

7. SPIRITUALITY, WORSHIP AND SIMPLICITY

In Genesis 2 the first man is made from the clay, breathed into by God, and he becomes a living being. The Hebrew concept of a person was of an integrated whole. And while, in its intellectual travels, Western society has often worked with the idea of people as bodies inhabited by souls or spirits, in the twentieth century many disciplines pointed us back to thinking of the person as a whole, a gestalt. What we do with our bodies affects our thinking, our emotions and our imaginations. How we feel affects what we can do. Mental health and physical health are not unconnected.

Contemplation

As we grow from childhood our understanding of the world develops. With the help of others we make sense of the various things we experience or find out about and we develop our ideas. We also develop various skills: speaking, reading, writing, driving, singing, carving wood, playing instruments. We also hopefully learn how to get on with other people, so that we can live together in communities of one form or another. But there is a fourth way in which we engage with the world. We can reflect on it, appreciate it, be aware of ourselves and the world we are part of and sense our place within it. And we can sense beyond and within the world the One who calls it into being.

The Beginning of Wisdom

In the book of Proverbs and in the Psalms it is written 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom.' (Ps 111.10; Prov 1.7; Prov 9.10)) An awareness of the world in its complexity and magnitude can generate fear. The mystery of growth in the Spring, the intimate interconnection of bacterial, insect, animal and plant life, all within weather systems affected by the movement of the planet round the sun and the slow movements of the earth's rocks; all this can produce a sense of awe. And yet the One with whom we are ultimately concerned is the One who brings all that into being.

But Jesus and the prophets say, 'Fear not.' Not because God is less than we imagined but because God's attitude towards us is love. God loves us, dust that we are, and so we matter. God loves this world that is his creation, and so it matters. God is continually at work within and beyond the world, so there is hope. God is always more than we think and beyond our imagination. We can have a sense of awe as we contemplate God's creation, as we see God's love in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, and as we are caught up in the power of God's Spirit. And this is the basis of wisdom.

Theology

In doing theology we are trying to think and talk about God. Conversations, letters, sermons, discussions, the writing of books, thoughts about God on a walk: these are all theology. And it is important. If we are to engage our faith with the theories and ideas of our society, whether in science, economics, business practice, education, or community life, we need to do theology. We need to think and talk about God.

Spirituality

In prayer and worship we are engaging with God, or we are allowing ourselves to be aware that God is engaged with us. There is a place for thinking about God within worship, and in prayer. We do not switch off our minds in prayer, but prayer is much more than thought. So it is that our praying can involve hearing music, seeing pictures or lights, the taste of bread and wine, the feel of water, and the movement of our bodies as well as words and silence. All these are means by which we can return to our place within the life of God. In our worship we offer our whole selves: dust into which God has breathed life; people, with all our strengths and weaknesses, successes and sins; but loved by God.

A particular contribution

In all the discussion, debate and activity in response to the ecological crisis we have here a particular contribution to make. And it is one which many people are looking for the church to make. Partly it is a matter of providing resources so that people can pray and worship, and helping them to do this.

In doing this we need liturgies and ways of praying which relate to the world as God's creation and which can gather up people's thoughts and concerns, their feelings of fear, anxiety, hopefulness, and their sense of sin. Our contribution is also a matter of having the courage to face the realities of the crisis with faith that there is no state or situation in which God is not present and that nothing can separate us from his love. And there is the possibility of passing through that darkness to living with the joy, freedom, playfulness and hope which God alone can give.

Jesus society

Our life in God is a life in community. Most of us live in a number of communities: family, work, church, locality, nation. A community that knows the love of God as it is shown by Jesus is going to grow into his kind of society. It will show wisdom by trusting, handle leadership by serving, handle offenders by forgiving, handle money by sharing, and handle violence by

suffering. Its members will have a new attitude toward other people and toward nature. With a sense of the continual creative love of God it will be moving on from its own failures to doing new things, and doing things differently. That is what the church is called to be.

Simplicity

In his classic book, *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster describes the root of this freedom, joy and playfulness as simplicity. And he suggests that simplicity has an inward and an outward aspect.

Inwardly it is a spiritual liberation: a liberation from the need to accumulate, keep, hoard and consume: a liberation that comes from a recognition that all we have is a gift from God and all we are is God's creation. And the God who gives and creates is One who loves us.

Outwardly simplicity will show itself in a lifestyle which is satisfied with enough, which gives freely, which is critical of propaganda and avoids addictions, which can enjoy without owning, which speaks plainly, which avoids the oppression or exploitation of other people, and which is focussed on the Kingdom of God.

This is a way of living which is needed now. But it cannot be induced by laws and rules. Tax penalties and legislation can to some extent change the way that society operates and can curb excesses, but the crucial change is going to be both outward and inward. In the gospel of Jesus Christ and in the resources of the church we can continually discover the words, the insights, and the means of changing lives for a changing world. And we can help others do so.

Historical resources

As well as the scriptures we have a vast treasure of resources in our liturgies, music, buildings, and traditional practices of prayer. The writings of many Christians who have gone before us contain great wisdom and insight in their prayers, letters, books, poems and hymns. Whilst remaining within our own Anglican tradition we can also draw on the resources of others.

People are all different and so different ways of praying are helpful to different people. Often as someone explores the various spiritual traditions of the churches they will discover, among their variety, ways of praying which are helpful to them. And congregations are often helped to see things in new ways from the words and practices of other denominations or movements.

As people turn to the church for help we need to ask, 'What will help them see the world as it is?' 'What will help them see the world as valuable to God?' 'What will help us all grow in faith, hope, love and wisdom?'

For some people what is helpful will come from the Reformed or the Orthodox traditions. For others it will involve Franciscan or Celtic practices, or learning from Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen or other contemplatives. For corporate worship many

denominations have helpful resources. Our own *Times and Seasons* contains much that many will find helpful.

But as well as the resources of the church there is the world itself. We are called to work for the healing as well as the care of creation. But there are also ways that creation can heal us. Many people are intuitively aware of this when they go to the hills, to the sea or to a garden to find space to reflect and a place to become more centred.

New developments

For many years the Creation had little attention in Christian prayer and worship. The world was often seen as a veil of tears from which we would one day escape. As the ecological crisis forces us to take Creation seriously many new liturgies and forms of prayer are being developed. Some of these are being developed in school worship. The Iona Community has drawn material from the Celtic and Reformed traditions but adapted it in an urban context. The ancient practice of pilgrimage has a revival, and people are also developing the practice of Stations into other settings, with nature providing the setting for reflection and prayer. Congresbury Parish Church are developing a prayer and healing garden with a listening and counselling service.

Returning to the Centre

For some centuries the world view of Western society has had humanity at the centre. Everything else on the planet was seen as a natural resource for humanity and had value only in as much as it was valuable to people. In reaction to this some are now putting forward a view that the life of the world has value in itself and we are but a part of it.

What the Bible presents us with, and which our traditional theology develops, is a view of the world as God's creation, in which humanity has a part. It is this that we need to maintain in our thinking, our praying, and our living in difficult times.

We engage with complex issues. Life is not simple. There are no easy answers. But we are offered a way of living simply in which we can learn God's wisdom and share his creative love.



AS I AWAITED
THE 5:25 I HAD
PLENTY OF TIME
TO REFLECT ON
THE ENERGY SAVED
BY THE CANCELLATION
OF THE 3:55