

## Reflections in Solitude — Week 7

### Rev. Christine Gilbert for St. Andrews by the Sea Uniting Church

A few months ago, I watched a series of recorded talks given by Sarah Bachelard from the 2019 John Main Seminar. Sarah is the founder and leader of the Benedictus Contemplative Church in Canberra. She is a priest in Anglican Orders, an honorary research fellow at the Australian Catholic University and a member of the World Community for Christian Meditation. This impressive blend of formation and experience made her a fitting choice for these talks and I valued her scholastic yet accessible approach.

However, I was taken by surprise to see Sarah choke back tears half-way through her third presentation. The subject matter was theological in nature as she attempted to address her cheekily phrased question: Do we need Jesus? Why can't we just meditate? But mid-way through, she seemed to run into something more personal, below the surface of her well-read, well-constructed lecture.

Sarah spoke about our—and her—inability to let go completely, to give herself wholly over. “I may yearn and yearn to give myself to God without remainder,” she said, “but I cannot get past myself.”



Then Sarah's voice grew quieter, her words came more slowly and it appeared we were traversing on holy ground. She continued:

*And it's here, at the point of my very failure, to be truly poor in spirit—which is its own kind of poverty—that something else must happen. Some grace must be given if I am truly to break through. In the Christian vision, what happens at this point is Christ. Christ is the one who comes for me... who leads me out beyond myself... who liberates me for fullest life... Christ is the one who gave himself to be where we are so we might come to be where he is.*

Our dependence on Christ does not always sit easily among those of us who are used to being competent and productive, self-sufficient and proactive. In fact, Sarah's words, her emotive response and my recollection of and focus on them may seem peculiar. Why would you want to go there, after all? What is its significance to real life?

Many of us can accept Jesus as a notable historic figure, a wise teacher, someone whose life we may wish to emulate. But to admit our limitations, to recognise *our need for a saviour*, someone to rescue us not just from the perils of the world but most especially from our very selves is hard to reconcile. Thus, the question honestly expressed during the John Main Seminar to a group who would largely identify as Christians, “Do we *need* Jesus?” may be a highly relevant one for us all.

As I listened to Sarah and watched her struggle to say the words written on the page before her, I felt warm tears form in my own eyes. Though I sat alone before the computer screen, I nodded in understanding and encouragement—a kind of gestural “amen”. Sarah's words and her display of deep movements of the heart put me in touch with my own utter dependence on God, on Something More than myself. I, too, have been overcome at times when I realise the profound grace that is with and for me, taking me beyond myself so that I might truly love and live.

One of the more recent experiences was during our final gathered worship before the COVID lockdown as we sang Richard Bruxvoort-Colligan's version of Psalm 121 with the repeated refrain: “You are holding our life...” So much was—and is—uncertain. Our anxieties and fear ran high amidst our helplessness against the threatening virus. But for a time, as we sang and prayed, I felt myself abiding in the love of Christ that still gives me confidence and hope.

Jesus said, “I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.”

In the narrative of the Gospel, we might hear Jesus’ words in a linear and literal way. That is, Jesus was here on earth, has ascended to his father in heaven, and will return one day to take us there. But remembering that the Gospel was written in order that we might encounter the Living Christ as we read and re-read it, Jesus’ words move into a realm that is beyond space and time.

In other words, *Christ is always coming to us*. At times, we might be startled by a luminous Presence as we move about in a world “charged with the grandeur of God” as Gerard Manley Hopkins put it. More often, we become more attuned to the Sacred that is within and around us when we quieten down and take time to notice.

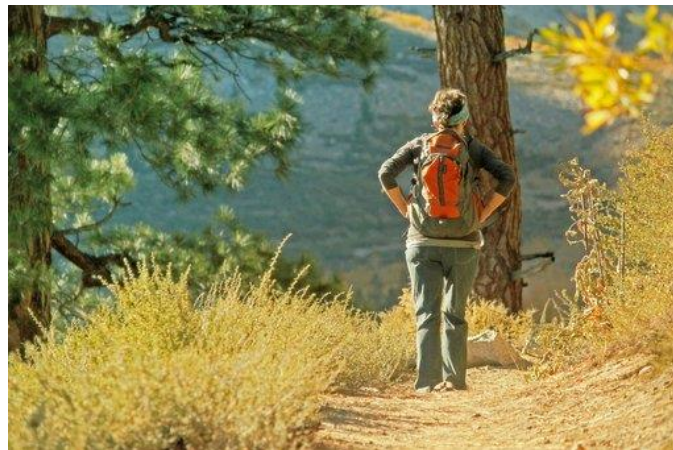
In the non-linear, beyond time and space reality of the Gospel, not only is Christ always coming to us but Christ is always taking us to dwell in God. We enter this dwelling place through the door of prayer and meditation. In the words of John Main:

*The essence of Christian prayer is not dialogue but union, oneness. ...the experience of coming into full union with the energy that created the universe ...it is the wellspring that gives each one of us the creative power to be the person we are called to be—a person rooted and founded in love.*

To say that the reality we discover in prayer belongs to the Gospel may suggest it is a separate and alternative reality than the one in which we ordinarily live. But this is not the case.

Daring to state things somewhat boldly here: the world shown to us by Christ in the Gospel, the world we encounter in prayer and meditation, is *the world* in which we truly live, move and come to have being.

Friends, in these weeks, many of us have glimpsed in new ways something of this very real world. It is the everlasting life full of compassion, justice, kindness, peace and love. Jesus not only revealed this world by living fully and consistently in it, but he longs to take us there.



*Here is a well-known prayer of Michael Leunig’s with which many of you will be familiar. I think it is fitting for this time.*

Dear God,

We pray for another way of being: another way of knowing.

Across the difficult terrain of our existence we have attempted to build a highway and in so doing have lost our footpath. God lead us to our footpath: lead us there where in simplicity we may move at the speed of natural creatures and feel the earth’s love beneath our feet. Lead us there where step-by-step we may feel the movement of creation in our hearts. And lead us there where side-by-side we may feel the embrace of the common soul. Nothing can be loved at speed.

God lead us to the slow path; to the joyous insights of the pilgrim; another way of knowing: another way of being.

Amen.

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