

**Belonging to the Truth (John 18. 33-38)**

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In terms of the gospel narrative, we've taken a leap forward in the past week. Last Saturday, our reading from Mark had Jesus in Jerusalem prior to his arrest. It's true things were looking pretty dicey; the authorities were closing in. But Jesus was still at large. Fast-forward a few days, and this week's passage from John's gospel locates him post-arrest and mid-interrogation. Jesus has now been deserted by his friends, handed over by the authorities to Pilate, the Roman governor, and is on the point of being condemned to death. And it seems to me that this dialogue, imagined by the writer of John's gospel, distils the essence of Jesus' challenge to the rulers of this world.

Pilate approaches their conversation at the level of human power structures. Jesus is accused of having proclaimed himself a king; Pilate is worried about insurrection and the challenge to imperial Rome. 'Are you the king of the Jews?' But Jesus is operating out of an authority and at a level of identity beyond human hierarchies or rivalries. 'My kingdom is not from this world. If it were, [if I were acting at that level], my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here'. Pilate has only one frame of reference. He fixates on 'kingdom'. 'So you are a king?' Jesus answers, effectively: 'Wotevs'. 'You can say I'm a king if it floats your boat'. But really, I'm not that interested. Here's the thing: 'For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice'.

In other words, I'm not in competition for the kind of kingship that matters to you. I'm here for something qualitatively distinct. I am among you, says Jesus, to communicate the nature of reality itself. Anyone who's deeply connected with reality, anyone who belongs to the truth, will recognise and respond to me. They will know who I am. It's a most extraordinary claim. At one level, it sounds intolerably

arrogant, as triumphalist and totalising as any Roman imperium. Yet, apprehended contemplatively, it seems to me that Jesus' words point us to the radical meaning of discipleship and the profound significance of our way of meditation. I'd like to explore this a bit more.

Last week we asked how meditation, our practice of wordless, imageless prayer, could lead to deepening relationship with God. I said that 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. This means that true knowledge and love of God means getting past the images *of* God, the ideas *about* God that are in our heads, and awakening to a deeper perception of and communion with the real.<sup>1</sup>

This deeper perception and communion is what our tradition calls the knowledge of the heart – where 'heart' means not emotions or feelings, but the deep centre of our personhood. In meditation, we let go thoughts and slowly detach from the activity of our busy, discursive minds. Painful memories and old wounds are allowed to surface and be reconciled, and we find ourselves entering what poet R.S. Thomas called 'the silence of the mind'. Here, as Rowan Williams puts it, with 'our minds made still and ready to receive, with our self-generated fantasies about God and ourselves reduced to silence, we are at last at the point where we may begin to grow'.<sup>2</sup> This is the first, so-called 'purgative stage' of the contemplative path.

There's a sense in which we're never finished with this stage. And yet, as we persevere in the practice of meditation, gradually we enter a further unfolding or stage of the journey. Traditionally it's called illumination – though from the point of view of our lived experience, 'illumination' can be a bit of a misnomer. For although we're moving closer to the light, it doesn't always feel that way.

It's true that our experience of meditation changes. We're not so frustratingly beset by the continuous whirling of our thoughts which, in a memorable image, the

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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.

<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, Address to the Synod of Bishops on *The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*, 10 October 2012, para.6.

Orthodox monk Theophan, likened to ‘clouds of mosquitoes in summer’. Repeating the mantra no longer feels quite so clunky or effortful. The practice shifts from involving ‘a good deal of mental activity’, says Martin Laird, to a point where the mantra is ‘more a part of our simple awareness’. John Main talks of moving from saying the mantra, to sounding it, and finally to listening to it. Laird speaks of beginning to ‘become one with the prayer word, the way a weaver is one with the loom, or a dancer with the dance’.<sup>3</sup>

But along with this deepening of our experience of meditation, there can also be a painful sense of separation or loss. The ‘searchlight of consciousness’, writes Laurence Freeman, is being turned away from ourselves and directed towards nothing in particular (since God is not an object of our awareness). ‘John of the Cross describes this period as the “night of the senses” in which you move from a familiar devotional kind of religious experience with a significant degree of ego satisfaction into the self-less vision of contemplation’.<sup>4</sup> For some, this feels deeply disorienting – more like a loss of faith and sense of God’s presence than its increase. But what’s happening is a purifying of our love. We’re being drawn beyond ego-ic, possessive desire for God, into a self-less loving of God for God’s own sake, regardless of what we experience God as feeling like or doing for us. ‘Do not cling to me’, says the risen Jesus to Mary Magdalene; and he is always receding from his disciples’ gaze and grasp. This is ‘cleansing the thoughts of our hearts’ as the ancient prayer has it.

On this journey, it’s our radically self-dispossessing fidelity to the mantra, just saying our word without constantly checking our temperature or if we’re there yet, that leads us deeper into God. Ultimately, in God’s own time, we may be led to union, which, in Freeman’s words, ‘refers to the experience of oneness, the transcendence of the ego’s centre of consciousness ... the movement from the mind’s self-mirroring complexities into the simplicity and pure vision of the heart, the non-duality of the spirit’. This oneness is God. It’s the heart of reality and the truth of our being, realised. And says Freeman: ‘with a silent passion deeper than their

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<sup>3</sup> Laird, *Into the Silent Land*, p.60.

<sup>4</sup> Laurence Freeman, *First Sight: The Experience of Faith* (London: Continuum, 2011), p.63.

words, and differences, all religions point to this'.<sup>5</sup> Or as Jesus says, 'Everyone who belongs to the truth, listens to my voice'.

So notice what it means to enter into this truth. On the one hand, as we journey deeper into God, there's a sense of being ever more secure in an identity that cannot be threatened. In this light, what can look like Jesus' arrogance before Pilate is simply an expression of his freedom from the forces that usually control and dominate us. He's beyond caring about esteem, honour, power, validation. Though he will be killed, at the level of his identity he knows himself one with God. Writes Williams: 'what is alive in Jesus is life itself, the very act of being which is God'. 'To confront Jesus is to confront eternal truth'. This is what God looks like. 'If, like Pontius Pilate, we ask, "What is truth?", the answer before us is "He is"'. 'For this I was born, for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth'.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, this truth, this identity in God, is not some fixed possession. Jesus is who he is, he's at one with God, only in his continuous receptivity to God, his letting go into God. He is what we are becoming in our meditation, as we practise imperfectly this same pattern of giving ourselves away and receiving ourselves back, letting go and letting in. Christians have often understood Jesus' claim to be the truth as implying that our tradition somehow 'has or 'possesses' the truth. Christian witness has thus become largely about sharing, and at worst imposing, the supposed 'truths' of our faith as a kind of ideology. But this is a radical misunderstanding.

To listen to Jesus' voice, to be his disciple, means nothing other than being drawn to share in the life he lived, participating in the same dynamic of receptivity and self-gift, loving and being loved, finding and being found, humble self-emptying. It's about being-in-relation to God and Freeman writes, 'The nature of discipleship with Jesus is relationship with *his* emptiness. This is the essence of Christian faith'.<sup>7</sup> And this is what it means, not to possess, but to belong to the truth.

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<sup>5</sup> Freeman, *First Sight*, p.78.

<sup>6</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ* (Melbourne: John Garratt Publishing, 2003), p.71.

<sup>7</sup> Freeman, *First Sight*, p.65.