

Reflections in Solitude — Week 9

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A week ago now, the General Secretary of South Australia Felicity Amery and Moderator Bronte Wilson invited Ministers to attend one of three Zoom gatherings to converse around the question: *What are we learning about the church at this time?*

My husband Sean, in his role as a member of the faculty at Uniting College, was asked to provide a brief theological reflection for the third and final gathering. I think Sean's reflection is valuable at any time, but after reading the lectionary passages for this Sunday, I felt his offering was especially fitting so I would like to share it with you.

Like the disciples in Acts, I hear many asking questions about the future of the church. Like them, our vision is often limited by what has been. Thus we hear the disciples ask, "Is this the time you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" A return to nationalism is all they can imagine. It is the epitome of what effectiveness and success in mission look like—a restoration of status and influence. I often hear many in the church grasping for something similar, even if the "look" of what we envision is new and innovative.

After the ascension of Jesus, the disciples return to the upper room to await inspiration and direction from the Spirit. While they wait, they do not spend time drawing up master plans or strategising. Instead, they devote themselves constantly to prayer and, as history reveals, true prayer always leads us towards self-giving love. In other words, not impressive achievements but the laying down of life for one's friends. (Jn 15:13)

Here is Sean's reflection...

What are we learning about the Church at this time?

In order to address the question posed, I want to address it initially towards myself. That is, what am I learning about myself at this time? My hope then being that the personal perspective might have a broader application and resonance.

When Covid-19 was named a pandemic and things started to change dramatically, I found myself waking up in the small hours of the morning in a cold state of dread. Frozen almost.

There were a number of cross-pressures at play that I am sure many of us know by experience, such as health concerns, anxiety around finance and a general sense of helplessness about my children's and grandchildren's immediate and long term well-being.

Thankfully amidst the interior pressure, I was reminded of Wendell Berry's celebrated poem, "The Peace of Wild Things" so that through it and other holy murmurings, I heard the distinct invitation to pray. Yet not just pray in a functional, instrumentalist way—"God, end this virus"—but as an immersion further into the deep peace of Christ (that passes all understanding) within the very midst of the "wild things."

It was kind of like,
"Come aside and
stay with me.
Watch with me.
Pray with and in
me."



Well, as it happened (and so happens), this movement toward a deeper experience of prayer, coincided with my ordering and eventual re-reading of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship*. This being a more recent translation and a more accurate rendering of the title we may know as *The Cost of Discipleship*. And after I read the first chapter, "Costly Grace," I put the book down on my bedside table and whispered, "Holy ground."

In other words, there was more than just profound insights into the life of Christian discipleship here, there was a spiritual claim upon my life: *Sola Christus*, or "in and through Christ alone."

And not merely in a doctrinally correct sense but in a transformative, relational sense. So, in my case, this was yet another invitation to pray in the way and being of Christ which is always the encouragement to let go of fear, disbelief, dread even, and to fall headlong into God's embrace.

Bonhoeffer says it beautifully in the context of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: "Genuine prayer is not a deed or an exercise, a pious attitude, it is the request of the child to the heart of the Father." Bonhoeffer knowing full well that Christian action pivots on this depth and quality of contemplation as to where the Spirit of Christ is actually leading.

Now, I am aware as I begin broadening this personal invitation out towards the life of the church that there exists a tension in all this. I know it in myself but I have also heard it from ministry students and colleagues in recent weeks. The crux of this tension being, "I do not have the time and energy to look in the contemplative prayer direction. I will when it is not so hectic, so difficult and complex out there."

Well, there is much to address practically and that commonly has meant something to do with computers and technology! After all, we need to keep our worship services going. We need to design new, slimline educational courses. We need to stay visible. We need to reach as many people as we can.

On many levels I get all that and I swim in the stream of it as best I can (though I nearly had a melt down before a livestream lecture the other night when I couldn't a PP to run in Zoom!). But I also wonder about what really matters at this time so far as the Christian Church is concerned. And what might be in need of shedding, reshaping, re-stating and indeed re-framing by virtue of our invited contemplation and prayer; a seemingly *passive stance* in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis but in actual fact, the wellspring of renewed imagination and action.



Charles Taylor, the Canadian philosopher who wrote *A Secular Age*, notes that the "immanent frame" in which we all live in the West (a bordered landscape of the purely material and functional world) is characterised by the language of "causal efficiency." Everything turns on it and by in large we in the church also turn on it. That is, if we plan and do it well enough, it will get done and be done efficiently. Thanks be to God—as if God had something to do with it in the first place!

Well, in the same open and courageous spirit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, I trust that we are learning as a church that the language and gifting of prayer isn't simply about helping us get things done more proficiently in the time of crisis. Rather it is the expressive yearning of the child directed towards the compassionate heart of the Parent.

It is the deeper immersion into the beauty and fearlessness of Christ. It is both inner and outer transformations born of Spirit. It's the irreducible stuff of the Christian life or that which lasts unto eternity and which heals and enlivens others. And why, because in such contemplative practice, we not only look upon God, but there is time and space for God to gaze upon us, to call us by name and to restore within us the love and peace of the Holy Trinity, and that will always be the Church's greatest gift in its mission to the world.

The Peace of Wild Things

by Wendell Berry

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting for their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.