

CONTEMPLATION, THE HEALING OF MEMORIES AND ANGER

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WHEN WE MOVE to a new place, first impressions are often the sharpest. Even if later experiences prove to be more informed, and closer contact and a more formal access to information may increase our understanding, nothing seems able to equal those first impressions of delight or pain.

For me, contemplation was such a new country. I stumbled across it almost by chance, a while ago. Since then, I have walked in it for miles, a journey that has been often uphill and tiring, but full of delight and surprises and, more than anything, a homecoming to something I knew existed but had so far not found. I consider myself a relative beginner, hesitant to speak when there are so many knowledgeable and established inhabitants of that country. But a newcomer's story may be worth listening to.

The reason for telling it is not because it is unusual but because many of its ingredients seem similar to those in the stories of many ordinary people in the pews and those who have abandoned Church and regular prayer altogether. For me it had a happy ending; depressingly this is not usually the case with the majority of the people in this country who claim to believe in a God and yet find it difficult to relate to him.

For years I had been baffled: our relationship with God was to be seen as a relationship of love, palely mirrored in our human relationships. But why then was prayer so unattractive, such hard work, a joyless anaemic affair and a constant struggle against distractions? There was apparently no problem communicating with the people I loved. It was a delight to be close to them, to share with them my thoughts and my feelings, to listen to what they had to say and to enjoy their unique qualities. But communication with God was quite a different matter.

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I was similarly concerned about the image of God as our loving parent so prevalent in Christian belief. When I looked at loving families, I saw children and parents delighting in each other. There was no need for children to put on their Sunday best to be with their parents. Children were loved and hugged, however grimy, and however objectionable at times. Loving parents, at their best, will understand a child testing himself against them, because it is part of his growing into a person. Frequently, parents take an almost foolish pride in their children's achievements, not because they believe they house a genius, but because they see such achievements as part of a unique, precious and growing individual. If I was to understand myself as God's child along these lines, something was fundamentally wrong in this parent-child relationship. Coming into his presence was first and foremost associated with unworthiness, it was no real pleasure but a chore; I seldom felt that I could come just as I was, confident in his love and in myself.

Perhaps I was just unfortunate in consulting the wrong spiritual guides, attending the wrong prayer workshops or talking to the wrong people. The remedies offered were manifold. They ranged from 'you must just persevere' or 'relax' to 'try and find the disturbance (i.e. the sin) that blocks the communication channels with God' or, more often, 'why don't you just suspend your questions and doubts and simply submit?' No doubt this is all good advice and helpful at the right time, but to one who is already struggling, full of doubt and frustration, it only reinforces the sense of guilt and failure. Invariably there was talk of prayer being difficult and hard work. Very little seemed to come across of the pleasure of prayer and the delight of being in God's presence.

A turning point came with a friendly and accepting Church community with many members obviously rooted in prayer, which allowed individuality and space. I know of no better incentive to learn to pray than to love people whom one knows to be rooted in Christ. And this in turn brought me into contact with contemplation.

Trusting

Of course contemplation is not an aim in itself, but a means of becoming aware of the Lord in our lives, and sensitive to the way he already speaks to us. Often such an awareness is like a tender plant almost choked by rubble, for we do not approach prayer

with a clean slate; rather we carry with us a suitcase of life experiences, both good and bad. In all of us there are memories of approaching others in trust, and finding ourselves rejected, often without anybody's deliberate fault. Inevitably prayer will recall a host of such associations from our suitcase of life. We may understand in our heads that God is our loving father, quite unlike any earthly relative, but the surfacing images will reflect our experiences of our earthly father, or of men in authority over us. We may know that God loves us, warts and all, and longs to enter our sinful lives, but because approval for us is closely tied to achievement, we may be afraid to step before God with empty hands. The hardest lesson is to let God love us and make himself known to us in the way he longs us to see and understand him. Therefore letting down my barriers towards God was initially accompanied by a mass of apprehension, frustration, anger and downright scepticism. At that stage a sensitive companion on the journey was absolutely essential, someone I could trust (which itself was a slow learning process), who encouraged me to travel on when the going was tough and seemed to lead into introspective chaos. It was wonderful to find a patient soul friend who believed in my growth towards God, however slow the tangible process, and who respected my holy sanctuary, trusting that God would work in me in his own way and time, and who had the confidence gently to challenge my often distorted images of God.

For a person brought up in the German evangelical tradition and a product of a nominally rational and scientific education, contemplation does not come easily. For too long I had been taught to mistrust illusions of the mind, 'graven images' and subjective emotions, and feared that imaginative contemplation might turn into a self-centred and not God-centred indulgence. Initially the contemplation of Jesus stories was therefore difficult. But fortunately scripture is rich in more homely imagery and parables. By looking at those I found a slow change taking place which, in time, proved dramatic. As I contemplated biblical passages, my whole outlook seemed to undergo a change. For example, the Kingdom of God was likened to yeast; as I contemplated this image, its deep meaning began to dawn on me: yeast is quite an ordinary ingredient, sterile on its own, but multiplying prolifically when mixed with other ingredients, needing to be broken and dispersed and finally to die for bread to be edible. Another image is that of the mustard seed, a playful wonder of

creation which grows into a powerful tree, being a home to birds, without restricting their freedom. There were the parables, the most moving among them the story of the prodigal son. To me it had always seemed such an unfair story and I had felt deep solidarity with the elder son. Now I was touched by the almost foolish father who loved beyond all common sense; for the first time I seemed to hear him saying to the elder son: 'All I have is yours' and resentment about unfair treatment disappeared. And there was a whole procession of real people in the bible with whom I could readily identify: the fearful, the doubting, the foolish, the depressed, all responding uniquely to the beckoning, gentle call of God, and being given the freedom to do so, each in their own individual way.

This process of seeing bible stories in a new light continued as I looked at Jesus stories. It was almost as though, for much of my life, prayer had been a monologue on my part, often blaming God angrily without listening to his answer. As I approached the stories with more trust, a dialogue with God began to develop. Jesus became different and real, as he spoke through the stories, able to deal with my anger as it surfaced, and sharing my joy and peace.

I began to see the vulnerability and the gentleness of God, his deep love, and it became possible to feel safe with him. There was the growing hunger to hear the words: 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you' and 'you are precious in my eyes, and honoured, and I love you' (Isai 43,1). There was the joy and the reality of being in God's arms: 'like a child quieted at its mother's breast' (Ps 131,2), knowing myself to be safe and loved, often accompanied by peaceful sleep.

Remembering

With this changing perception two major movements occurred: firstly, a heightened consciousness and the discovery of God in the small signs and miracles of everyday life. But secondly, and more importantly, I began a painful and joyful journey into the past, recovering many lost memories and finding myself slowly restored and healed.

Most of us, especially when life is very busy and generally fulfilled, have developed a technique of 'functioning'. For many of us this is possible because we have been and are constantly affirmed by those who love us. As J. Dominian writes, 'Spouses and friends heal us by giving us a second opportunity, both by

accepting us as we are and by helping us to learn how to love them'.¹ We also 'function' by establishing certain taboo areas, where we hide hurts and uncomfortable memories, and which those who love and know us may come to recognize and avoid.

But in such areas we are most vulnerable, our perceptions are most distorted and we are most given to the loneliness and self-centredness brought on by apparently undeserved suffering. Could it be that God's answer to Job 'from the whirlwind' (Job 38,1) is so scandalous because it attacks the central stumbling-block to healing: our pre-occupation with our self-righteousness? So often we hold on to our hurts, the chips on our shoulders, so as to be able to deny responsibility for our actions and avoid taking up the opportunities for healing which God offers us constantly. We are never pure victims, although there is the great temptation to consider ourselves as such and to see penitence as an almost heroic act of overcoming resentment and anger. How much more sobering is the reality from which we shelter ourselves: harbouring our grudges and hurts, often using them in a petty, calculating way; and, if we have any power over people, ourselves becoming victimizers. The Lord 'visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children' (Exod 34,7) is not so much the account of a vengeful God, but the reality of unredeemed memories. Personal growth requires us therefore to pay attention particularly to such taboo areas, to re-member our hurts and let God heal them.

And all of us are members of unredeemed communities though it may take a long time for us to realize it. Superficially my childhood in a small town in post-war Germany was relatively uneventful and normal; even if 'normal' meant that many of my friends had lost their fathers. The adults who shaped us were neither among the spectacular victims or villainous victimizers of Nazi Germany, but most of them had visible or invisible wounds and feelings of guilt which were hidden away very firmly. In addition there were tangible signs of smouldering resentment over divided political allegiances of the past and over the big influx of refugees which was accompanied with much social and religious prejudice on all sides. The result was a hard, judgmental community, unduly concerned with material security and achievement and inconsistent in the treatment of its young, often lacking the warmth and patience which are so essential to growth and security. I have many memories of being at the receiving end of anger,

without knowing why. Retrospectively I can understand; there was much suppressed grief, individual and collective, which darkened perceptions and created anger and depressions. As children we were often confused when adults reacted inconsistently and harshly and innocent questions caused eruptions of anger or, worse still, walls of stony silence.

'When we see societies losing or suppressing their past, we rightly conclude that they are unfree, diseased or corrupt.'² This disease is so easily transmitted to the next generation. Many of us rebelled and rejected our elders and by doing so, became ourselves enmeshed in the net of anger and unfreedom, unwilling and unable truly to forgive. But to become free, we need to remember, that is to integrate our lost memories, for without such memories we are amputated people and communities, 'a people without history is not redeemed from time'.³

And over and over again we experience that, through remembering and through repentance, individuals can and do redeem and change communities. As we face our individual and collective hurts in the past, we become free as individuals to be creative when interacting with others. Through our own freedom we may give others back that freedom which will enable them to grow and become truly themselves. As R. Williams writes so well:

Growth is in the passionate constancy of returning to what seems a grave, a void, to the dim recollection of a possibility of love, in the hope of hearing one's name spoken out of the emptiness . . . If we answer that call, and find our story given back to us, our name and our memory, that story turns the corner into life and promise, and most importantly, calling in the fuller sense.⁴

This process will invariably need to start from the individual, but it can never remain an individual process, and is bound to change communities.

Healing

I had, above all, wanted to learn to pray. But, with beginning to learn to trust, the urgency of wanting to learn a skill receded. For the first time in my life, prayer stopped being a chore. It was like entering a new world. Frustration in this new place came from feeling so blind and so lame and dismembered. Retrospectively, it seems that the acknowledgement of my poverty and need, slowly

revealed, was the first major step to healing. But that in itself was a process of growth, a grace which could not be forced, but needed to be waited for.

Our hurts are also our greatest opportunities. In our daily lives God gives us many opportunities for healing and redeeming such hurts. Because we are particularly raw and sensitive in certain areas, we will tend to seek out signs and situations with similar ingredients, both good and bad. If unresolved, this is where we tend to fall short again and again and where we are shown most clearly our need for change. If healed, past hurts are an immense treasure, which tend to make us more sensitive, providing us with an invaluable opportunity for ministry. But such daily opportunities for healing can, I believe, be used in a constructive way only if we contemplate them. We need to return to the realm of emotions, often re-living pain and anger in God's presence to become free. Pure reflection may be a beginning, but it is not enough to escape the vicious circle.

If we truly want to see, God will show us enough for our growth and healing. 'Come and see' said Jesus in one of my fantasy prayers and led me into the past. I found myself back in my childhood and walked through my home town, rediscovering some of the pleasures and the forgotten pains of the past. But, equally importantly, I also began to understand the pain and the vulnerability of those who had hurt me. Next, the little girl that used to be and still is part of me, joined me during prayer, sharing with me her tears and joy and asking very gently to be loved and accepted. And when I did so, she disappeared as quietly as she had come, and I found myself more at one with myself and healed. I caught glimpses of a treasure of memories and creativity within me through which God can and does speak and heal, a world which our modern rational minds are almost too ashamed to acknowledge. Contrary to all expectations, this turned out to be a journey into freedom. Being shown my history, reliving once more the circumstances of my past, enabled me to learn to love and accept myself and in time to understand and forgive those who had hurt me. But, almost paradoxically, it also made it possible to become more responsible for my actions. I believe this to be a common Christian journey into freedom. As J. A. Baker writes:

We become free by accepting that we are responsible. Only the man who is prepared to stand up and say of his life: 'This is my

own doing', however great the pressures that have conditioned and circumscribed him, has broken out of bondage.⁵

Such understanding defies the logic of the mind; it is part of a journey into the mystery of adulthood, to be grasped with the heart and to be seen through contemplation.

Compassion and action

Apart from the increasing joy and energy, there was a new need for community, to be before God in the company of other sinners, and the need for compassion, to be with those who suffer and to share in that suffering. Being healed from anger and hurt seemed to remove the walls of isolation around myself, took away the fear of others and made it possible to interact in a new freedom and openness. This was a great surprise to me, though, on reflection, it is quite a logical development. For, if we believe that God is in control and works in and through us, situations are truly open and we can be free to respond.

The second observable change was a new attitude towards action. Because, through contemplation, there were real glimpses of God's potential and of the Kingdom, the need for change in the world became more urgent. But, paradoxically, because of the experience of God in control there was a growing understanding that we can be relaxed about achieving such change. It seems to me that we can live in that tension between urgency and relaxation only if we are daily grounded in prayer. Needless to say, we fail daily and there is a constant need to return to God's loving arms and to find ourselves repeatedly restored and experiencing the continuing mystery of God's healing hand.

Of course, the process of healing of memories and anger is not a once and for all linear process. For me it is more like a journey into wholeness with many dead ends and the need to return to the same place over and over again. Often there was progress in one area while I was stuck or regressing in another. And at times, contemplation was very hard work, frightening and very painful, though I was never given more to see than I could bear. God taught me slowly and gently who and what I really am. And because prayer takes away the anaesthetic of self-deception, it made me feel my hurts, like frozen limbs come back to life. But since real love never hurts unless it also affirms, God also showed me the positive, lovable and unique qualities in myself and this is ultimately a journey into freedom.

Contemplation is a bit like being a small child, finding oneself on one's mother's lap and communicating with her. If we are restless, it is all right to express such restlessness; if we are angry or sad it is acceptable to cry. But ultimately there must come a point when the questioning, thrashing and kicking must stop and we must be able to trust and relax and let ourselves be loved. Only then can we be truly restored to have the freedom and the strength to meet others properly.

Finally, I am still surprised and delighted by how little I needed to know to start contemplating. God seems to have provided all the answers to our questions within ourselves, if only we learn to read the signs. A very mistaken but nonetheless common assumption is that contemplation is above all the prayer of the spiritual giants, to be imitated both in method and use of imagery. True, the spiritual giants are worth listening to because they often transcend ordinary perceptions and articulate so well what we may be struggling to express. But they may make sense only properly if their experiences reflect ours and we may well have to start from where we are. Ordinary lives, especially experiences of parenthood and everyday caring and the wonders of creation, are full of signs of the goodness of God. They are the fundamental store of knowledge from which Jesus seems to draw for his teaching. Sadly and for a number of reasons the sharpness and the delight of the biblical imagery has often been lost. But through contemplation of quite simple everyday scenes with which we can readily identify, our understanding of God can be radically extended, for such pictures are an integral part of our feelings and personalities and a sign of God's presence in all our lives. I believe that such experiences need to be one basis for discovering God afresh and need to be articulated in the corporate experience and worship of the Church. In practical terms, this means opening up contemplation for lay people, for those with doubts and questions, and journeying with them from their starting point at their speed, sharing with them the uniqueness of that journey.

When I started out on contemplation, it seemed that I was unusual in my need for a new form of communication with God. I now see that this is incorrect. There seems to be a widespread and enormous hunger among all kinds of Christians to learn to pray and discover God in their lives, and the Kingdom of God is breaking through in the most unlikely forms and places. Spiritual direction (an unfortunate term for the companionship on the

journey of faith) offers, to my mind, real opportunities for the growth of God's Kingdom and for ministry. What seems to hold it back is the real shortage of spiritual directors. To minister effectively, we need to tap the wealth of human resources, wisdom and experience in the Church, and particularly among lay people and women. I am convinced that such a ministry will enable individuals and communities to grow in the love of God, manifest signs of the Kingdom and lead to true healing and freedom.

NOTES

¹ Dominian, J.: 'Encountering myself: guilt and forgiveness' in *Encounters*, ed Mayne, M., (London, 1986), p 41.

² Williams, R.: *Resurrection*, (London, 1982), p 30.

³ Elliot, T. S.: 'Little Gidding' in *Collected poems*, (London, 1936), p 222.

⁴ Williams, R.: *op. cit.*, p 47.

⁵ Baker, J. A.: *The foolishness of God*, (London, 1970), p 127.