

Running on Empty: Contemplation and Ecclesial Possibility
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The late twentieth century saw a remarkable renewal of contemplative prayer in the western Christian tradition. Thanks to monks of near celebrity status – including Thomas Merton, Henri le Saux, Bede Griffiths, Thomas Keating and John Main – the centrality of contemplation to Christian life has been rediscovered. By contemplation, I mean primarily the disciplined practice of silent prayer or meditation. This practice involves setting aside *our* words and thoughts, even our prayerful words, images and ideas, so as simply to wait on God in deepening receptivity and vulnerability. This is what the earliest monastic tradition called pure prayer or the prayer of the heart.

In our time, contemplative practice resonates powerfully with many people. I think this is for two significant reasons. First, it's an antidote to the ills of our compulsively busy, self-preoccupied and anxious age. Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann once said that, 'as a witness to salvation, the Christian testimony must be related to the sicknesses of a given society *in a healing way*'.¹ Contemplative practice is healing for our culture. It quiets anxiety and distractedness; it restores a sense of connectedness to ourselves, to others and to the world around us, at a time when many feel isolated and alienated.

And second, meditation offers a *way* of prayer, a method, by which practitioners grow into personal, living experience of God. Karl Rahner, the great Jesuit theologian of Vatican II, famously observed that 'the Christian of the future will be a mystic or ... will not exist at all'.² By 'mystic', Rahner hastened to add, he didn't mean someone pursuing strange 'parapsychological phenomena'. Rather, he meant one who knows 'a genuine experience of God'. This personal encounter is distinct

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A universal affirmation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1992), p.171.

² Karl Rahner SJ, *Theological Investigations*, Volume XX Concern for the Church, trans. Edward Quinn (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1981), p.149.

from second-hand or propositional belief, and deeper than the kind of ‘spiritual high’ reliant on passing emotional states. It’s an encounter which, said Rahner, ‘is the very heart of all spirituality’.³ Meditation opens the way to it. John Main, the Benedictine teacher of Christian meditation put it this way: ‘in meditation we verify the truths of our faith in our own experience’.

Tonight, I’m going to take for granted the significance, indeed the necessity of contemplative practice, for deepening the life of faith. What I want to explore with you is what this rediscovered contemplative way could mean for our church as a body. I’m interested not just in teaching meditation as one form of prayer. Rather, it’s about the life and mission of a whole church being renewed by contemplative consciousness. I believe that this consciousness reconnects us to the fundamental gospel dynamic of death and resurrection in ways that may renew our liturgy, our approach to mission and work for justice. And, as we’ll see a bit later, contemplative consciousness offers a way of engaging, even embracing as gift, our current ecclesial experience of decline and disorientation.

Self-Emptying

The title of my talk is, ‘Running on Empty’ (with apologies to Jackson Brown). So before we go on, I want to touch on the profound and paradoxical significance of emptiness in the life of faith.

I’ve already described contemplative prayer as the disciplined practice of laying aside thoughts, and of silent waiting on God. This laying aside of thoughts, as anyone who’s tried to meditate will testify, is a profoundly demanding practice. What’s demanding isn’t just that we find it difficult – although we do. We’re constantly being drawn back into the clamour of our minds, planning, worrying, daydreaming and cogitating. What’s even harder is that, once we get just a little past this surface clutter, we glimpse that in the instruction to lay aside our thoughts,

³ Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, XX, p.150.

we're actually being asked to lay aside our self-consciousness itself. It's our thoughts that carry our story about who we are, the stream of identifications that keeps our ego-ic identity in place. Beginning to let these go, we realise how deep a subversion of the self is involved here, which is why John Main says it takes 'nerve' to become really quiet. The practice of meditation is one of radical self-emptying ... self-forgetting ... kenosis.

The 5th century monk, John Cassian, spoke of the grand poverty of silent prayer. Main describes this profound self-emptying as the complete simplicity 'that demands not less than everything'. *This*, he says, is how we enter with our whole selves into the movement beyond the self into God. It's how we hand ourselves over, and hold nothing back.⁴ This is the dynamic of death and resurrection. We deepen our trust in and availability for the divine life. We are self-dispossessed so as to receive ourselves back as gift.

Well, if this is a process we find confronting and difficult as individuals, how much more so as a body! We the church proclaim the transforming power of Christ's self-emptying, his total self-entrustment to the Father. We proclaim our vocation to Christ-likeness. But our church tends not to exemplify a willingness to hand itself over, to let go its identity and security so as to receive its life back as gift. In fact, all too often, it's the reverse. We're anxiously preoccupied with survival and relevance, self-defensive about criticism and frightened of change; too often we seek to secure an identity by way of worldly power and oppressive social conformity. In truth, our church fails time and again to live from and entrust itself to the way of self-emptying and so fails to realise the possibility of the transformation it proclaims.

Yet having said this, what does ecclesial self-emptying actually look like? Indeed, how do we distinguish between a church that is radically self-forgetful, and a church that has simply forgotten faithfulness? It's a large question – tonight I want to

⁴ John Main, *Moment of Christ: Prayer as the way to God's fullness*, ed. Laurence Freeman (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2010), p.114.

begin to open it up in relation to just a few aspects of the church's life, and invite your reflections in response.

Liturgy from Empty

I'm going to start with the question of self-emptying in relation to liturgy. In her book, *Writing the Icon of the Heart*, Anglican solitary, Maggie Ross, shares the story of being perched on a cliff in Glacier Bay, Alaska, face to face with the 500 foot tall ice towers marking the jagged edge of the glacier. Occasionally, she writes, one of the forward-leaning ice spires would collapse with a thunderous roar, an explosive boom reverberating among the peaks for many seconds. Above her towered cliffs of granite which seemed immobile – except that in truth, the area was 50 years overdue for a catastrophic earthquake. The last one had generated a wave that scoured surrounding mountainsides to an elevation of 1200 feet. 'We sat on the edge of this abyss', Ross writes, 'stupefied by glory'.

She went on to recount how the group she was with had intended to celebrate the Eucharist while they were there. Yet as they sat, transfixed by the landscape, she came to feel that the human rite of word and symbol would be inadequate to the liturgy they were living. The priest, however, took out the bread and cup from his backpack. She felt his action 'extraneous, an intrusion'. Perhaps it would still have been OK, if 'only he had simply reached out his hands for ours, or in silence distributed the elements that had already been consecrated far beyond the reach of any human incantation ... But no, he was a by-the-book man, and, pulling one out, began to drone the words I normally love, but which in that context were almost an obscenity. Everything had already been said from eternity'.⁵

I find Ross's words deeply challenging. They remind me of one Good Friday where my experience of the liturgy was that it shrank rather than enlarged the meaning of the Cross at the heart of creation. It was a liturgy that domesticated

⁵ Maggie Ross, *Writing the Icon of the Heart: In Silence Beholding* (Oxford: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2011), pp.51-52.

rather than illuminated the crucifying depths of our alienation and the tears of things. It wasn't that no care had been taken. It wasn't a bad liturgy – in its own way, quite creative and certainly sincere. And yet, it was as if the priest, like the priest in Ross's story, was starting with his own agenda, not fully present to what was already there, and so desperately trying to 'make' something happen.

There was a little pile of stones. At a certain point in the service, we were all invited to take one and put it at the foot of the cross. Symbolically this was meant to invoke our sins – but it felt like play-acting. We hadn't been allowed to go deep enough actually to get in touch with our alienation. So I felt like I was just going through the motions, doing what 'should' be done and trying to generate the appropriate feelings to go with it. It was more a distraction than a help. It didn't enable me to get in touch with my sin, or with Christ and his forgiveness, or anything else. I'd gone, wanting to be *with* this. I was thwarted and went home frustrated.

Of course, we know this isn't easy. All of us are in different places when we come to worship. But that's precisely why the liturgy needs to point beyond itself *to* the reality, and not try to *be* the reality or *make* it happen. For this, it needs to emerge from contemplative awareness. The liturgy will only open a space where *we* can do our work, if it trusts both the prior reality of God, and the people and the Spirit at work in them. It must emerge from the deep listening that's possible only we've let go our agenda. If it doesn't come from there, it will tend to get *in* the way rather than opening *up* a way. As Maggie Ross writes, 'it is not the liturgy that sanctifies our lives; our lives are already sacred, and liturgy tries to remind us of that'.⁶

What does this mean for how we go about things? Liturgical churches have a lot invested in our liturgies – and rightly so. It's easy to caricature the communal ferocity unleashed by any proposed liturgical change as mere resistance to novelty. But much more is at stake. Words and forms do make a difference, they affect who

⁶ Ross, *Writing the Icon of the Heart*, p.53.

we are and are becoming. For most Christians, they're a primary source of understanding and formation, or deformation. Not just any words or forms will do. Even so, we don't ensure faithfulness by treating our liturgies as ends in themselves, as guarantors of doctrinal correctness or magic formulas ensuring the means of grace.

This means, I suggest, that a self-emptying church must be willing not only to talk *about* self-dispossession, but actually allow itself to *be* dispossessed. In relation to liturgy, I emphasise this is not in the first instance about seeking words or symbols that are supposedly more 'relevant' or contemporary. Different kinds of liturgy are appropriate for different contexts, and contemporary liturgies are at least as likely to be self-conscious and get in the way, as any other. The deeper issue is our relationship to any and all of our liturgical response. 'No matter how simple or grand, contemplative or celebratory', Ross writes, 'the same rule of thumb applies: a liturgy will be effective only in so far as it is able to implement its own effacement. *Every true sacred sign effaces itself*'.⁷ How that might happen must be discerned in different contexts ... but it starts with the disciplined practice of silence and listening, waiting and receiving, and the willingness to risk responding to what is given.

Mission from Empty

This brings me, then, to the question of mission – the mission of a self-emptying church. Some time ago, I attended a meeting at what was then my local parish – a meeting of the pastoral care committee. The agenda was how to ensure that people felt welcomed to the church, how to ensure that new people stayed. I felt tired immediately. At one level, the concern expressed was genuinely for the people – had they been offered hospitality? Did they feel accepted, cared for? They're important concerns. At another level, though, I discerned something else driving the meeting's agenda. Things like: is our community growing and sustaining itself? And,

⁷ Ross, *Writing the Icon of the Heart*, p.61.

are we being seen as welcoming? Are we living up to our self-image as inclusive, caring and warm-hearted?

This is a subtle question. English theologian Andrew Shanks has identified the issue I want to raise here in another domain, the area of ethical response. He's pointed out that when it comes to doing the 'right' thing, two motives are, in most of us, deeply intertwined. There's the genuine desire to do justice – *and* there's the desire to be justified, innocent, to have the satisfaction of doing the right thing. This second desire, he says, gets in the way of the first. It makes our ethical responses self-referencing, self-conscious. It distracts us and, as he says, turns 'us away from the authentic desire to *be just*'.⁸ Instead of being genuinely other-directed, our concern is subtly but unmistakably self-centred.

This captures my experience of the parish meeting. There *was* a genuine desire to be welcoming, to care for others. But it was intertwined with the desire to gain a sense of security and identity from being welcoming, a self-consciousness that drove the response. And this is actually death dealing. It leads to the kind of complacency that causes people to run a mile.

What would it mean to let go the desire to be reassured about our identity as 'good' or 'successful' church communities? I'm not talking about being totally unreflective, paying no attention to the impact we are having. I'm talking about the willingness to play our part in God's ministry of reconciliation, giving ourselves to it as wholeheartedly and truthfully as we can, without keeping one eye on how we're doing, or what we're building, or on cultivating a certain self-image. I'm talking about handing over our ecclesial self-consciousness. Jesus put it more succinctly: 'do not let your left hand know what your right is doing' (Matt. 6.3).

I want draw on my experience at Benedictus here, to share how we're attempting, in our context, to participate kenotically in the *missio Dei*. This might

⁸ Andrew Shanks, *Against Innocence: Gillian Rose's Reception and Gift of Faith* (London: SCM Press, 2008), p.30.

seem a kind of performative contradiction – look at us being self-emptying – so I’m conscious of the risk I run here! Nevertheless, I offer our experience as a concrete example of one aspect of the mission I sense we are called to as a contemplative church.

Members of Benedictus are responding to many vocations. Among our community is a secondary school teacher in a high needs school, whose students struggle (some of them) with drug addiction, depression and homelessness; there’s a climate scientist, who continues his work on climate change mitigation despite a deeply hostile political context; a paediatrician specialising in children’s development and family support; a counsellor, and others who work in pastoral care and social work, government, the law, health professions and academia.

When we began to ask about the mission of Benedictus as a community, it seemed abundantly clear that our first task was not to take these people away from their work in the world, using up their energies on some other, church sponsored project. Rather, it was to encourage and strengthen them for the work of reconciliation and healing to which they are already called, to which they’re already giving themselves. For me, this meant giving up an incipient image of myself as the leader of a community doing something impressive and visible for the local area. It was going to look like Benedictus, as such, wasn’t really socially engaged. But if our mission was, at least in the first instance, to nurture the vocations of those who came, then what would that look like?

In his essay, ‘Contemplation in a World of Action’, Thomas Merton confrontingly expressed what’s at stake here. He wrote:

‘[Anyone] who attempts to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening their own self-understanding, freedom, integrity and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others.’⁹

⁹ Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1980), p.164.

No matter how sincere, they will tend to communicate only the 'contagion' of their own obsessions, ambitions and anxieties.

We believe that part of our vocation as a contemplative church is to encourage formation in contemplative action, so that people may participate in the world in a different way, with a different quality of presence, attention and self-awareness. There might be various ways of going about this. In our case, we run facilitated reflective peer groups where people bring their ordinary experience into a disciplined process of reflection, including theological reflection, discovering signs of life and invitations to new ways of being they may not have recognised before. They begin to relate to unhelpful patterns in their lives with greater freedom. They discover, by attending to the particularities of *their* experience, what really calls for their repentance, what conversion might be, how they might be liberated to yield themselves more deeply to God's call on them.

Not everyone who comes to Benedictus participates in this kind of structured formation. We simply offer it as one way of taking seriously that the Christian journey is one of transformation, and that the church must open the possibility of intentionally undertaking that journey.

I want to highlight two senses in which this kind of mission is ecclesially self-emptying. First, this work of formation is in service of deepening participation in God's reconciling work in the world. It's not primarily about drawing people more fully into the institutional life of the church. By contrast, much so-called 'lay formation' focuses on just this. In my Anglican diocese, the centre for lay ministry offers programs in such things as reading the bible in church, leading the prayers, visiting the sick and having evangelising conversations. Now, there's nothing wrong with empowering people to participate in their ecclesial communities. But is that it? Has the church no imagination for empowering people in their vocations beyond the institution? Does it not take these vocations as seriously as its own? Or has it simply not let go its self-interest long enough to discern how it might serve the people as

they serve the world? The mission of a self-emptying church has a different focus from the mission of a church trying to secure its own place and identity.

Furthermore, although there's joy and satisfaction witnessing the growth in members of these groups, this form of mission consents to its own self-effacement. When those who participate go back to work or to their families, free to be who they're called to be, we might never know about it, or what difference Benedictus made in the process. And nor will anyone else. It's slow, patient, unglamorous work. This kind of mission doesn't deliver the reassurance that might come with running large church based mission initiatives or generating lots of church based activity.

Don't misunderstand me. Self-emptying in mission will look different in different contexts. Sometimes a gathered community *will* join together in a particular ministry – running a food bank, caring for the homeless, advocating against injustice. Even so, faithful communities point away from themselves, not seeking to secure identity through their good works. Immediately we seek to possess an identity of our own (pleased with ourselves for being so relevant, inclusive and welcoming), we close ourselves off from life. Others experience us at best as well-meaning, at worst as patronising and complacent, blocking access once more to the One whose witnesses we allegedly are.

Transforming Justice

So the being of a contemplative church is essentially self-effacing. Like salt, like leaven, you won't always be able to tell the difference it makes to the whole. Its vocation is simply to be faithful to its calling, in its context, discerned as best it can. In these final remarks, I want to suggest something about the way a church committed to growth in contemplative consciousness may contribute to the wider work of justice and social action.

Early last year, I attended the meeting of the UN Commission on the Status of Women in New York, as part of the Anglican communion delegation. Thousands of

people were there, representing governments and international agencies, civil society and NGOs. Hearing about the range and extent of gender-related injustice was overwhelming, as was the frenetic activity at the event itself with its hundreds of parallel sessions, policy discussions and legal drafting groups. At one point, our Anglican delegation was addressed by a high level official from the Episcopal church who commended us all for our activity, and urged us not to give up, but to ‘keep agitating’.

These words made me uneasy. I was already troubled by aspects of the meeting – the sense of frenzy, the robust ego-ic identities many activists appeared to be deriving from their work, the vast amount of energy being expended for little real progress. I began to reflect that, in the discernment of spirits, agitation is often a sign of the ‘false spirit’. And I wondered if, at least in part, rather than all of us needing to keep agitating – it was our very agitation that was operating as a block to healing, giving us the illusion of ‘doing’ something while actually avoiding what was truly necessary.

What could that be? Perhaps a willingness to stop for a while, to risk being fully present both to the depths of the world’s pain and our experience of impotence in the face of it. A willingness to undergo the distress of that, then to discern our response out of truly compassionate presence, stillness and deep listening rather than rushing around with more likely looking solutions and joint statements. Just as in pastoral care, we can so easily rush busily in, primarily concerned to ameliorate our own anxiety and discomfort, so in social action we can end up embroiled in the same dynamic.

I know what I say here is likely to be misunderstood. I’m **not** saying we do nothing in situations of injustice and suffering, simply waiting for God to do it for us. As Rowan Williams insists:

[T]his is not at all to argue that ‘internal’ transformation is more important than action for justice: rather, it is to insist that the clarity and energy we need for doing justice requires us to make space for the truth, for God’s reality to come through. Otherwise our search for justice or for peace becomes another exercise of human will, undermined by human self-deception.¹⁰

So I am raising a question about the depth and broken-openness required of us, as individuals and as communities, if we’re to answer to the depth of the world’s need. Yes, it’s necessary to implement practical and legal measures. But where there’s profound hurt and alienation, these measures are truly effective only when they’re part of a larger transformation of imagination and relationships.

Think of what’s needed to respond to the ecological crisis, the cry for reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, the sickness in gender relations around the world. To transform our imaginations and relationships requires that we get in touch with the stories we live by, asking how they oppress others and ourselves; it requires that we become aware of what we resist and fear, the ways we cling to security, control and business as usual. It asks that we let our hearts break open, so as to receive a larger vision and capacity for compassion. Isaiah imagines spears turned to pruning hooks and swords into ploughshares, and invites his people into a new possibility for peace. In our country, Michael Leunig faithfully responds to this same prophetic vocation to critique and reimagine our world. And this is the church’s vocation too. It’s intrinsic to our contribution to the work of justice.

How might we cultivate in our church communities and agencies this broken-heartedness and largeness of spirit, this capacity to makes space for God’s truth to break through for the world’s healing? I’ve spoken already of the significance of the

¹⁰ Rowan Williams, ‘The Archbishop of Canterbury’s Address to the Thirteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith’, Rome, 2012, s.11. [<http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2654/archbishops-address-to-the-synod-of-bishops-in-rome#sthash.r70ofEIKX.dpuf>]

prayer of the heart which puts us in touch with our essential poverty and deepens our listening. I've spoken of formation in contemplative action by which, in the words of Douglas Christie, we can 'learn to live in the world as ... healing presence, attentive and responsive to the lives of other beings and capable of helping to reknit the torn fabric of existence'.¹¹

I want to note one more thing. It's the gift of our present ecclesial circumstances. Parker Palmer has pointed out that, whether or not we take up intentional disciplines of contemplation, life itself provides moments of 'unintentional contemplation'.¹² These are moments 'when illusion is stripped away and reality is revealed'. Perhaps the foundations of our world are shaken by a betrayal or failure, perhaps 'a vision we had believed in turns out to be a hoax, or – worst of all – ... we discover ourselves to be less than we had thought'.¹³ Contemplation, writes Palmer, deprives us of familiar comforts. 'Then', and this is important, 'it replaces them with an *inner emptiness* in which new truth, often alien and unsettling truth, can emerge'.¹⁴

As church, are we not, many of us, in just such a moment of unintentional contemplation? We're discovering ourselves to be less than we thought. A vision we believed in has turned out to be an illusion, or at least we're discovering the inadequacy of some of our convictions, communities and practices. We're being deprived of the familiar comforts of respectable identity, social status, political influence. However much the busy agenda of fresh expressions and new programs for discipleship might seek to disguise the truth, often it feels as though we are running on empty, desperately trying to stave off descent into non-being.

¹¹ Douglas E. Christie, 'Immersion in the Larger Whole: Toward a Contemplative Ecology', *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes For a Contemplative Ecology* (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2013), p.6.

¹² Parker J. Palmer, *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity and Caring* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), p.26.

¹³ Palmer, *The Active Life*, p.26.

¹⁴ Palmer, *The Active Life*, p.27 [my italics].

Well, what if, instead of frantically trying to fill ourselves up again, to restore the old identity, we allowed ourselves simply to inhabit this empty space, this time of unknowing, this disorienting collapse of the structures that have contained our life till now? The resurrection, Williams has said, is ‘new life from moral and material nothing’.¹⁵ For the disciples, it arrives in the midst of their dereliction, shame and despair, beyond anything they could imagine. They didn’t even know what they were hoping for – and neither, really, do we.

Yet, just here is the place of conversion, transformation, renewed vocation. Laurence Freeman has said: ‘If we want to understand poverty of spirit we have to accept it as the reaching of the boundaries of our being and our capacity, and finding we are unable to go further by ourselves’.¹⁶ And he goes on: ‘Poverty of spirit is a “grand poverty” because when we have touched this boundary of being ..., it surprisingly recedes and marvelously our being expands. That *is* the resurrection’.¹⁷

I believe *this* is the great contemplative possibility all of us are living in the church today. If we can be with our broken-heartedness and poverty, embrace it rather than resist, then one day – though there are no guarantees what it will look like – we will live into the gift of new and expanded life. And perhaps this is the form our call to discipleship is taking today. I believe that to be adequate to the depth of the world’s need, truly bearers of *Christ’s* reconciling love, calls for an expansion of the church’s imagination and our compassion. To live into this possibility means being willing to let ourselves go, to fall empty-handed into the hands of the living God so as to receive our life back as gift and renewed call. Dare we accept this invitation? Will we follow Jesus through the deep waters of chaos and death, being uncreated to be recreated, broken to be given as blessing for all?

¹⁵ Rowan Williams, ‘Resurrection and Peace: More on New Testament Ethics’ in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp.265-275, p.271.

¹⁶ Laurence Freeman, *Light Within: Meditation as pure prayer* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1986 and 2008), p.76.

¹⁷ Freeman, *Light Within*, p.76.