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### **Love's Oneing (Matthew 4. 1-11)**

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Again and again in their depiction of Jesus, the gospels insist on his single-minded attention, his whole-hearted responsiveness to God. There are many sayings I could cite. When Jesus was asked which is the greatest commandment he replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength' (Mark 12. 29-30). Commenting on his disciples' worry about what they would eat or drink or wear, he exhorted them to 'strive first for the kingdom of God and God's righteousness' (Matthew 6.33); and in response to Martha's agitation about her many tasks, he commended Mary's choice to listen quietly at his feet for 'there is need of only one thing' (Luke 10.42).

As we just heard in our reading, it's clear that Jesus practised what he preached. Faced at the outset of his public ministry with the temptation to live and act out of his own will and resource, Jesus consistently refused that option. He came back again and again to deep listening to 'every word that comes from the mouth of God' (Matthew 4.4). He practised radical trust in God's provision and the complete letting go of ego-ic ambition to succeed in or change the world. Everything was yielded to God, until eventually the temptation to seize his life apart from God dried up, and an energy of a wholly different quality suffused him. As Matthew puts it: 'Then, the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him' (4.11).

This is what contemplation is about. Through practice that leads beyond the ego-ic temptation to run life on our terms, contemplation draws us towards the possibility of sharing in the very relationship with God that Jesus knew. This is a relationship ultimately of communion or at-onement, God's life living itself in ours, God's love flowing out through ours. Contemplation is about realising the gift Jesus sought on his disciples' behalf: 'As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us ... so that they may be one as we are one' (John 17.21-22). Kerrie Hide

puts it this way: ‘contemplation loses the sense of looking at God, reflexively as subjective-objective knowing that we know, and becomes beholding in total awareness of God, or oneness with God ... In contemplation we are absorbed within the loving of divine contemplation, within Love’s oneing’.<sup>1</sup>

Today we have the great privilege of launching Kerrie’s book, *Love’s Oneing: A Book About Contemplation*. I have found this text an incredibly rich reflection steeped in the practice and transfiguring knowledge of which it speaks. There are, as Kerrie notes, ‘a growing number of excellent books about contemplation’ and many introductions to the practice of meditation. What’s different about this book, however, is that it’s written expressly with ‘mature contemplatives’ in mind – those who are ‘already steeped in the central movements’ of the contemplative journey, but who ‘seek more nuanced wisdom on how to nurture heart-awareness, [and] discern and foster a more stable contemplation’.<sup>2</sup> It’s a book addressed to the journey that many of us are on, and I hope I can give you even a small glimpse of its bounteous resource!

The key image in *Love’s Oneing* is ‘one-ing’. It’s a word that comes from the 14<sup>th</sup> century English contemplative, Julian of Norwich, who says that ‘prayer ones the soul to God’.<sup>3</sup> What’s striking about the verb ‘one-ing’ is that it expresses a sense of the vital, dynamic process of becoming one *with* God as well as the centring, grounding and abiding at-onement of the soul *in* God. Kerrie notes that ‘the classic definitions of oneing as being joined or united, fall short of conveying the original creative dynamism and fluidity of the oneing that is [Trinitarian] love’.<sup>4</sup> For the communion of love that constitutes God, the unity that God is, is not a static, or self-enclosed identity but an ever-fertile movement of love pouring itself out and receiving itself back. And this has profound implications for how we imagine our contemplative journeys. Because we’re not striving one day to arrive at an end, to

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<sup>1</sup> Kerrie Hide, *Love’s Oneing: A Book About Contemplation* (London: Austin Macauley Publishers, 2022), p.iv.

<sup>2</sup> Hide, *Love’s Oneing*, pp.xiii-xiv.

<sup>3</sup> Hide, *Love’s Oneing*, p.19.

<sup>4</sup> Hide, *Love’s Oneing*, p.20.

get 'there' and possess our spiritual achievement; rather, we're being drawn into an eternal dynamism of love which, Kerrie insists, is simultaneously *enstatic* – enclosing, still and abiding, and *ecstatic* – outpouring, creative, evolutionary.

In the Christian imagination, this one-ing in Love is conceived as an en-Christing journey. It's how we come to share the mind of Christ or awaken Christ-consciousness, and – crucially – this affects not just the possibilities of our own lives but the unfolding of life itself. The final three chapters of Kerrie's book explore the thought of three more or less contemporary mystics – Teilhard de Chardin, Beatrice Bruteau and Ilia Delio – whose conviction is that the rise of oneing consciousness is connected to the emergence of communion consciousness, a 'gestalt shift in our whole way of seeing and being in relation with one another'.<sup>5</sup> Kerrie writes that this communion consciousness 'naturally imparts a greater awareness of our wholeness, including in ourselves, all of creation and the whole of cosmic expression. The energy of oneing heightens, imparting deeper union, stronger connectivity and fuller being'.<sup>6</sup> This profound realisation of our 'Holy Wholeness' is critical for responding to the needs of our time – not just because it awakens us to a radically interrelated cosmos, but because the energy of oneing in us flows out to affect the whole. 'The invitation for us is to be the creative union, to be this field of oneing, to be the flow of love energy, the creative freedom that self-creates'. And Kerrie asks: 'Can we be the oneing that creates communion and awakens communion consciousness?'<sup>7</sup>

Well, can we? How do we accept the invitation to be one-d by, with and in love? Each chapter of Kerrie's book explores the life and thought of a mystic from the western tradition – there are nine in all. And each one insists that the essence of the contemplative journey is the movement of *kenosis*, which means self-emptying, dispossession, noughting, yielding self-preoccupation and defensiveness, leaving self behind. But there are nuances in the teachings of these figures, subtle shifts in emphasis, that we do well to attend to and learn from.

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<sup>5</sup> Hide, *Love's Oneing*, p.202.

<sup>6</sup> Hide, *Love's Oneing*, p.218.

<sup>7</sup> Hide, *Love's Oneing*, p.217.

For example, Julian of Norwich encourages the movement of kenosis through the practice of 'beholding'. For Julian herself, 'beholding' began when she was suffering from what had seemed a mortal illness and was handed a crucifix to gaze upon. She looked upon the wounded Christ, and gradually her seeing deepened, so that (as she writes) 'in seeing a bodily sight' of his bleeding form she simultaneously 'sees a spiritual sight of Christ's homely loving'. In other words, progressing from bodily beholding she begins to see with the eye of the heart, and this deeper beholding draws her onto the inside of that which she beholds. As Kerrie puts it, 'Beholding is intrinsically kenotic as it involves ... emptying ourselves of all conceptualisations, as we pour out our heart in love'. Beholding transforms us into the subject of our beholding.<sup>8</sup>

Kerrie's next mystic, the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, also speaks of 'beholding' but with an emphasis on the stirring of desire, the role of *eros* and longing love in drawing us to God. This desire, however, must be profoundly non-possessive, 'a longing beyond longing', a "'naked intent'". So this too is a kenotic way that displaces the attachments of the ego-ic self and serves to 'invite his readers into a naked, spacious, formless, abandon, until in silence and stillness, beholding blindly, we are oned to God in love'.<sup>9</sup> Meister Eckhart speaks of listening in silence and cultivating a 'bare mind', 'an inner desert' ... 'an emptiness, a bareness, a poverty of being that enables us to be pregnant with nothing',<sup>10</sup> while Clare of Assisi, Mechthild of Magdeburg and John of the Cross allow themselves to enter deeply into the wounds of Christ, undergoing with him the suffering of the world, so as to discover (at the very extremity of pain) the unitive intimacy of divine Love.<sup>11</sup>

In all this, we see the significance of the fact that this book is addressed to those who are maturing in contemplation. As long as we're unschooled in the basic discipline of letting go spiritual materialism, as long as we're still trying to have

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<sup>8</sup> Hide, *Love's Oneing*, p.8.

<sup>9</sup> Hide, *Love's Oneing*, p.32.

<sup>10</sup> Hide, *Love's Oneing*, p.65.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Hide, *Love's Oneing*, pp.97, 119, 150.

spiritual 'experiences' that might make us feel special, secure or holy ... all this language could be misread, misappropriated. As if we're supposed to try to generate certain feelings, certain internal dramas of the soul. But what's being spoken of here is subtler. The metaphorical, paradoxical, sometimes extravagant language of mystical texts is an expression of the unfolding of the long journey, different for each of us, that begins, as it did for Jesus in the gospel, with the simple commitment to put God at the centre in all things and to give up the impulse to clutch at what can only ultimately be given.

This is a book that needs to be prayed more than read. There are, in fact, invitations to pray at the end of each chapter, but that's not all that I mean. Kerrie's prose itself is designed to slow us down and draw us into the space of prayer – which she describes as 'an open-hearted receptivity, an interior silence, and a preparedness to pour out love in *noughting*, to the point where we lose ourselves in the one'.<sup>12</sup> What a gift to be offered at the beginning of Lent! May it be a blessing to all to whom it finds its way.

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<sup>12</sup> Hide, *Love's Oneing*, p.21.