

**This Generous Undertaking (2 Corinthians 8. 1-15)**

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Epistles or letters make up the overwhelming proportion of the text of the New Testament. There are four gospels – narrative accounts of the life and work of Jesus. There’s a book called the Acts of the Apostles, which details the experience of the disciples in the immediate aftermath of Jesus’ death and resurrection. And there’s a book at the end, the Revelation to John, which offers a visionary account of the end of all things, purportedly revealing the ultimate trajectory and meaning of the created order. In between, there are letters – 21 in all – addressed by senior leaders in the early church to congregations, communities and individuals dotted all around the Mediterranean. And when you think about it, the humanly authored letter is an interesting form for divinely inspired address to take.

After all, it doesn’t seem strange to imagine that God might speak to human beings in the form of law and commandments, in the form of prophecies or visions distilled into proverbs, wisdom sayings and parables. Moreover we’re familiar, from Jewish Scripture, with the idea that God’s meaning can be discerned in narratives that witness to historical events. But the idea that God also, in some sense, ‘speaks’ in letters written by one human being to other human beings seems an unusual genre for Scripture. If you think of the letters of Paul, for example, they interweave profound theological reflection and ethical exhortation, alongside quite personal accounts of his struggle in ministry and prosaic descriptions of his travel arrangements, his changes of mind about where he should go next and with whom.

Paul, of course, did not know he was effectively writing the New Testament. But he *was* writing to build up and encourage the earliest Christian communities, and clearly he didn’t see that sharing these details of his daily life would detract from his theological and missionary purpose. I guess this is because all things, every decision and choice, every false start and redirection, were for him sourced in a commitment

to obedience and deep listening; in all things, he felt the transformation wrought in him by Christ to be operative. Thus, he seems to have assumed that by sharing how he was being led and open to change in every dimension of his life, others might discover this pattern for themselves. He doesn't present us, in other words, with a fixed and finished systematic theology, but with a process, an account of learning to live the gospel. And I wonder if, by including these letters as part of its sacred text, the early church invites all subsequent generations to remember that God becomes known and the resource of God becomes available, not just by means of doctrinal instruction and spiritual insight, not just by the witness of exemplary characters, but through the attempts by persons and communities to be faithful in every facet of ordinary life, and sharing with each other what they discover in the process.

One of the things Paul is particularly concerned about in his letters is to forge a sense of mutual belonging and purpose between fledgling communities. For him, it's intrinsic to discipleship that Christian communities support and enable each other. We're not rival groups, competing to be more successful than one another, but fellow members of the one body – all followers of the one Teacher, all given being by the grace of God. And one of the ways Paul encourages this sense of mutual belonging is by sharing news of what the different communities are up to and pointing to how God is at work through them and through particular individuals within them – Titus, Timothy, Silas.

As you know, I've just had the privilege of spending time with some other communities – and (in the spirit of Paul) I want to share a little news of them with you – for our mutual upbuilding! The 'official' part of my trip had 3 main facets:

- Speaking at the National Conference WCCM (UK), where I spoke (at their invitation) on the theme 'Pools of Grace: The Gift and Call of Contemplative Church';
- Road-show talks – four days and eight talks in Leeds, Birmingham, Chepstow, Bath, Salisbury). These talks were open to a more general audience and so

focused on themes that I hoped would resonate with a wider audience ... 'Soul in the System' and 'Poetry, Contemplation and the G-word'.

- Meditatio Centre event in London invited to speak as part of a 2024 series on Contemplation and Contemporary Anxieties. My theme was 'Shouting, Cancelling, Signalling: Christ and the Anxieties of Speech'.

I was able to meet with many fellow-travellers, and heard news from emerging contemplative communities. These included Balally parish in Dublin led by Father Jim Caffrey which Neil and I visited last year; a small new monastic community around Bath and Bath Abbey; the Nazareth Community and the Companions of Nazareth based around St Martin-in-the-Fields in London, led by Richard Carter. I also had the privilege of catching up with beloved members of our own extended Benedictus community – Sue & Michael Clarke in Yorkshire, who are themselves pioneering a new contemplative form of gathering, and Sarah Legrand in London.

There were some key themes that struck me in all this.

1. interest in and exploration of forms of contemplative church & notions of communities for transformation. At the conference and elsewhere, I met people who are really wanting to go deeper in their relationship with God and in their own formation and prayer. Some are looking to Benedictus as a model – others focused on more monastic or quasi-monastic expressions of this.
2. interest in the kinds of service that emerge from contemplative communities. For example, the community in Bath is discerning a sense that they might be called to help resource 'ordinary parishes' to become more contemplative. I heard about work being done with homeless people and asylum seekers particularly in Middlesboro and London, which involved not just practical or material assistance, but the formation of new communities and forging bonds of friendship, offering the opportunity to practice contemplation to those on the margins (eg. a WCCM member who has taken homeless people and asylum seekers on retreat; the daily pre-dawn silence in the church with people who sleep at the homeless shelter or on the streets around St

Martin's). I shared something of our focus at Benedictus on formation for contemplative action with members of our community.

3. part of what I brought into the conversation was the attempt to bring a contemplative perspective to bear on contemporary questions – the development from teaching 'how to meditate' to the question of what we might offer from a contemplative perspective that might open up or shift the way we conceive of and engage with the needs of our time.

I said earlier that one of Paul's particular concerns is to forge a sense of mutual belonging and purpose, to encourage the small communities to which he writes by sharing news of the faithfulness and joy of other like communities. And I certainly felt encouragement from those I met, and hope that I was able to bring encouragement from our community to them.

The other thing Paul is particularly concerned about is that communities share generously out of the gifts they have received. Not – as he insists in the passage we just heard – 'according to what one does not have' or cannot do, but 'according to what one has' – according to what is ours to do. Just as the generosity of God in Christ generates life for all, so we are invited to participate in 'this generous undertaking'. For Paul, our generosity makes visible the generosity of God; and the more we are sourced in divine generosity, the more abundance overflows.

I've experienced this generosity in many ways over the past few weeks – the generosity of members of Benedictus who have enabled our common life in my absence by taking on more – our guest preachers and service leaders, chair setter-upperers and pastoral carers; the generosity of my many hosts in the UK and the generous listening I've received. I've learnt of and been inspired by the generosity being expressed by other communities for some of the most vulnerable in their midst. There's much still to be processed for me in all this – much that I hope to share with you over time. So let us be encouraged to continue in this way ... so that, paraphrasing St Paul, 'as we have already made a beginning, so we might also

complete this generous undertaking' – seeking always to discern the will of God for us and to give ourselves generously for the sake of love.