

3 February 2018

Set Pools of Silence (Mark 1: 29-39)

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A few years ago, I was at a theological seminar talking about meditation and the centrality of contemplative prayer in Christian life. I'd been waxing lyrical for a while, when someone challenged me abruptly: 'if Jesus had spent all his time meditating, he would never have been crucified'. The implication: it's the public prophetic challenge to unjust structures rather than interior, silent prayer that's the real heart of discipleship.

My challenger was someone I like and respect deeply, someone whose own ministry has involved sustained and generous commitment to social justice. To his ears, meditation sounded like 'quietism' – inward looking, self-referencing, self-indulgent and pointless. So I was a bit thrown. And I wish I'd had the presence of mind to point to this passage from early in Mark's gospel, which reveals that in Jesus' own life there was no dualism, no opposition between contemplation and action, or between committed engagement with the needs of the world and solitary prayer. In fact, for him they belonged integrally together.

This is the first story, in Mark, of Jesus' public ministry. The action begins, we're told, immediately the Sabbath ends – 'That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons'. And it was a pretty full-on session: 'the whole city was gathered around the door' and Jesus gave himself generously to those who came, curing 'many who were sick' and casting out 'many demons'. But then, and this is the very next thing narrated, comes a time of contemplation: 'In the morning, while it was still very dark' he got up by himself, went out to a deserted place, 'and there he prayed'. He was gone awhile, it seems. By the time the disciples find him, Jesus has discerned the next steps of his vocation;

he will, he says, go on to the neighbouring towns, 'so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do'.

At the very outset of Jesus' ministry, then, a rhythm is set up, which will be repeated again and again in the gospel, a rhythm of alternating engagement and withdrawal, times in public and times of solitude, periods of intense action followed by periods of contemplative reception, in which direction is clarified and vocation affirmed.

We live in a culture, as you know, which is weighted towards action – or at least, activity. There's a lot to do, and much of it is good and necessary and contributes incalculably to the common-weal. I think of all the different ways that's evident among us – Kate caring for animals, Margaret, Karina and Robert nurturing school children and their families, Pauline teaching law at university, Heather caring for grandchildren and others of you caring for children, friends, neighbours, elderly parents and supporting those who are sick – in ways big and small helping to build community; there's Richard counselling at Menslink, Andrew, Rebecca and others of you advising government, contributing to public administration and policy, Annie advocating for those with disabilities, some of you doing research into issues like climate change, dementia, some of you offering spiritual direction, fitness training, some of you doctors, lawyers ... There's a lot to be done, we're doing it ... and we live in a culture weighted towards action.

Our way of life is less conducive to the work of contemplation. We find it hard, personally and communally, to allow space and time for periods of withdrawal and silence, for being refreshed by resting prayerfully in the presence of God, having our vision clarified, our vocation renewed. Yet this squeezing out of the contemplative dimension – as if it were some kind of dispensable luxury – leads to the drying up of the well-springs of action. And we all know what it's like and what it costs when we lose living connection with the deep source of our life – we become parched and brittle, stressed and reactive; we start just trying to survive, less and less capable of being fertile and fruitful, channels of God's mercy and love to others.

As we begin our year together, I imagine that the call of 'action' is already well and truly demanding your attention and response. So tonight, I thought it might be helpful for us to reflect on what will help each of us make space and time in ourselves and our busy lives for God. What will be our way of keeping connected to our source, allowing the well-spring of living water to bubble up within us? What practices are you going to commit to this year?

You know what many of the possibilities are. Meditation is one I recommend! I know it can be difficult to establish meditation or any kind of daily prayer as a regular thing in your life. There's the question of finding time ... and here each of us has to figure out what will work in our schedules. There's also the question of how much time ... in the traditions of Christian meditation as taught by the World Community and Centering Prayer, the ideal time is said to be 20 to 30 minutes twice a day. But don't let the ideal put you off. Any time is better than none. You can begin with ten minutes once a day ... and see what happens.

And then, there's the biggest obstacle of all: our ego-ic attachment to being good at everything. Don't let that put you off either. No one is good at meditation. You will be distracted. It can help and encourage to start with something more guided and structured – the 'Headspace' App for meditation is excellent and some of our young people at Kalchaino are using it. But in the end, we still need to commit. I wonder if we might think of the daily 10 minutes, the 20, the 30 as a 'pool of silence', a space you're setting aside simply to be still and let God to get to you. 'In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed'.

There are, as you know, other practices, other ways of making space for God. They include prayerful reading of Scripture or the spiritual masters, journaling and self-reflection, being in nature or mindfully in your body (yoga, tai-chi), and creative practices like photography, drawing or music. One other I want especially to mention as we begin our year is the practice of contemplative worship.

There's an exquisite prayer at the beginning of the Anglican Eucharistic liturgy, which I think expresses the heart of contemplative common worship. It was originally composed for a Latin missal in the 11th century and appears also in the 14th century contemplative treatise, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. It goes like this: 'Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name, through Christ our Lord'.

I love this prayer. I love how it reminds us that we're already known by God, so there's no point and no need to try to hide anything. We can simply rest in the presence, with nothing to explain or justify – all our hearts open, all our desires known. I love how it helps us trust that God is the one at work in us. We don't have to pull ourselves up spiritually by our bootstraps, and we don't have to try to reform each other. We just have to show up and ask the Holy Spirit to transform our love. And what I especially love is how this prayer joins us to each other as we pray it. It's from *us* and it makes us a fellowship – 'cleanse the thoughts of *our* hearts ... that *we* may perfectly love you'.

Contemplative worship is a radical, counter-cultural way of being spaciously, vulnerably, hopefully in community before God. It's a way of being open to our own transformation and renewal, even as we enable that as a possibility for others. And it seems to me that when we at Benedictus come together regularly in this way, we not only replenish the springs of our own lives; we become co-creators of a pool in which we can all splash around in delighted play, and whose water flows out for the replenishing of the world.

I have a real sense of anticipation about this coming year for our community. I am hopeful that we can deepen our work for justice and our collaboration with wider networks; I have a sense of our growing witness to a new way of being church. At the beginning of our service we prayed – 'raise up contemplatives among us, those who walk within the fire of ceaseless prayer, impetuous desire. Set pools of silence in this thirsty land'. We're not praying this about someone else – some other

group. This is about us – this is about our commitment to deep prayer and our yearning to become – together – water for a thirsting world. It's about us participating in the kind of rhythm Jesus lived – a rhythm of self-giving, passionate action nourished by times of contemplative connection and reception. I am so happy to be with you again and pray that this year we know ourselves blessed anew and a blessing for all.