

Lex Orandi, Lex Vivendi: Being a Contemplative Church

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'Lex orandi, lex credendi' was an ancient monastic saying – the law of praying is the law of believing, or 'how we pray shapes how we believe'. To this formula was sometimes added the phrase *'lex vivendi'*. How we pray is how we live – *lex orandi, lex vivendi*. This seems to me deeply true. If our praying is perfunctory, mechanistic, self-serving or self-enclosed, so will be our living. If, on the other hand, we are in our prayer authentically present and available for encounter, open to the grace and terror of the living God, then our lives will be charged with the possibility of radical newness and adventure. Transformative prayer and transformative living go together – and without openness to transformation, both prayer and life soon 'go dead'. We may continue to go through the motions, saying our prayers and occupying space on the planet, but we will not be fully alive, nor truly participating with God in life's generation and healing.

In my previous talks, I've sought to show how this life-giving dynamic of transformation involves being restored to ourselves – integrated, recollected – as well as being drawn beyond ourselves – letting go, being self-dispossessed. There's a sense in which this dynamic is sequential. We have to be healed and reconciled, restored and recalled to ourselves, at least to some extent, before we can authentically begin to let go – let ourselves go. This is because the necessary letting go is not self-repression or mutilation, but rather the free handing over of our whole self into God. Yet there's another sense in which this movement is also cyclical and ever-deepening. The more we let our whole selves go, the more fully (paradoxically) we are restored to ourselves; the more we can yield, the more we're liberated to live out the truth of our vocations.

A practice of meditation is, I have argued, a necessary dimension of the prayer which opens us to this radical self-yielding, this *kenosis*. The disciplined practice of interior silence is how we enact, daily, the handing over of our self-consciousness

and ego-ic identities, deepening our trust in and reception of the divine life. It's how we come to know for ourselves, in John Main's words, 'the truths of our faith in our own experience', entering the dynamic of death and resurrection with our lives. Meditation is a daily, disciplined, unspectacular and yet profoundly efficacious practice of availability for transformation.

As I said at the end of my last talk, however, our gathering is concerned not just with our individual journeys of transformation. We are also here to explore the broader question of spiritual renewal in our world, and the role of contemplative communities in encouraging renewal both within the church and beyond. If meditation is a necessary dimension of transforming prayer, then clearly teaching meditation is part of how a contemplative community encourages this kind of renewal. We see this in the work of the WCCM, the Center for Contemplative Outreach and others, and I take for granted that we must continue with this work.

But it's not all that's needed. Yes, the prayer of the church must be deepened. But we need also to learn how to live in ways that are deeply congruent with our prayer. This is my focus in this final talk. How will our way of prayer affect how we live as contemplative communities – as monastic communities, the WCCM's 'monastery without walls', and worshipping communities like the one I lead – Benedictus Contemplative Church? How will our contemplative way of prayer transform our worship, our common life and our discernment of vocation? And how might this affect our contribution to the wider church?

These questions are critical because our church is not noted for its willingness to *participate* in the dynamic of transformation. It might talk *about* transformation, but it tends not to exemplify a willingness to hand itself over, to let go its identity, its security and its righteousness so as to receive its life back as gift. In fact, all too often, it's the reverse. We're anxiously preoccupied with survival and relevance, self-defensive about criticism and frightened of change, we seek to secure our identity by

way of political power and social control. In truth, the church fails time and again to live from and entrust itself to the possibility of the transformation it proclaims.

And yet, having said this, it's not always easy to discern what authentically allowing itself to be dispossessed, 'handed over' and what being self-forgetful might mean for the church – what it means for things like liturgy and contribution to public debate, for mission and life as a gathered community. Indeed, distinguishing between a church that is radically self-forgetful and a church that has forgotten faithfulness may not always be straightforward. Nevertheless, if we're serious about our contemplative communities being communities for transformation, contributing to the renewal of the church and the life of the world, these are issues we must engage. So what follows are some reflections on how I believe contemplative consciousness might transform aspects of our ecclesial life. I am conscious of these calling for much more thought and critical exploration, so I offer them as a first, not a last word and in the service of our continuing conversation.

Kenosis in Language

I am going to start with the question of kenosis in language. I want to talk about liturgy and then, very briefly, to touch on the church's public discourse.

I spoke in my first talk of pilgrims I met on the way to Santiago. I remember vividly a conversation with Antonio – a warm-hearted, generous Italian pilgrim, about 35 years old, a chef who had owned a restaurant in Malta and who produced sumptuous feasts on a shoestring budget to share with the rest of us. Antonio was clearly on a spiritual journey – listening to the questions rising up in his life, searching for meaning and vocational integrity. He wasn't a practising Catholic but one evening, perhaps because things were stirring within, he went to the pilgrim mass in the local village church. It didn't go well. His experience, as he shared it, was one of profound disconnection. The liturgy, as he parodied it to the rest of us over dinner, went like this: blah, blah, blah, **Amen**, blah, blah, blah, **Amen**. I have no reason at all

to doubt the sincerity of the priest or people of that place, yet nothing in their liturgy and language connected for Antonio. He was more open than he'd been for years, but sadly he found there no opening to the presence of God. And you know, as well as I do, that Antonio is not alone in this.

Two explanations for this experience of the church's language have been much discussed. One refers to 'secularisation', that profound and pervasive shift in Western culture. A whole worldview within which our theology and liturgy evolved has been lost, such that (without translation) much of what we do or say in church seems simply nonsensical – certainly to those like Antonio. One ecclesial response is to push on regardless, clinging more tightly to traditional forms, maybe even blaming people for leaving. A more compassionate response has been to seek ways of 'translation' – using more contemporary idioms, offering informal worship and so on. But is this enough? Does it get to the heart of the matter? I don't think so.

A second explanation refers to the loss of trust in the church. There are many reasons for this, not the least being recent revelations of endemic abuse and the systematic and culpable failure to address it. We have not embodied the words of our proclamation. We have lost our integrity. It's little wonder, then, that our words have lost their meaning, and are unable to be 'heard'. In his imprisonment under the Nazis, the Protestant martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrestled with the question of how realities entrusted to Christian witness might be spoken as living words, proclaimed as liberating events. Because of its self-preoccupation and political inaction, he believed the German church of his time had become 'incapable of taking the word of reconciliation and redemption to mankind and the world'. Its language had gone dead.

In Bonhoeffer's view, any new power of Christian speech would be given on the other side of the church's own conversion and purification. Until that day, he

said, 'the Christian cause will be a silent and hidden affair'.¹ Bonhoeffer's experience of the powerlessness of a corrupt, self-serving church to speak with authority or capacity to transform has become ours as well. Here the connections between disciplined silence, the purification of the church and the renewing of its language are clear.

A third issue has been less discussed. I think it's crucial. It would remain critical even if the issues I've just identified were somehow addressed. It's to do with the necessary *effacement* of our language, the necessity for liturgies to get out of their own way. So let me say some more about this.

In her book, *Writing the Icon of the Heart*, Anglican solitary, Maggie Ross, shares the story of being perched on a cliff in Glacier Bay, Alaska, face to face with the 500 foot tall ice towers marking the jagged edge of the glacier. Occasionally, she writes, one of the forward-leaning ice spires would collapse with a thunderous roar, an explosive boom reverberating among the peaks for many seconds. Above her towered cliffs of granite which seemed immobile – except that in truth, the area was 50 years overdue for a catastrophic earthquake. The last one had generated a wave that scoured surrounding mountainsides to an elevation of 1200 feet. 'We sat on the edge of this abyss', Ross writes, 'stupefied by glory'.

She went on to recount how the group she was with had intended to celebrate the Eucharist while they were there. Yet as they sat, transfixed by the landscape, she came to feel that the human rite of word and symbol would be inadequate to the liturgy they were living. The priest, however, took out the bread and cup from his backpack. She felt his action 'extraneous, an intrusion'. Perhaps it would still have been OK, if 'only he had simply reached out his hands for ours, or in silence distributed the elements that had already been consecrated far beyond the reach of any human incantation ... But no, he was a by-the-book man, and, pulling

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (enlarged edition), ed. Eberhard Bethge (London: SCM Press, 1971), p.300.

one out, began to drone the words I normally love, but which in that context were almost an obscenity. Everything had already been said from eternity'.²

I found Ross's words deeply challenging. They resonated for me because I'd experienced something similar one Good Friday where my experience of the liturgy was that it *shrank* rather than *enlarged* the meaning of the Cross at the heart of creation. It seemed to domesticate rather than illuminate the crucifying depths of our alienation and the tears of things. It wasn't that no care had been taken, or that it was rattled off. It wasn't a bad liturgy as such – in its own way, quite creative and certainly sincere. And yet, it was as if the priest was trying to 'make' something happen.

There was a little pile of stones, we were all invited to take one and put it at the foot of a cross. Symbolically this was meant to invoke our sins – but it felt like play-acting. We hadn't been allowed to go deep enough actually to get in touch with that reality. So I felt like I was just going through the motions, doing what 'should' be done and trying to generate the appropriate emotion to go with it. It left me feeling alienated. It was more of a distraction than a help. It didn't enable me to get in touch with my sin, or with Jesus and his forgiveness, or anything else. I had gone, wanting to be with this. I was thwarted and went home frustrated.

I'm not saying any of this is easy. And of course all of us are in different places when we come to worship. But that's precisely why the liturgy, the language of word and symbol, needs to point beyond itself *to* the reality, and not try to *be* the reality or *make* some reality happen. And for this, it needs to emerge from contemplative awareness. The liturgy will only open a space where *we* can be available – do our work – if it trusts both the prior reality of God, and the people and the Spirit at work in them. If it doesn't, it will get *in* the way rather than opening *up* a way. As Maggie

² Maggie Ross, *Writing the Icon of the Heart: In Silence Beholding* (Oxford: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2011), pp.51-52.

Ross writes, 'it is not the liturgy that sanctifies our lives; our lives are already sacred, and liturgy tries to remind us of that'.³

What does this mean for how we go about things? Liturgical churches have a lot invested in their liturgies – and rightly so. It's easy to caricature the communal ferocity unleashed by any proposed liturgical reform as mere resistance to change. But much more is at stake. If 'how we pray is how we live', then these words and forms do make a difference, they do affect who we are and are becoming. For most Christians, they're a primary source of understanding and formation, or deformation. Not just any words or forms will do. But we do not ensure faithfulness by treating our liturgies as ends in themselves, as guarantors of doctrinal correctness or magic formulas ensuring the means of grace. Whatever we cling to, or possess this tightly, will inevitably get in the way.

A kenotic, contemplative church must be willing to let go, to loosen its grasp, to trust its own journey of discipleship. Not only to talk *about* self-dispossession, but actually allow itself to *be* dispossessed. Again, this is not just about seeking words or liturgical actions that are more, supposedly, 'relevant'. Different kinds of liturgy *are* appropriate for different contexts and occasions, and traditional liturgies may be as apt as any. The deeper issue is our relationship to any and all of our words. 'No matter how simple or grand, contemplative or celebratory', Ross writes, 'the same rule of thumb applies: a liturgy will be effective only in so far as it is able to implement its own effacement. *Every true sacred sign effaces itself*'.⁴

So what might a self-effacing liturgy look like in practice? Always it will need to make room for silence, and to cultivate receptivity to silence in the worshipping community. But liturgical silence is always framed by word and gesture. So I've been wondering recently about a Good Friday liturgy for my community, Benedictus. How would I invite people into deepened contemplation of the Cross? The love of God

³ Ross, *Writing the Icon of the Heart*, p.53.

⁴ Ross, *Writing the Icon of the Heart*, p.61.

stretched out to all, even those who refuse it. The crucified Christ, with us in our alienation, handing himself over for our healing. What liturgy would trust this reality, open a way into it and not just talk about it? What words are needed? What gestures, what silence? ... It's early days – but what's starting to emerge for me is the possibility of meeting at a place called the Pinnacles – a hilly place at the edge of the suburb, the edge of town. We'll walk a little way into this landscape, scattered with trees and boulders. It's land that mutely tells its own story of suffering and sin – of dispossessed Aboriginal people, of trees cleared to make way for grazing, of weeds and thistles choking out native grasses. We'll gather by a boulder ... share silence and story ... space for each of us to be with our own grief, pain, loneliness, burden ... and our longing for healing ... We'll offer it up, we'll remember ... and maybe that's enough.

Like I said, it's early days. Maybe I'll need to let this go too. And let something else be given. The practice of liturgical self-effacement cannot be put into a formula – it's a giving up and, in God's time, receiving. It has to be discerned in different contexts. I don't have all the answers – just a conviction that this is what we are called to. Kenosis – the willingness to get of the way, so that the reality which gives us life, and to which we point, may be glimpsed again through us. That's what Antonio had longed to see.

It's the same with our public discourse. Any speech the church offers must be in service of the world's healing and transformation. It's not about us – about a self-conscious quest for relevance, the need to be noticed or the self-satisfaction of a prophetic identity. Nor is it about wielding in-house jargon in public to reassure ourselves we really have something to say. No, if we are truly to communicate God to the wider world, enabling the encounter that leads to repentance, conversion and healing, then we must be profoundly present to that reality ourselves, and then non-defensive and non-possessive about the language through which we attempt to

testify to it. It's no use just saying 'Jesus' at people. If our words have gone dead, then it doesn't help to say them more loudly and more often.

Of course, our speech and action must seek to make present God's love for and call on the world. But this is not the same as always using overtly religious language. Like Jesus' own language, Rowan Williams says, it may be 'non-religious' in the sense that it isn't 'primarily concerned with securing a space ... for a particular specialist discourse. Whether or not it uses the word "God", it effects faith, conversion, hope'.⁵

Kenosis in Mission

This brings me, then, to the question of mission – the mission of a self-dispossessing church.

Some time ago, I attended a meeting at what was then my local parish – a meeting of the pastoral care committee. The agenda was how to ensure that people felt welcomed to the church, how to ensure that new people stayed. I felt tired immediately. At one level, the concern expressed was genuinely for the people – had they been offered hospitality? Did they feel accepted, cared for? They're important concerns. At another level, though, I discerned something else driving the meeting's agenda. Things like: is our community growing and sustaining itself? And, are we being seen as welcoming? Are we living up to our self-image as inclusive, caring and warm-hearted?

This is a subtle question. English theologian Andrew Shanks has identified the issue I want to raise here in another domain, in the area of ethical response. He's pointed out that when it comes to doing the 'right' thing, two motives are, in most of us, deeply intertwined. There is the genuine desire to do justice – *and* there is the desire to be justified, innocent, to have the satisfaction of doing the right thing. This

⁵ Rowan Williams, 'The Judgement of the World' in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p.41.

second desire, he says, gets in the way of the first. It makes our ethical responses self-referencing, self-conscious. It distracts us and, as he says, turns 'us away from the authentic desire to be just'.⁶ Instead of being genuinely other-directed, our concern is subtly but unmistakably self-centred.

This captures my experience of the parish meeting. There *was* a genuine desire to be welcoming, to care for others. But it was intertwined with the desire to gain a sense of security and identity from being welcoming, a self-consciousness that drove the response. And this is actually death dealing. It leads to the kind of self-complacency that causes people to run a mile.

This experience caused me to reflect: what would it mean to let go the need to be reassured about our identity as 'good' or 'successful' church communities? I'm not talking about being totally unreflective, paying no attention to the impact we are having. I'm talking about the willingness to play our part in the mission of God, giving ourselves to it as wholeheartedly as we can, without keeping one eye on how we are doing, or what we are building, or on cultivating a certain self-image. I'm talking about handing over our ecclesial self-consciousness. Jesus put it more succinctly: 'do not let your left hand know what your right is doing' (Matt. 6.3).

Again, I'll draw on my experience from Benedictus to explore this theme. I want to share how we are attempting, in our context, to participate kenotically in the mission of God. This might seem a kind of performative contradiction – look at us being self-emptying – so I'm conscious of the risk I run here! Nevertheless, I offer our experience as a concrete example of the kind of mission I sense we are called to in our contemplative communities and in the wider church.

Members of Benedictus are responding to many vocations. Among our community is a secondary school teacher in a high needs school, whose students struggle (some of them) with drug addiction, depression and homelessness; there's

⁶ Andrew Shanks, *Against Innocence: Gillian Rose's Reception and Gift of Faith* (London: SCM Press, 2008), p.30.

a climate scientist, who continues his work on climate change mitigation despite a deeply hostile political context; a paediatrician specialising in children's development and family support; a counsellor, and others who work in pastoral care and social work, government, the law, health professions and academia.

When we began to ask about the vocation of Benedictus as a community, it seemed abundantly clear that our first task was not to take these people away from their work in the world, using up their energies on some other, church sponsored project. Rather, it was to encourage, support and seek to strengthen them for the work of reconciliation and healing to which they are already called, to which they are already giving themselves. For me, this meant giving up an incipient image of myself as the leader of a community doing something impressive and visible for social justice in the local area – it was going to look like Benedictus, as such, wasn't really socially engaged.

But if our mission was, at least in the first instance, to nurture and deepen the vocations of those who came, then what would that look like? In our weekly worship and meditation, we seek to create a hospitable space where people can really encounter themselves and God, and so be touched and renewed by the reality we proclaim. That's already significant. But we began to ask how we might enable people to participate in their own transformation in a more focused and intentional way, in ways that were directly related to their vocations, their family life, their participation in the wider community.

In his essay, 'Contemplation in a World of Action', Thomas Merton beautifully expressed what's at stake if this work of transformation is not enabled. He wrote:

'[Anyone] who attempts to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening their own self-understanding, freedom, integrity and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others. They will communicate ... nothing but the contagion of their own obsessions, ...

aggressiveness, ... ego-centred ambitions, ... delusions about ends and means, ... doctrinaire prejudices and ideas.⁷

We grew to believe that part of our vocation as a contemplative church was to encourage formation in contemplative action, so that people could participate in the life of the world in a different way, with a different quality of attention and capacity for self-awareness. There might be various ways of going about this. In our case, we run facilitated peer groups where people engage aspects of their daily lives. Participants bring their ordinary experience into a disciplined process of reflection, including theological reflection, discovering signs of life and invitations to new ways of being they had not recognised before. They begin to relate to unhelpful patterns in their lives with greater freedom, and experience the fellowship of a community that is profoundly accepting. They discover, by attending to the particularities of their lives, what really calls for their repentance, what conversion might be, how they might be liberated to yield themselves more deeply to God and God's call on them.

Not everyone who comes to Benedictus participates in this kind of structured formation – it is entirely invitational. But I want to highlight two senses in which this kind of mission is kenotic. First, it takes seriously that the Christian journey is one of radical transformation, and that the role of any ecclesial community is to open the possibility of embarking on that journey. This work of formation is in service of our participation in God's reconciling work in the world. It's not primarily about drawing people more fully into the institutional life of the church.

By contrast, much so-called 'lay formation' has been focused on turning people into quasi-religious. In my Anglican diocese, the centre for lay ministry focuses on such things as teaching people to read the bible in church, to lead the prayers of intercession, visit the sick and have evangelising conversations. There may be nothing wrong about this per se. It's certainly good that people are

⁷ Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1980), p.164.

empowered to participate in the life of their church. But is that it? Has the church no imagination for empowering people in their vocations outside the institutional church? Does it not take these vocations as seriously as its own? Or has it simply not let go its own self-interest long enough to discern how it might serve the people as they serve the world? The mission of a kenotic, self-forgetful church has a different focus from the mission of a church trying to secure its own place and identity.

Further, although there is great joy and satisfaction witnessing the growth of members of the groups, in terms of Benedictus as a whole, this form of mission consents to its own self-effacement. When those who participate go back to work or to their families, freer to be who they're called to be, we might never know about it, or what difference Benedictus made in the process. And nor will anyone else. It's slow, patient, unglamorous work. Perhaps we'll always look, as a community, somewhat fragile – people tend to come and go a bit. This is true, I know, for the meditation groups in the WCCM. But this is what it means to be called to be salt, leaven. You can't fully distinguish salt from the reality it participates in – you can't always identify the difference it makes. This kind of mission doesn't deliver the self-satisfaction and existential reassurance that might come with running large church based mission initiatives or generating lots of church based activity. The faithfulness is all.

Don't misunderstand me. Kenosis in mission will look different in different contexts. Sometimes a gathered community *is* called to join together in a particular ministry – running a food bank, caring for the homeless, advocating against injustice. There will be an identifiable corporate work to which we can point – think of the charisms of various religious orders. And sometimes such communities will grow and become highly visible. Even so, true faithfulness is measured by the extent to which such communities point beyond themselves, not seeking to secure their identity through their good works. Immediately we seek to possess a goodness of our own, we close ourselves off from grace and from life. Others experience us at

best as well-meaning, at worst as patronising and complacent, blocking access yet again to the One whose witnesses we allegedly are.

So this discussion points, I think, to two particular contributions our contemplative communities might make to renewal in the world and the church today. First, emerging from our own formation in transforming prayer and contemplative action, contemplative communities might contribute to the kind of lay formation that goes beyond facilitating participation in the life of the institutional church to enabling transformed engagement in the life of the world. Second, by understanding, practising and articulating this kenotic way of being, we may help liberate the wider church from its endemic anxiety about survival and identity, and so the corruption of its mission by self-concern and self-consciousness. The mission of the church is the *missio Dei*, the mission of God. Let us then listen for what the Spirit is up to – let's join in as and how we called. Let our life point beyond us, to the living realities of hope and love.

Kenosis in Gathering

So I've been speaking about a church willing to hand itself over. A church, free and confident enough, contemplatively grounded enough to let go its clinging to a specialist, insider language, and a self-conscious identity in mission. This might sound a lot like a church going out of existence – a church unfaithful to its vocation to be an identifiable sign of the kingdom of God, in the midst of this world. In this final part of my talk, I want to touch briefly on this issue.

The central paradox of the church's witness is that our vocation is to be gathered *as* kenotic, signful *as* self-emptying. What this means, I believe, is profoundly illuminated by the stories of the regathering of the disciples for mission after Jesus' death and resurrection.

Rowan Williams has pointed out that the crucifixion had led not only Jesus into the place of shame and failure, but his disciples also. On the one hand, they had

been led by Jesus outside the belonging they had known. They had become marginal to their religious community, and the world of public law keeping. And yet their 'longings for power' and positions of influence in some new age have also been disappointed. There had been no fire from heaven to vindicate Jesus, no new authority for them, no restoration of Israel. They are scattered. The 'embryonic new identities they had begun to learn in the company of Jesus' are exposed as weak and confused 'as they find they cannot survive his failure and dereliction'. In other words, they are stripped of any illusions they may have had that they could maintain themselves and their community out of their own resources. As Williams writes: 'Any identity, any reality they now have will have to be entirely gift, new creation, not generated from their effort or reflection or even their conscious desire'.⁸

In this experience of utter dereliction, the risen Jesus comes to them. His presence restores them to themselves (think of Mary Magdalene, called by name) and forgives their failure (think of Peter being called again to discipleship). Jesus gathers them again as a community – meeting them in Jerusalem, in Galilee; he restores to them 'meaning, promise, the future, the possibility of continuing to live in freedom and in the resource to love'.⁹ And yet, none of this is experienced or held by the disciples in the same way as before. They can bear the knowledge of their weakness, confusion and fallibility because they are forgiven, but they can no longer cherish the same illusions about themselves.

For this reason, the disciples' identity and their vocations are now constituted essentially not as possessions but through their relationship to the risen Christ. It is just as he had promised: 'because I live, you also will live' (John 14. 19). To live out of this resource is to know one's identity as no longer self-enclosed or self-sufficient. Instead, it's to live into an open horizon, receiving one's identity as gift and in responsiveness to call. So, as the Letter to the Colossians says, 'you have

⁸ Rowan Williams, 'Resurrection and Peace: More on New Testament Ethics' in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp.265-275, pp.270-271.

⁹ Williams, 'Resurrection and Peace', p.270.

died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory (Col. 3. 3-4). This is the being, the life of the church. It is, I believe, what being gathered as kenotic, signful as self-emptying means. Two implications strike me immediately.

First, we do not need to hold onto our ecclesial identity or vocation as our possession. The church rests entirely on our being called by God out of non-being – our life is gift, breathed into us by the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead. The true church lives always and joyfully on the edge of going out of existence. Williams speaks of resurrection as ‘new life from moral and material nothing’.¹⁰ In our day, we have the privilege of understanding this not simply as theological truth, but as increasingly part of our lived experience. There is a sense in which the church as we have known it is going out of existence – perhaps that truth is somewhat muted here in Rome, but it’s starkly evident in other places. And ‘what we will be has not yet been revealed’ (1 John 3.2). We are invited to continue faithful on the brink and, as it were, ‘for nothing’ – with no guarantees. This is the kind of self-giving to which Jesus consented in Gethsemane; it’s the kind of self-giving which John Main teaches is at the heart of contemplative prayer, when we ‘hand ourselves over before the other appears and with no pre-packaged guarantee that he will appear’.

Second, faithfulness on the brink consists, not of clinging to the securities we know, but of the willingness to let go, to listen, to trust in the face of unknowing. It means cultivating discernment and openness to the call that comes from the future, on the other side of death. In daily practice, it means radical prayerfulness and then enacting our best discernment of the call given to each one and each community, open to re-direction and deepening discernment as we go.

These are ways of being that monastic communities have exemplified through the Christian centuries. Responding, often with little external reassurance, to the strange vocation to be totally handed over to the life of prayer, monastic

¹⁰ Williams, ‘Resurrection and Peace’, p.271.

communities witness to impossibility of fitting the economy of God into the economy of this world, and the difficult vocation to live by faith rather than sight. Thomas Merton spoke of 'the vocation of Mother Church's hidden children – those who by vow lie buried in the cloister or the hermitage'.¹¹ This hidden vocation is of course continuous with the vocation of the church as a whole – to be leaven in the dough, salt and light, a mustard seed growing 'how we do not know' into a tree where all may find shelter in her branches. And all of us are being called to embrace it more consciously, even as we let ourselves go.

¹¹ From his poem, 'The Quickening of John the Baptist'.