NO SALVATION OUTSIDE THE WORLD? Praying in Place

By PHILIP SHELDRAKE

'ONLY THOSE PEOPLE who know where they come from, where they belong, are safe to travel.' So said an Indian acquaintance of mine of the many westerners in search of a home in the mystic Orient. If that insight is true of outer travel, it is equally so of the inner, spiritual journey. Yet, how difficult it is for so many of us to know our place, our context, or, at least, to take it seriously and have it taken seriously by others as the bedrock of our spiritual quest. How difficult, in other words, to believe oneself to be saved *in* the world or truly to pray 'in our place'.

Once upon a time, I was on the staff of a major Jesuit retreat centre. A young couple, friends of mine, came to make an eight-day retreat. They were assigned the same experienced director, told her that their spirituality involved praying and reflecting together as well as individually and asked her whether they could have a joint direction session each day. Their lives were intimately connected and they felt that their retreat should express this. The answer was 'No'. They had indeed been allowed the concession of a shared room (I cannot recall whether it had a double bed!) but that was the limit. Spirituality and prayer were *essentially* personal and solitary activities. Directed retreats only worked for *individuals.*

At another time I was accompanying in general spiritual direction a young woman with two pre-school children. She struggled with images of prayer gained from what had appeared at the time to be a highly successful and fruitful weekend retreat *away from her family*. Prayer had been so good. Why could it not be the same at home? But children make demands, life makes demands . . . The only place of solitude was the bathroom. Prayer had to change. Concepts of appropriate time and place needed to change. The search for the purity of detached spiritual experience gradually gave way to something altogether more messy, less predictable, more grounded.

As I tried to reflect upon the strengths and weaknesses of 'retreats in daily life' as opposed to traditional closed retreats, these two powerful

images from my experience re-emerged to clarify sharply the main focus. While there are undoubtedly many practical questions involved in evaluating retreats in daily life, a far more fundamental issue is the kind of understanding of God and spirituality that is modelled and supported by different kinds of retreat. Do we really believe (to borrow Schillebeeckx's memorable phrase) that there is no salvation outside the *world*? Or is it that our spiritualities have been colonized for so long by celibate culture that retreats have traditionally expressed the values of that culture rather than those of ordinary, everyday experience? Where are we truly placed, indeed to what degree spiritually are we placed persons at all rather than displaced persons, and how far does our spiritual journey begin with a rootedness in that place?

Retreats in daily life first began to emerge in different forms perhaps fifteen to twenty years ago. They were not simply the bright idea of retreat-givers in isolation but were a response to an increasing demand for retreats by lay Christians. This demand was based, first of all, on people beginning to take seriously the notion of a single and universal call to holiness and to own that they actually had a 'spiritual life' that was worth nurturing. Such retreats were seen initially as *adaptations* of 'normal' retreats which, of course, remained those conducted in retreat houses. That is to say the primary reference point was the *closed* retreat, silent, solitary, individual, intense and separated from everyday affairs. The problem with the notion of 'adaptation' is that it seems to imply a kind of concession to weakness or to the limitations of practical circumstances. It is a second best. This had practical consequences—mainly that whatever format and structures were adopted should approximate as closely as possible to the ideal or norm, the closed retreat. An obvious example was that the focus was still primarily, if not exclusively, on *periods of formal prayer* as the significant contexts for God's self-disclosure and the retreatant's response. Arguably, the early forms of group retreats in daily life, particularly at parish level, were also understood as adaptations—this time of the old-style parish mission—rather than as something completely new in aim as well as format.

Now, the question of 'adaptation' begins to move us beyond purely practical considerations. What was at stake was the very spirituality that lay at the heart of such traditional concepts of retreat. Deep down, 'the spiritual' was still conceived as something that operated on a special level, in special contexts and in special activities. As retreats in daily life became more acceptable and took on an identity of their own, the question of different understandings of spirituality became much clearer. Such retreats were not *adaptations* of something else from

somewhere else, but should arise organically from within everyday experience. The context for spiritual experience then becomes every element and moment of our existence. As Maurice Giuliani, the noted expert on specifically Ignatian retreats in daily life, has suggested, the whole of human activity may thus become a 'spiritual exercise'.

Apart from a difference of context, retreats in daily life have a different dynamic to closed retreats and what is appropriate for the latter cannot be imposed upon the former. Such retreats may be more diffuse than closed retreats because they necessarily interweave with the dynamic of the everyday, its pressures, pauses and focuses. This includes the dynamics of all the other people in my life. The everyday and ordinary is not a distraction or interruption but inherent to the retreat. The spiritual experience that emerges is necessarily not one of *separations* (of the spiritual from the material, of prayer from activity, of God from other relationships) but of *connections* and *integration.* This is profoundly challenging but also liberating for those brought up on a spirituality of disengagement.

Practically speaking, different formats for retreats in daily life have emerged. Some retreats emphasize personal spiritual direction while others, particularly some forms of parish-based retreats and those with a highly developed structure, such as 'Open Door' or 'Way of Life', place most of their emphasis on group activities. Others, again, attempt to maintain a careful balance between personal prayer guidance and group sharing.

The focus of such retreats varies enormously. Some are really prayer seminars to introduce people to personal prayer or to varieties of method. Learning to use scripture in a personal way and praying with it is a quite common focus. In a sense, the concentration is on 'technology'. Other retreats are aimed at helping people to reflect more deeply on their spiritual experience, to cultivate greater awareness and to articulate it either on a one-to-one basis or in a faith-sharing group. Again, some retreats have a specific focus e.g. social justice, and may include some appropriate input or immersion in challenging experiences.

While retreats in daily life are associated in some people's minds with the Ignatian tradition, other groups and traditions have developed the same format and some approaches to retreats in daily life would deny any connection with a single spiritual tradition, prefering to describe themselves as eclectic in approach.

Contexts vary as well. Some retreat houses are attempting to develop a wider ministry in the local community by hosting retreats in daily life. Other retreats are parish-based. A few retreats emphasize meeting in

people's homes as a specific value in itself. Finally, some individually-guided versions would involve the participant travelling to where the spiritual director works.

The common features of all such experiences is that they have shifted the concept of 'retreat' beyond the traditional retreat house with its self-contained daily pattern, removed from the vagaries of everyday concerns. However, retreats in daily life are not merely located outside retreat houses but also seek to embrace everyday experience and to enable a more effective dialogue between prayer and life. They are based on the needs of home-based people living in the everyday world. Structures are created to suit the *real life* rather than an idealized 'spiritual' life of the participants. It is certainly true that the development of retreats in daily life has enabled a larger number and more varied range of people to undertake retreats. Having said that, there is a certain 'asceticism' in that any retreat involves a commitment and commitment inevitably means making choices and establishing priorities!

One may, of course, view all this in a very pragmatic way and it is certainly the case that practical reasons played a significant role in the development of this kind of retreat. Closed retreats cost more money than many people can afford. They demand an ability to leave work, family or other responsibilities behind and to travel away for anything from a weekend to a month. Traditional retreats have, as a result, been accused of being élitist and middle-class. In contrast, retreats in daily life are locally-based, non-residential and increasingly accessible to large numbers of people who live nowhere near a retreat house, even if they could afford the time and money to visit one.

The issue, however, is deeper than this. The spirituality that lies behind so much of the traditional retreat movement is separatist in more profound ways. Firstly, it was assumed that a 'retreat' meant detachment from the normal flow and that it was necessarily a concentrated experience. Secondly, classical retreats seemed to assume a depth of spiritual experience, self-awareness and personal maturity that was overpowering. Retreats, therefore, must be for the 'religious specialist'—and this was often taken to mean the professionals, the clergy and religious. For others, to pretend to such spiritual heights or depths would seem presumptuous. Thirdly, this was compounded by the fact that the spirituality that was presented assumed a relatively high degree of literacy. For example, the apparently simple matter of finding your way around the Bible was actually more than the majority of people could manage without a great deal of assistance and instruction. Finally, the assumption that most of life was at best an irrelevance and at

worst a hindrance to spiritual growth (particularly if it involved such spiritually dubious areas as sexuality) effectively disempowered a large number of people who did not relate well to a more intellectual, introverted, intrapersonal and disengaged approach to relationships with God.

The retreat movement grew out of a world where God had been displaced from everyday human experience. It has, therefore, unfortunately inherited a number of often unconscious and damaging assumptions. I remember some years ago directing a retreat where an older man came up against a serious block when praying around the passage about the potter in Jeremiah 18:1–6. He found the notion of God's hands holding him, moulding him, remoulding him, extremely threatening. His inherited image of God as distant, detached, judging, unmoved, did not allow him easily to entrust God with his existence and hopes. The breakthrough came unexpectedly and imaginatively when the hands he saw around the pot that was himself turned into those of his wife caressing him. Perhaps for the first time ever, the man actually understood the many years of sexual intimacy with his wife as a sacrament of God's healing and creativity.

The crucial issue that lies behind all the practical questions concerning the nature and structure of retreats is how and where we experience God. Any kind of retreat, closed or in daily life, involves some degree of standing back from the flow for the sake of greater perspective. However, that is not the same as the need to withdraw from the everyday to seek a truer place where God dwells. Brian Stoney, in his contribution to this collection, makes the point powerfully when he suggests that our contemporary social and cultural sense of 'displacement' tends to make us rather uncomfortable with an incarnational faith—that God in Jesus has chosen our world to be God's place also. 'We look for a God who will fix us up, make us feel at home. We want Jesus to be a heavenly king . . . We are hoping to find a better place where we will meet a better God. . .'

One could make the point, however, that this contemporary sense of displacement has merely perpetuated a discomfort with materiality in relation to spirituality that has its roots in a variety of intellectual and social influences in the early Christian centuries. We have always sought to escape particularity, the concrete and especially the messiness of so much of human living in favour of the pure, the detached, the unambiguous. As we perceived God, so we idealized human holiness. In this context, Ignatius Loyola's suggestion that every period of prayer should begin with a 'composition of place' raises important questions for

our whole approach to retreats and prayer (see e.g. Exx 47). Some commentators have suggested that what Ignatius is really talking about is a 'composition of *self* in place'. In the context of retreats or prayer in daily life this clearly takes on a new richness as the place in which I am to be composed, the 'material' of the prayer is necessarily inclusive of every element of life at that point—relationships, work, play, interaction with locality and all the diverse interests that go to make up my own personality.

Many of us have struggled for a long time with a God who was associated with power and distance. Such a God necessarily affected our conceptions of selfhood. A fixed cosmic order meant that stable roles and actions, a spirituality of *stasis*, tended to outweigh the value of our own personal lives in their richness of desire, fluidity and openness to change, to future. This tends to reinforce a spirituality of duty—not merely to fulfil our proper roles in life, our 'vocations', but even our coming to be a person. God imaged in exclusively male terms (and a stereotypical male as well!) was self-possessed, invulnerable, perfect, autonomous and controlled. Objectivity and detachment were the important values of *that* God and of ourselves in God's image. It was therefore difficult, if not impossible, to accept the normal furniture of our lives and experiences—desire, emotion, vulnerability and incompleteness—as the fundamental material of spirituality.

Retreats in daily life seem to be a potent instrument both to undermine unhealthy images of God and to reinforce more positive and more Christian ways of understanding holiness. The opening Principle and Foundation of the Ignatian Exercises (Exx 23) summarizes so much of classical Christian spirituality when it views God as that which alone is to be *enjoyed* or served whereas everything and everyone else ('all created things') may be *used* by the human person 'in as far as they help me in the attainment of my end'. Otherwise, 'I must rid myself of them in as far as they prove a hindrance . . .' And they will always prove a hindrance while we continue to view where God dwells as always 'somewhere else' and our world and lives as a vale of tears rather than a place of grace and presence. A sense of balance and freedom from addiction should be present in any healthy spirituality, however at home it is in the everyday world. However, a spirituality focused on 'daily life' is necessarily forced to reread in quite a radical way this traditional (certainly not uniquely Ignatian!) distinction between God and created reality as well as understandings of detachment.

Retreats in daily life adopt a more extended rhythm and a dynamic that is not simple but woven together from the many dimensions of

human living. This may make such retreats appear to be less coherent than the more compact and intense experience of closed retreats. What daily life and its dynamics do force upon us, willy-nilly, is the experience of *waiting*. Daily life, too, means that our retreat, our spiritual quest, has to cope with *change* as a perpetual and unpredictable reality. It also gives time for proper attention to *desire*. And waiting, coping with change and attention to desire, taken together, will mean substantial shifts in our understanding of God and our ways of responding to that presence.

For one thing, it becomes much harder to conceive of 'the will of God' in abstract and extrinsic terms. God's 'will' is not a single, fixed and arbitrary path, established according to God's own eternal laws, yet hidden from us because God chooses to play some peculiar game of celestial hide-and-seek. Discernment of the truth of our lives is grounded in a belief that the reign of God is something that encompasses every dimension of our being, every element of our lives, the inner, the interpersonal and the social reality that surrounds us. God's desire for us, and desire on our behalf, is discovered to be unconditional love inviting us to step out in faith and hope—a love that is sensed most of all in the messiness. 'The desert', the place of searing encounter, is found after all to be the normal, the ordinary, rather than a place of purity beyond distant mountains.

The experience of waiting, attending to desire and living with a perpetual condition of change also touches upon how we perceive *time*. Not merely where but also when is our destiny to be reached? How do we evaluate the world and human history as contexts for transformation? In other words, theologically, what understanding of eschatology lies behind spirituality and its practices? A spirituality, and retreats based on it, that affirms that God and human perfection are to be found essentially *elsewhere* also tends to remove us from the present moment. God is not only somewhere else but is also not in our time. Of course, a healthy spirituality, linked to a healthy theology, is a delicate balance of living in 'the now' yet in the light of 'the not yet'. The trouble is that so much traditional spirituality (and that includes retreats) has suffered from an overbalanced eschatology that turns its back on the 'here' and 'now' in favour exclusively of the 'elsewhere' and 'future'. The truth surely is that God calls us into our futures only *in and through* the medium of an undistracted commitment to the present.

The idea of desire, so little attended to yet so central to the thinking of spiritual guides such as Augustine, Julian of Norwich and Ignatius Loyola, expresses this paradox admirably. Desire is openness to possibility, and therefore future, yet it is something that can only be

experienced intensely in the moment, in the present. What this means is that only by being deeply grounded in the present moment will possibility open up for us. Only by attentiveness to the particularity of human experiences will the cosmic, the universal, the all-inclusiveness of God be opened to us. Retreats in daily life cannot, of course, produce such things automatically, yet as structures that express attitudes and commitments they may stand for a radically different evaluation of 'the here and now' as the context for God's self-disclosure and our response.

The developing phenomenon of retreats in daily life leaves us with a number of important questions and issues and it is with these that I wish to end. Which spiritual traditions that have not moved in this direction could usefully think along these lines—not merely for practical reasons but for the sake of a renewed spirituality? This is now an ecumenical question in a world where Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Reformed Baptists and Quakers (at least in Britain) are increasingly co-operating in the development of the retreat movement.

In what ways does this approach to retreats raise serious questions about the central emphases of our spiritualities, e.g. about solitude, silence and withdrawal as *prerequisites* for spiritual development? On the other hand, as a friend from the Reformed tradition recently reminded me, she was brought up to believe that people should dutifully seek to 'bloom where they are planted' and no more. Consequently, it is sometimes true that people also need permission to take their relationship with God seriously enough to allow themselves silence and solitude. Thus how can we reframe the continued value of such things in proper balance and in a non-exclusive and non-élitist way? How far do retreats in daily life serve to undermine the assumed superiority of special contexts (e.g. monasteries) for spiritual growth and of the spiritual values and/or techniques that have arisen from such contexts? How far may retreats in daily life, by emphasizing the spiritual quality of all elements of every person's experience, effectively break the stranglehold of patriarchal assumptions about spirituality?

Have our spiritualities been too individualistic and solitary and, therefore, is an individual approach to retreats always and necessarily the best or does a group dimension have more than simply practical advantages? To put it another way, is there a serious question here about our understanding of the human person before God? Do we experience ourselves first and foremost as 'I' and then struggle to make connections or do we experience ourselves essentially as part of a 'We'? And how far is this experience, and the way we relate to God in prayer, inherent in the human condition and how far influenced by social,

cultural and theological conditioning? As Marnie Kennedy points out in her essay, the personalist philosophy of western culture is still a very strong influence in spirituality. This makes interconnectedness a real problem. We need a new mind-set, assisted by new emphases and even structures in spirituality, that is corporate, interdependent yet respectful of the uniqueness of each person.

Has our approach to groups been too conventional and what potential do retreats in daily life have for groups with a 'natural' rather than a narrowly 'churchy' base (e.g. women's groups) or for emerging forms of Basic Christian Communities? Are such retreats good ways of enabling groups to discover new ways of being church? Retreats in daily life empower people by helping them take their own experience seriously in place of imported or imposed experience. They will increasingly run the risk, therefore, of uncomfortably bumping up against the demands and assumptions of religious institutions.

Virtually all the models for retreats in daily life presuppose the availability of a guide or other kind of enabler. What about groups that want a retreat of this kind but cannot find guides? Is an explicitly social dimension a helpful addition to such retreats *on occasion* or is some form of social awareness a prerequisite for a healthy and fully rounded spirituality? How far do retreats in daily life open up possibilities for spiritual ministry by new groups of people and how are we most effectively to respond to training needs? How far do such retreats offer greater opportunities for meeting the needs of spiritual searchers who do not naturally connect with parish or other church-based groupings?

There is 'no salvation outside the world'. We and our prayer need to be fully 'placed' and at home in the complexities of our experience, rather than displaced by an enforced detachment from it. If this is the case, perhaps 'daily life' rather than withdrawal should be the future privileged (though not exclusive) context for retreats. Periods and places of withdrawal and solitude will always be necessary but if 'daily life' rather than withdrawal is the *paradigm* for the spiritual quest then the meaning of such places and times will be different. In that case it is unlikely that retreat houses of the traditional institutional kind can maintain their superior status in the world of retreats for much longer.