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## Contemplative prayer

You may remember Duncan kicking off the year by saying that we want to focus on being maturing disciples who are maturing disciples. He then talked about the 6 traditions of the church that make for a balanced spiritual life to help us get on this journey. In the first sermons we looked at the importance of being incarnational [integrating family and work with faith]. Now we are moving on to look at contemplative prayer. This is the next spoke if you remember the wheel.

I know many of you know a lot about this, but for some of us its not so familiar, so this morning we are going to look at what it is, see who are role models are, look at what happens when we practice it and lastly look at some ways to go about. Then over the next weeks Duncan and Colleen will take us deeper by focusing on specific ways of using it.

### So what is it?

To para phrase Richard Foster it is 'the steady gaze of the soul upon the God who loves us. It's about fire and love. Enveloping comforting love, thru which we are transformed'.

Now some of you are sitting there thinking wow –that sounds wonderful. The rest of you are thinking 'WHAT!!'

So let me rephrase it. Its making space to be with God, to hear him and to receive his love. And it will change you.

We all know about prayer, we know about worshipping God and asking forgiveness and praying those we love - all important things to do but the emphasis here is that the prayer is not directed by us, our needs and thoughts, but by God. Its space we give God.

I want to repeat a sketch that Aldo used. I realise this church is rapidly becoming divided along the lines of those that heard Aldo and those that heard from those that heard Aldo. Sorry if you didn't get to hear him – hopefully they'll be another opportunity. In this case I didn't hear this myself. Barbara related it to me, so this is really stolen work. But I think this sums up the need for contemplation.

Skit.

God wants to be able to tell us how much he loves us. That is what this is about.

### Who are our role models for this?

This is important because there is some confusion about contemplation and meditation – they are seen to be new agey. But we must not let the new agers deprive us of a great Christian tradition.

This is biblical. The Psalmist meditated on God's character [ and over and over you hear God saying to the people 'listen to me' eg: psalm 81]

We also have Elijah keeping lonely vigil over earthquake wind and fire.

And then Jesus. The term contemplative was not around in those days but the tradition certainly builds on his example.

For Jesus his relationship with God was central. It was what underscored everything. There are clear moments of God telling Jesus how much he loved him, namely his baptism and the transfiguration, but Jesus knew throughout his life that he was loved. And he ministered out of that love . It is noteworthy that he started his ministry with time in the wilderness and on countless times he withdrew to a quiet place to pray. Jesus punctuated his work with time alone with the father. These times fed him and gave him the intimacy that he needed. It was an intimacy that the disciples recognized which is why they, good Jewish boys, ask Jesus 'how do we pray?' and what does Jesus start the prayer with? Abba, papa, intimacy.

One day we will be with God, we will continually be conscious of his presence and his love – but until then we need to make times to tune in – as Jesus did.

A lovely example is Mary, Martha's sister, just sitting and listening to Jesus. Putting aside her need to 'do' good things and to receive in return.

John the gospel writer understood this love and intimacy. His gospel displays his understanding. This morning's reading is not an easy one – there is so much to get out of it. But what is important for us this morning is that it reflects Jesus' oneness with the father, our oneness with them, the love between them and God's love for us too.

John is in fact a great example of how knowing we are loved by God changes us. Remember the definition at the beginning said how contemplative prayer changes us? John is an example of this.

John was really quite clumsy at times in the beginning – there was one time when some Samaritans would not receive them and John wanted to send down fire to consume them! [Luke 9] He was way off the plot. and then later asking if he and his brother could sit on his right and left in heaven[ I imagine him waking up at 3 am thinking I can't believe I asked Jesus that] But at the end he had such an understanding of Jesus that he was able to write his incredible gospel as he did.

What changed him? Time with Jesus. Intimate time with him. John was one of the 3 to witness Jesus raise the little girl, he was one of the 3 to see the transfiguration, one of the 3 that Jesus asked to stay awake for him in Gethsemane. These events changed John, deepened his understanding – but more than that perhaps, John knew he was loved. He referred to himself as the one that Jesus loved. This may have been a literary device but Foster doesn't think so. Foster is sure that John knew he was loved and that is why he refers to himself as that and that that is what brought the change in him.

We also change in response to God's love for us. Our love for him grows out of his love for us – and that leads to love for one another.

And John is clear that the love we have for God is an answering love. God so loved the world.... John tells us. That is what we respond to.

And this is where the contemplative tradition is so helpful. It puts things in the right order. We have a tendency to do good in order to make ourselves worthy and loveable. But we can't earn it and if we stopped doing and focus on being loved then we would be able to do so much more and so much better. Our actions would be joyful, sustainable, inspired. Fuelled by love.

I was wary to include this because the point of contemplation is simply to receive – if we see it as a means to an end we degrade it. But the inevitable outcome of knowing and receiving God's love is that we want to give love out too. So that answers the question as to what happens when we practice contemplation. We want to give.

If we look at the great contemplatives they all gave so much back. For instance, Anthony of Egypt in the 3<sup>rd</sup> C spend 20 yrs in the desert but that was followed by an amazing ministry of healing, counseling and teaching. He was an incredibly wise man who had access to all walks of life. What he did he could not have achieved without his time of preparation alone with God.

Unfortunately there was a movement that really got it wrong. Simeon the Stylite spent several years tied to the top of a 20 metre pillar in the desert. this was his contemplation. The rope caused sores and he became infested with worms. Eventually he died.[old age?] His asceticism was applauded and emulated by many people.

Luther and Calvin denounced it and in fact contemplative movement fell out of favour because of this – but, as Bill Hybels points out, they themselves were formed thru contemplation. They may have seen the dangers of being obsessive, but withdrawing to be alone and listen to God would have been 2<sup>nd</sup> nature to them. So we need to get the balance right. Tying yourself to the top of a pillar in the middle of the namib probably won't help you – or anyone.

The monks however, withdrew from the rush of life and the corruption of the church and then put so much back into the community. That is a balance we need to achieve.

But no I am not suggesting we all rush off to join a monastery or convent either, we are not all called to that. But we are called to withdraw so that we can listen to God.

Especially because we live in a prevailing culture that says we must do things all the time. Do you remember Colleen's great sermon on rest. She said that when God does lead us to green pastures all we want to do is mow the lawn!

And not only do we fill our lives with action but we fill it with noise.

I heard 2 weeks ago that for the first time in SA history there are more people living in the cities than in the country side. We are living in an increasingly urbanized environment.

Even if retired we can find it hard to escape noise and bustle. We are surrounded by traffic and tv's and radios and to add to that some of us have cells with sms's that beep their arrival and laptops which make sure we are always available, always communicating with someone somewhere.

What about God?

When are we available for him to communicate with us?

This is our last question this morning:

We have looked at what this tradition is about, we've looked at our role models in this and how they were changed by it – what we need to know now is how to go about it -

how do we make sure we can withdraw to listen to God and know his love for us in the busyness of life?

Well how do we listen to anyone?

Firstly we have to shut up.

Quieten our world and ourselves. You know how a good listener listens. Not distracted by the sms beep, not watching someone behind you.

Those of us that are involved with small children get ample opportunity for this. I pick up my youngest from school. She's 10 and is still under the illusion that Graeme and I are relevant. I know we don't have long. Anyway I pick her up until recently after a v full morning at work. My head is full of all sorts of unfinished things and I am now in the pick up time traffic with lots of other parents completing for traffic lanes and limited parking space. When I have managed to get there I always ask how was your day –and she'll say I'll tell you in the car. This is cause she knows I may see a mother I need to greet or the traffic woman to thank - and she wants undivided attention.

We get in and whilst getting back into the traffic and completing for lane space she tells me every detail of her day. I have learnt to turn the radio off [even off FMR] and to drive on auto pilot so that I can focus. So if you spot me on the road around 2.30 just give me lane space. You know how children speak – its not always clear.

I have to keep quiet and zone out the rest of the distractions otherwise I won't hear properly.

We need to keep quiet and zone out other distractions or we won't be able to hear God properly.

Here are some ideas to try if you haven't.

Firstly, experiment with silence.

Just 5 minutes. Sit with God. don't try to achieve anything or hear anything just sit. You'll find thoughts fly in – give them to him [what shall do that meeting God?] then let it go. Have a note pad for reminders.

Don't expect great tracts of wisdom – you're not aiming to end this 5 mins with an updated 10 commandments, the point is to just relax and be. In my experience you will find great benefits later [ strong presence of God unexpectedly later, ability to enter worship more fully] but I can't know what.

Or

Make your next journey a time of silence. Turn off your cell. Don't use your lap top. Don't turn on the car radio. Enjoy the quiet. So that's quiet.

Try reading differently. Don't read in order to understand or to finish but to hear. Read slowly, pause at whatever you feel the

drawn to. Even if you don't know why. Esp if you don't know why. Know God is reading it with you. let words and phrases sit with you. Yu can do this with the Bible or with a devotional classic like Augustines confessions or Julian of Norwich – but something that resonates.

Or if you can, come to the Lenten meditations being run here on Thursdays.

Pray the same prayer over and over for 10 mins a day. The well used one is `Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me' or maybe `create in me a clean heart, Oh God'. the point is to focus our thoughts on God so that God can enter out hearts.

And I think we should all try this last one – Holy Leisure. This isn't about silence but rest. Letting God talk to us thru rest. Changing gear – letting God into the frenetic rush of life, or letting go our need to achieve and accomplish all the time.

Take a nap.

Spend an hour visiting a friend or neighbor about nothing important.

Sit in an airport or coffee shop and watch. Observe. Watch others with God.

Take a walk – not for exercise but for the sheer joy of it.

Listen to the birds – not study migration patterns but to hear them.

Take a bath not a shower.

Waste time for God.

Foster even suggests that you don't pray for a day!! How radical is that!

But Eugene Peterson in his introduction to the Letters to the Hebrews says that too much religion is a bad thing. Religion is all about our well intentioned efforts to get it together for God. When in fact the most important thing is always what God has done, is doing and will do for us.

Contemplative prayer is about making space in order to receive that.

Jesus gave us the story of the Prodigal Son. We all know it. We know about the loving father looking out for, waiting for the

wayward son to just turn back. He didn't have to be perfect before accepted back. The father couldn't wait to tell him that he loved him. We know all that but do we live by it? Is that really the image of God by which you operate? Or does policeman plod [as Duncan's spoken about] creep in?

We may well feel useless, flawed, unforgivable [how bad is that for a Christian to admit] but he loves us. But he made us worthy. God wants to tell us how much we re loved and boy do we need to hear it!

We know that children need to know they are loved. When they are brought up with that assurance they take wings and soar. God wants to give us that assurance so that we can take wings and soar.

I want to end with a poem that I love. Many of you will know it – several of you have heard me use it before. It has a lot to say about letting God tell us he loves us. Its by