

**Being on the Way (Mark 13. 1-11)**

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This is the second last week of the church's year. In two weeks' time, we enter the season of Advent which prepares us for Christmas and the celebration of Jesus' birth. And we begin telling his story, our story, all over again.

As we've approached the end of this year, our gospel readings have taken us to the last leg of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, to the Cross. A story that began, according to Mark, with Jesus hearing God's voice and being driven out into the wilderness to clarify his call, is concluding in a different kind of wilderness. The authorities are hostile, Jesus is increasingly exposed, his message increasingly unpalatable. His disciples are becoming ever more conscious of the risk they themselves are running. By the end of this week, they will all have deserted him and fled (Mk 14.50).

This is the context, then, in which I thought it might be helpful for us to focus over the next two weeks on our own journeys of faith and (in particular) our way of meditation. As you know, to be followers or fellow travellers with Jesus means not just admiring him from a safe distance; not just picking up a few pearls of wisdom or tips for living well. It means going where he goes, learning to enter with and through him into the fullness of his relationship with God, the fullness of truth. Meditation, mysteriously, is a practice which leads us on this way; and whether we've been meditating for years, or whether it's relatively new, it's always worth reminding ourselves of how this is so, that we may be encouraged to be faithful and 'endure to the end' (Mk 13.13).

For many who have spent time in and around the church, the practice of silent or wordless meditation such as we do together at Benedictus seems initially counter-intuitive. Both Hebrew and Christian scriptures testify to a God who speaks, a God who reveals God's self in word and deed, through events and persons,

commandment and summons. The experience of dialogue with God seems pervasive in our tradition – from the prophets being given and then communicating the ‘word of the Lord’, through practices of vocal prayer – whether of lament, petition or praise, through the commissioning of Jesus’ disciples to become his witnesses to the ends of the earth. One of E.M. Forster’s characters in *A Passage to India* spoke of ‘poor little talkative Christianity’ – and it’s not hard to see how we got so chatty! In the practice of silent meditation, however, we’re taught to lay aside all our words and images – not only the plans and anxieties that so often preoccupy us, but even our words addressed to God, images and ideas of God that come direct from Scripture. Like I said, it can seem radically counter-intuitive. How is *not* talking to God, not even thinking *about* God, a form of prayer? How is it an expression of faithfulness, let alone of discipleship?

The fundamental contemplative insight is that God is always more than we can think. God is not an ‘object’ of our awareness but the ground of our awareness itself. True knowledge and love of God means going past the idolatrous images we tend to create (and the Hebrew scriptures are full of anxiety about idolatry) and awakening to a deeper perception of and communion with the real.

In his wonderful introduction to the contemplative path, Martin Laird remarks: ‘There are different forms of knowing, different forms of awareness’.<sup>1</sup> Our thinking or discursive mind is a wondrous human capacity, necessary and useful for navigating daily life, exploring ideas, imagining possibilities, working out problems and reflecting on experience. It’s also chronically inclined to busy-ness, grasping and a self-consciousness or self-centredness that separates and isolates us from everything else. St Thomas Aquinas ‘calls that aspect of the mind that thinks and calculates “lower reason”’. And according to the Eastern Orthodox teacher Theophan the monk, when you are thinking of God, God is, ‘as it were, outside you’, or

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p.26.

separate from you, 'and so your prayer and other spiritual exercises remain exterior'.<sup>2</sup>

But as well as this 'lower reason' of the thinking mind, there is what Aquinas called 'higher reason' and the Orthodox tradition, the knowledge of the heart. 'Heart' here refers not to 'feelings' or 'emotions', but 'the deep centre of the person'. Says Theophan, 'you must descend from your head to your heart'.<sup>3</sup> The heart 'communes with God in a silent and direct way', because its awareness is not distorted or fragmented by what Laurence Freeman calls 'the prism of our ego'.<sup>4</sup> Meditation is a practice for letting the mind descend to the heart. When we meditate, we let go the activity of our discursive mind, including our words to and thoughts about God; not because we're giving up on God or being faithless, but because of a deep intuition that in the end, at a certain point, these actually block our deeper communion. As when compulsive talking or analysis can block our deeper attunement to the reality of another person, our deeper listening for their truth. Says the psalmist: 'Be still and know that I am God'.

Which sounds all well and good, in theory. But the experience of the practice of meditation can seem far from this longed-for state of communion and deep knowing. At the beginning, indeed for years, we can seem inextricably stuck in our discursive mind, helplessly tossed about by our restless thoughts and chronic distraction. We may be dismayed to find that we are drawn back into our thoughts 100 times, 600 times, in any given period of meditation. Far from our practice drawing us closer to God, we seem only to have left behind what limited connection we had – and times of meditation can feel unsatisfying, effortful, without consolation or fruit. What's going on? And how should we respond?

Well, what's going on, is well described by our spiritual tradition as a necessary aspect of the process of growth. The first stage of the spiritual journey involves what's called 'purgation'. Often, this has been conceived largely in moral

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<sup>2</sup> Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, p.27.

<sup>3</sup> Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, p.27.

<sup>4</sup> Laurence Freeman, *First Sight: The Experience of Faith* (London: Continuum, 2011), p.61.

terms – recognising and then being healed of ways of being that feed our self-centredness and inhibit our loving; such things as greed, lust, falsehood, pride and the like. It's been rightly understood that we can make no progress, receive no gift, if we're consumed by such things.

But meditation reveals a further dimension to this purgative stage. It's to do with the necessity of our being liberated not just from unloving behaviours, but also from the self-centred or limiting habits of thinking and feeling that give rise to these behaviours in the first place. At a surface level, there's that perpetual round of 'inner noise and mental chatter', the continuous scrolling of our worries, resentments, wants, assumptions and plans, that keep us stuck within our ego-ic self and incapable of being wholly present and attentive to anyone or anything else. Theophan speaks of thoughts that are always 'whirling about, like snow in winter or clouds of mosquitoes in the summer', that disturb our peace and inhibit our responsiveness.<sup>5</sup>

At a deeper level still, meditation reveals some of the limiting or compulsive thought and feeling patterns arising from our wounds, disappointments, failures and fears. Part of what can happen as we begin to meditate, as we seek to be silent and still, is a surfacing of painful memory. Freeman speaks of being confronted by the 'ghosts of our past' or 'our dead and archived selves, our dormant attachments, repressed fears and guilts and above all the losses we have endured'.<sup>6</sup> He goes on, 'The purgative stage [of the spiritual journey] is about re-programming, letting go, shedding our self-rejection, doubts and the feelings of unworthiness that stick to us like velcro. All of these states of mind impede or block progress because they make us identify ourselves with the prison of our limitations'.<sup>7</sup>

If this is what we're confronting, especially in the early days of our practice, it's little wonder that our times of meditation may not conform to our spiritual expectations or ambitions. Rather than feeling more holy and peaceful, we may spend our whole time beset by that 'cloud of mosquitoes'. We may feel as though

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<sup>5</sup> Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, p.27.

<sup>6</sup> Freeman, *First Sight*, pp.50-51.

<sup>7</sup> Freeman, *First Sight*, p.53.

we're travelling further from rather than closer to God, as though we're unravelling rather than coming to fullness. We can be discouraged by how bad we think we are at meditating and impatient at what seems like lack of progress. But this precisely *is* the progress. We're discovering a fuller truth of ourselves, realising our distractions, our need of healing and reliance on grace. And we're bringing the whole of ourselves, all our unfinishedness and distractedness, our ragged ends, attachments and unfulfilled hopes, *all* of it, into the loving and silent presence of God.

Freeman writes: 'Keeping our attention on the good, even in times when all we can feel is toxic and hopeless; this is the work of faith'.<sup>8</sup> Every time we realise we're distracted, every time we encounter feelings of discouragement, anger, disappointment, fear or frustration, and then choose, humbly, simply, faithfully, to come back to the presence, that which tangles us is loosened, that which attaches us unhealthily is detached. Slowly, we are healed and freed to love just that little bit more.

And this in the end is the measure of our practice. It's not about the experience we have when we're meditating – how satisfying or enjoyable we find it, how 'successful' we think we are – which is really all still about the religious ego. The prayer of meditation is about expanding our capacity for loving and being loved. Which is how it grows in us the courage to go where Jesus goes, to be drawn by him into fuller truthfulness and in the midst of the travails of this world, to endure to the end.

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<sup>8</sup> Freeman, *First Sight*, p.54.