: ‘I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you

² Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel*, revised edition (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2002), p.43.

may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God'.