

Lent 3 2024 TG **DISCERNMENT AND SILENCE** dtw

Three Saturdays ago, Bishop Stephen Pickard shared a poem with us by R S Thomas. I would like to share another one with you today by the same poet:

THE BRIGHT FIELD

*I have seen the sun break through to illumine a small field for a while
and gone my way and forgotten it. But that was the pearl of great price,
the one field that had the treasure in it.*

I realise now that I must give all that I have to possess it.

Life is not hurrying on to a receding future, nor hankering after an imagined past.

*It is the turning aside like Moses to the miracle of the lit bush,
to a brightness that seemed as transitory as your youth once,
but is the eternity that awaits you.*

Today we are given to read Psalm 19, a most rich, beautiful, and poignant Creation Psalm.

The heavens declare... (verses read from Order of Service) Matthew is preaching about this Psalm in St John's Cathedral, Brisbane today. The writer of this Psalm must have been in an awe-filled space, oblivious to many worldly distractions, to compose these magnificent verses. We too need spaces in our normally hectic lives, and quality time-out for a 'spiritual stock-take' to discover what God is doing in our lives, or what God *wants* to do or say.

I have had the privilege of attending, leading, or sharing the leadership of many retreats in my life and ministry. This year I have been invited to lead the St Peter's Cathedral Retreat at Sevenhill in September, assisted by Deborah. In her book *Holy Listening*, Margaret Guenther observes that a Retreat 'helps in maintaining a healthy perspective. A retreat is not synonymous with a vacation; the former has an intentional austerity. The radically simplified environment discourages inner clutter. In most religious houses there is 'nothing to do' – no games, no distractions, no loud noises, no TV, no busyness. Instead, there is silence, simple food, adequate space, and the security of being surrounded by a praying community. For those of us who get trapped in crowded schedules and fall into the dangerous and sinful delusion that we, the administrative assistants of a well-meaning but inefficient CEO God, are really the ones who hold up the world, even a brief retreat is a powerful corrective. When we have slowed down, we are able to look at ourselves and smile at our pitiful little constructs. Our humility is restored; at least for a little while, we are reminded of our true place in the order of things.' (unq) This is the foundation to what is called 'discernment'; it can only be found by 'the meditation of our hearts' (Ps 19.14)

One big context for real discernment is silence. Think about it – quietness – rest – peace – stillness. How do you feel? For some the feeling may be uncomfortable, or scary, or disconcerting. For others, perhaps the feeling is relaxation, an unwinding; a chance to 'chill-out'. Or maybe a bit of both? Most people aren't used to silence, particularly city-folk where the world is mainly a noisy place. I love getting to the country just to experience less noise, or even our beach house at Aldinga where I do most of my writing. But even in quieter places, we can still fill them with noise. Most of the people I see riding or running around the parklands have devices stuck in their ears and they miss the beautiful sounds of nature, let alone perhaps the opportunity to say "good morning" to someone else - in their own individualised worlds. Some noises even make us feel secure, like traffic at night, the ticking of a clock, the chiming of bells... In their absence one can feel

quite alone, even afraid. One of the hardest things that some people find in silence is facing themselves - having a good, hard look. A retreat is a great opportunity for a thorough personal spiritual workout and silence is its gymnasium. Silence is the very essence of the spiritual life. We are called into the quiet space to develop and love the art of silence. It is the place where God can most be heard and therefore the place where discernment is gifted the most. Our first reading this morning was the Ten Commandments including observing the Sabbath Rest. That touches on this too. God rested on the seventh day and Sunday is our sabbath. When I was young the shops weren't open, sport only happened in the afternoon. Now, Sunday is just like every other day.

This silence is, in fact, much more than a lack of noise; indeed, some of the great spiritual doctors could find silence deep within, even in the midst of rage, the cries of prisoners, the howling of wolves... It is an inner contentment – an inner searching – for God – alone with God – an emptiness to be filled with divine presence – a darkness to be flooded with divine light – a thirst to be quenched with Living Water. Solitude, Silence, Spirit...these three things are intertwined. And they are so creative, so positive, so edifying for the human soul! And they lead to true discernment.

I'm sure you know that many of the great spiritual movements have begun in silence and solitude. The first thing that Jesus did after his baptism was to go into the desert, fast and pray to discern the Father's will. He didn't attend a Purpose-Driven Church seminar! The only way that we can effectively be with God, pray to God and most importantly, let God speak to us, is in silence – in being apart. We have to make time to do this. A retreat or Quiet Day in a sense is 'enforced' time; the real challenge is to find good slabs of it back at the coal face of ordinary life. As we make the time to be with those we love, to do the things we like to do, so our divine lover bids us come apart, be still, know and discern the path to walk in. The founder of the Society of the Sacred Mission (where I was formed in theology at St Michael's House, Craferes), Herbert Kelly, included within his *Principles*, 'The one who cannot keep silence is not content with God'. He also wrote, 'God's voice speaks most often in silence'. Some bible texts that come to mind are: 'Be still, and know that I am God' Ps 46.10 'In quietness and trust shall be your strength' Isa 30.15 'the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake... and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire, and after the fire a sound of sheer silence' or in another transl. 'a still small voice' 1 Kings 19.11-12.

Who loved a time apart, a time of quietness, more than our Saviour Jesus himself? Jesus had a spontaneous and unbroken communion with the Father, yet he constantly found it necessary to put aside definite times for prayer, quietness and contemplation. Jesus loved to pray; it was like breathing to him. Remember, it was only after a whole night of prayer that Jesus discerned, and then chose his apostles from among his followers. It wasn't until he had prayed to the Father that he told his disciples about his coming suffering and death. The 'pressure of business' was for Jesus not an indication for more sleep but for more prayer and discernment. That Jesus should have to find silence, rest, and space to pray and discern is the greatest indication that his followers *must*. Jesus had to put aside times for quietness and communion with the Father in order to renew those great spiritual reserves that he needed to live powerfully for God, and not only this; he counted those times alone with his Abba-Father as the most hallowed of the day. The joy of silence, prayer, meditation, contemplation is simply the joy that springs from the sense of God's presence and it is Christ himself, in union with the Holy Spirit, who gives us this joy. This is the pearl of great price; this is the treasure hidden in your heart. Dare to find it and claim it.