

Sermon

Sunday 17th February 2019. Gospel Reading: Luke 6: 17-26.

Making Space for Truth: Balancing Action and Contemplation (1516 words)

In his book 'Where Prayer Flourishes', Thomas Merton explains that 'there is no contradiction between action and contemplation...action and contemplation are fused into one entity by the love of God and of our brothers (and sisters) in Christ... without contemplation and interior prayer the church cannot fulfil her mission to transform and save mankind'¹. Today, in our gospel reading, we've heard Luke's 'blessings and woes' which epitomise Luke's concern for the poor and his awareness of the potential dangers of wealth, privilege and self-importance. They speak of the need, as Thomas Merton suggested, 'to transform and save mankind' from the inequalities and injustices that have been all too prevalent throughout human history.

When we think of the beatitudes, I'm guessing that many of us think of Matthew's more poetic rendering within the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew's rendition Jesus appears to address more esoteric or spiritual qualities when, for example, he describes as blessed, 'the poor in spirit'², 'those who hunger and thirst for righteousness'³, or the 'pure in heart'⁴. But Luke's version is simpler, he's much more direct, much more pragmatic, dare I say much more subversive. The biblical scholar Raymond E. Brown suggests that Luke's Jesus is much more concerned with the real and immediate injustices experienced by the poor every day when he states that

¹ Merton, T. (2018) *Where Prayer Flourishes*. London: Canterbury Press, p 151 & 152.

² Matthew 5:3 (NRSV)

³ Matthew 5:6 (NRSV)

⁴ Matthew 5:8 (NRSV)

Luke's beatitudes 'address those who are actually poor, hungry, mournful and hated "now"'⁵. Tellingly, Luke's four 'Blessings' are followed by the four 'Woes', a point-by-point antithesis to the previous declarations, as Luke's Jesus brings our attention to the pervasiveness of discrimination and inequality, and to the antagonistic relationship that can exist between the affluent and the poor. Jesus describes a topsy-turvy world where those who are impoverished, powerless and marginalised; those who are rejected and ridiculed; and those who are persecuted and hated will enter the kingdom of God. Conversely, those who are financially prosperous and powerful, those who have plenty, and those who are arrogant because they are elevated and revered by others have already received their comfort and consolation. In a similar vein, but about 500 years earlier, the messenger in the book of Malachi declares that God 'will be swift to bear witness...against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow, and the orphan, (and) against those who thrust aside the alien...'⁶ As Stulman and Kim maintain in their commentary on Malachi, 'nothing disrupts unity more than injustice (and) injustice shatters the quality of life of the community'⁷. How pertinent this still seems today, and how little the human heart seems to have changed in the last two and a half thousand years.

All of this draws attention to the enduring need for societal reform and social justice, and for the pressing need to provide practical support to those who are impoverished, powerless and marginalised. This is a fundamental characteristic of our Christian faith. But, hand in hand with the need to transform the society in which

⁵ Brown R. E. (1999) *An Introduction to the New Testament*. London: Doubleday, p 239.

⁶ Malachi 3:5 (NRSV)

⁷ Stulman, L. & Kim, H. C. P. (2010) *You Are My People: An Introduction to Prophetic Literature*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, p 242.

we live, is the need to transform ourselves, to engage with the path of inner transformation, to integrate action and contemplation, for they are the heads and tails of the spinning coin that is our Christian life and we are called to them both. Jack Jezreel, founder of the 'JustFaith' organisation, explained it well when he said this...“The world cannot be changed by love to become just, unless we are changed by love to become whole, *but* we cannot be made whole without engaging in the work of making the world whole. Personal transformation and social transformation are one piece.”⁸ If we do not seek to *know* ourselves, to *change* ourselves, to grow in love and in our awareness of God, anything we seek to achieve with our activism runs the risk of foundering on the same ideologies that caused the problems in the first place. Without the contemplative dimension, we remain unenlightened people seeking to overthrow the systems of other equally unenlightened people. We risk becoming focused on us being right and them being wrong, and on the ideologies that underpin our belief systems rather than the truth, love, liberation and freedom that emerges when, as Anthony Bloom puts it, ‘contemplation (becomes) active and action contemplative’⁹. Anthony Bloom goes on to say that ‘action must be an act of God, by our instrumentality. Let us first learn to listen, hear, see and understand God, the world and our neighbour. And then to act not solely according to human wisdom but, above all, primarily on the basis of the divine wisdom...’¹⁰

I'd like you at this point to look at your service sheet. Look first at the front of the service sheet and there you'll see a colour image made up of nine pictures, this is

⁸ Jack Jezreel, “To Love Without Exception,” “Perfection,” *Oneing*, Vol. 4 No. 1 (Center for Action and Contemplation: 2016), 52.

⁹ Bloom, A (1971) *God and Man*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, p 99.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p119

our pictorial community rule of life. Now, for those of you who may not be familiar with our community rule of life you may well be asking what all that means. Well, I'd like you now to turn the service sheet over and on the back you'll see a black and white representation of the same image with labels indicating what the pictures represent. Each of these pictures represents an aspect of our Christian life that we have committed ourselves to as a community and I'd particularly like to draw your attention to two pictures, the one in the top right hand corner, and the central one at the bottom. You'll notice that one commits us to 'being concerned about social justice' and the other to 'being contemplative and rooted in prayer'. These, I would argue, are the heads and tails of the spinning coin that I mentioned earlier; they are the call to action and the call to contemplation. They embody, within our own community rule of life, the call to engage with action for societal reform and social justice whilst, at the same time, engaging with the path of inner transformation, the path that leads us to *know* ourselves, to *change* ourselves, to grow in love and in our awareness of God. These two aspects of parish life (the active and contemplative) are needed to balance and complement each other, with each completing the other and providing a fullness and wholeness to parish life that each on their own cannot achieve.

We have committed ourselves to being a contemplative community and, within a contemplative community, action follows contemplation and reflection. As a community, we enter into contemplation as the silent, prayerful, opening of ourselves to the living God and then, collectively reflecting on God's desire for us as an active Christian community, we act in a way that we believe accords with God's will as it unfolds within our hearts. This reflects Paul's instruction in his letter to the Romans

when he says, 'do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God...'11 This ongoing and cyclical process grounds our love for others, and our actions towards them, within a contemplative framework that enables us to evolve into a community that commits itself to the 'twofold way which makes contemplation active and action contemplative'12.

In 2012, our then Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams addressed the Synod of Bishops in Rome. He spoke of the deep and abiding connection between contemplation and action when he said this, '...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 peace becomes another exercise of human will, undermined by human self-deception... True prayer purifies the motive, true justice is the necessary work of sharing and liberating in others the humanity we have discovered in our contemplative encounter'13. So, when we seek to understand how best we can help the poor, the hungry, those who weep and those who are hated, excluded, reviled and defamed, we must remember also to make space for truth, for God's reality. It is when we sit in the silence and stillness of contemplative prayer that we can seek the clarity we need for doing justice because we sit, to quote R. S. Thomas, 'within listening distance of the silence we call God'14. AMEN

11 Romans 12:2 (NRSV)

12 Bloom, A (1971) *God and Man*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, p 99.

13 Archbishop of Canterbury (2012) *Archbishops Address to the Synod of Bishops in Rome*.

Accessed: 13.02.19. Accessed from:

<http://aoc2013.brix.fatbeehive.com/articles.php/2645/archbishops-address-to-the-synod-of-bishops-in-rome>

14 R.S. Thomas, 'AD', in *Collected Later Poems 1988-2000*.