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Contemplation and Prophecy: Lent 1 (Jer. 1.4-10)

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What does it mean to be a contemplative community – a community with a practice of contemplative prayer at its heart? Is it just that some of us happen to prefer this style of prayer – that we're content with fewer words in our liturgy and more silence in between? Are we simply the introverts of the spiritual economy – number 5s on the enneagram? Or is there something more to it than that, more than a religious 'lifestyle' preference? Does a contemplative community have, perhaps, a particular calling, a particular gift to nurture and share with others?

Let me share a couple of quotations to get us going. The first is from the American Trappist monk, Thomas Merton in his essay 'Contemplation in a World of Action'. Merton is exploring the relationship between contemplative prayer, that is prayer in which we seek simply to be in the presence of God, and action. He writes: '[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. ... We have more power at our disposal today than we have ever had, and yet we are more alienated and estranged from the inner ground of meaning and of love than we have ever been'. Writing under the shadow of nuclear war, he writes: 'The result of this is evident'.

The second is from Rowan Williams, the recently retired Archbishop of Canterbury, in one of his final addresses – given at the invitation of Pope Benedict to the Synod of Bishops in Rome. To this gathering, Williams says that ‘contemplation is very far from being just one kind of thing that Christians do: it is the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics, the key to the essence of a renewed humanity that is capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom – freedom from self-oriented, acquisitive habits and the distorted understanding that comes from them. To put it boldly, contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit. To learn contemplative practice is to learn what we need so as to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly. It is a deeply revolutionary matter’.

I am conscious that all this could sound a bit like some kind of ecclesiastical one-upmanship – aha – this proves it – we’re the real deal, we’re where it’s really at – contemplatives rule, so there!! That’s not what I’m up to here.

What I do want to do, for us to explore together this Lent, is the question of the relationship between our contemplative practice and worship, and what gift we might offer our world. I want to explore our *vocation* as a contemplative community, and I want to suggest that it is in part at least a prophetic vocation, a ‘deeply revolutionary matter’.

Let me say a bit more about what lies in the background of the quotes from Merton and Williams. Both these spiritual teachers begin from the confronting basic assumption that much of what we take to be reality is illusion, and much of what we take to be action is re-action. We think we are free, that we see the world and other people as they truly are and that we respond appropriately, but really – mostly that’s bollocks.

Last week I mentioned Richard Rohr's splendid insight that most of us live from three basic programs for happiness. Either we seek security, or approval, or control – we think if we have these things, then we will be OK. We could describe these approaches to life using Williams' words as 'self-oriented, acquisitive habits' of being. Acquisitive – because these are the things I think I need to acquire to live; self-oriented because it's all about me. If, for example, I need your approval to feel OK about myself, then I don't see you as you really are, with freedom, in all your messy complexity – as yourself, independent of me. Instead, I see you as a possible purveyor of approval and security for me. And if you don't give it appropriately, well then – I'm outraged – how dare you? I'm a good person, and after all I've done for you. I always knew there was something a bit off about her – she's always been like that actually her family was always like that ... Or if what I must have is control – I've planned it all out, thought it through – this is how this event, this community, this is how my life is going to go – and if it doesn't work out then, I'm angry, I'm devastated – how can this be? What do you mean I've got cancer? What do you mean you're leaving me? This is wrong – God's wrong. I'm not accepting this.

When I see the world through self-oriented and acquisitive eyes – seeking to prop up my vulnerable sense of self, my ego, seeking desperately to be loved and to be safe and to be successful – then, as Williams says, my understanding, my responses are always distorted – I see neither myself nor others' clearly, I am captive to fear. Most of what I take to be reality is illusion; most of what I think is action is reaction. And this applies to communities, nations and churches as much as to individuals.

Contemplative practice is about being dis-illusioned and learning non-attachment; it's about letting go the things I *think* I need to secure myself in the world, and learning to rest into a deeper ground, to receive my life as gift rather than acquire or possess it. This is exactly what Jesus is doing in the desert: he is tempted by the

desire for security (turning stones to bread); for approval (the chance to be spectacularly affirmed as Son of God by jumping off the pinnacle of the temple and being rescued by angels); for control (ruling the kingdoms of this world). It is as Jesus lets go of, refuses these false foundations for his identity, that 'filled with the power of the Spirit' he comes back into the world able to see it and love it as God does and to liberate us from these same entrapments. This is the journey of contemplative prayer. Williams writes:

'To learn to look to God without regard to my own instant satisfaction, to learn to scrutinise and to relativise the cravings and fantasies that arise in me – this is to allow God to be God, and thus to allow the prayer of Christ ... to come alive in me, ... to give me patience and stillness as God's light and love penetrate my inner life. Only as this begins to happen will I be delivered from treating the gifts of God as yet another set of things I may acquire to make me happy, or to dominate other people. And as this process unfolds, I become more free ... to 'love human beings in a human way', to love them not for what they may promise me, to love them not as if they were there to provide me with lasting safety and comfort, but as fragile fellow-creatures held in the love of God. I discover ... how to see other persons and things for what they are in relation to God, not to me. And it is here that true justice as well as true love has its roots'.

Here, I think, we see the profound connection between the contemplative and the prophetic vocations. A prophet is someone called by God to make visible the world as it is – to make visible injustice and collective delusion for what they are, to proclaim God's judgement and love or, as we heard in our reading, 'to pluck up and pull down, to build and to plant'. A true prophet is always, then, in some sense a contemplative – a 'seer', transformed by a naked encounter with God as Jeremiah is when his mouth is touched by God's hand. And true contemplatives are always in some sense prophets –

called to serve the world they live in by becoming progressively more free of illusion and so capable of truthful speech and action – action that is not simply an expression of our own insecurities and instinct for domination, but that respects and celebrates and renews the world. In the coming weeks, the book of the prophet Jeremiah will be our guide as we explore more of what this looks like, and as we consider our own vocations in community.