

Cultivating Love and Desire (III)

Two weeks ago, in the first of this series, *Cultivating Love and Desire*, I shared with you my frustration at the elusiveness of sustaining a relationship with God which empowered me to live as I really wanted to but seemed incapable of doing. I finished by quoting the words of Saint Paul, who, having lamented this very dilemma in his own life, then urges us to lay hold of the *life in the Spirit* and our future hope in Christ.

The question I addressed last week was: how does this happen? How do we move Christian spirituality and ethics away from impossible idealism and appropriate this life in Christ's Spirit to ourselves? How can we cultivate this devotion to God, this *empowering* love of the Spirit filled life? How can I make my relationship with God as real and life giving as it is with my lover or family or friend, so that I do what the law calls out for me to do? And how can what the law requires become what I *really* desire to do, so that I can actually live an everyday spiritual life which sustains and nurtures – a Jesus centred spirituality of the road??

In answer I suggested this had to do with three things: '**revelation**', '**encounter**', and '**surrender**'.

Living a satisfying, sustainable spiritual life in God, is to do with **revelation** because if we are to live such a life we need to know the truth about ourselves, the truth about our situation and the truth about God. According to the scriptures, we are incapable of seeing this truth without help. Rather, it is God's Word, *working within us*, that reveals this truth to us. Put differently: The basis of an empowered Christian spirituality is being *formed in* and *by* God's word so that we "see" things as Jesus does.

John's Gospel, of course, links this also to the work of the Spirit of Truth,¹

the one who comes along side to show what we need to know. Yet this kind of revelation is no passive, mystical experience. Rather, it involves robust engagement with both the scriptures and God's world. In this wrestling, out of the conflict, we are formed in God's word.

Secondly, I argued, this life in the Spirit has to do with **encounter** with Jesus – an encounter which overwhelms me and elicits from me a sense of deep *gratitude* for all that Christ has done for me and is my inheritance in him. The paradigm here was our Gospel reading of Jesus' encounter with the sinful woman at the house of Simon. We could also cite Zacchaeus' response to Jesus, where in joy this deep sinner, put things right with those he defrauded our times over.² In either case, we see that *gratitude* is the motive force in fostering our desire *for* God and empowering our life *in* God.

Thirdly, we saw that this spirituality was to do with **surrender**: a life given over to following Jesus. This is what Paul means by life in the Spirit. According to him, this the life in the Spirit, is the Spirit *controlled* life – life not enslaved to our human nature with its superficial desires and broken ideals, but a life lived in *accordance* with the Spirit of God;³ and this Spirit controlled life is generated from the Spirit of God *dwelling within* us, giving us the *desire* for *intimacy* with God – indeed, to call God Matua. What's more, says Paul, it is the Spirit's mysterious working within us which enables us to pray and so sustains us in this life in Christ.

In summary then, so far I have argued that a sustainable spirituality, one that nurtures and empowers, brings life and freedom instead of guilt and bondage, will centre around the dynamics of '*revelation*', '*encounter*' and '*surrender*'. This week I want to briefly look at the fourth ingredient: '*belonging*'

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In the first part of our reading today [this evening] from Paul's letter to the Roman Christians, we heard how this life in the Spirit is embedded in the eternal purposes of God. God works all things "together for good... for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose". And Paul tells us this purpose was to form a large family in the image of his Son.⁴

This is no mere theological side note. Rather it is an essential requirement of the life in the Spirit Paul has just described, since the Spirit filled life is *sustained* by God, not by us. Whereas we are mired in conflicting desires and failed self improvement programmes, in Christ we find a liberty that lasts and is satisfying since it is achieved by God. Paul challenges:

Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is *God* who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is *Christ Jesus*, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

(Romans 8:33-34)

Paul is saying that it is in the activity of God, purposed in eternity and enacted in Christ, which secures our life in God against the vicissitudes of life. *Nothing*, Paul asserts, can separate us from God's *love* as found in Christ, through whom "we are more than conquerors".⁵

Belonging to such a family whose foundations stretch from the beginning to the end of time and out side of time, gives us strength.

In the next two chapters Paul looks at the veracity of this claim. "After all", it could be asked, "God made these same promises to the children of Israel and where are they now in God's scheme of things?" Paul argues that God has by no means finished with Israel but rather that belonging to the people of God has been opened up to all. The important thing is not privilege, but our new life found *in* Christ.

Three times in chapter eight Paul speaks of being “indwelt” by God’s Holy Spirit.⁶ In chapter twelve, where he again comes back to the life in the Spirit, Paul emphasises the *belonging* that this implies.

Paul uses the imagery of the ‘body’ to make his point. The key verse here is verses 4:

“...so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are *members* one of another” (Romans 12:4)

Because we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit we belong to one another. This has implications for how we then live. Paul goes on to describe the contours of the Spirit life of the community:

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, but be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all... ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink’... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

(Romans 12:9-21)

So, for Paul, this is what being “members” of each other means; it means

belonging; and it is a belonging to each other which flows from our belonging to God as those indwelt by God's Spirit. Such a belonging is empowering – or at least it should be if genuine. Here is a description of a happy revolution that turned the Roman empire on its head.

For Paul this is expressed in the Lord's supper which he talks about in his first letter to the Corinthians. For Paul it's a kind of enacted parable.

There are mundane actions which break open a new reality as we participate in what's going on. There is the blessing of the wine, and there is the breaking of the bread; and there is the vertical and the horizontal aspects to this.

When we set aside the wine and break the bread we are in fact sharing in the blood and body of Christ. "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all *share* the one bread", writes Paul.⁷ The word *share* here is *koinonia*. It means a sharing of something in common with others and is also translated as "communion". The idea is one of mutual participation. It has the sense of a giving of ones self.

In Acts 2: 44 and 42 we read that after the day of pentecost "all who believed were together and had all things in common; [and] they *devoted* themselves to the apostle's teaching (the word), and *koinonia* (fellowship), the breaking of bread and the prayers." So here are the same elements found in the Spirit community straight after pentecost which Paul talks of in his letters to the Roman and Corinthian believers – word, sacrament, fellowship and prayer.

At core in the drinking of the wine and the eating of the bread, then, is not only communion with God, but communion with each other as members of one another through the indwelling Spirit of Jesus . It is this communion which gives the 'other' *power* in their individual life in

Christ while also *enabling* them to ‘belong’ – to Christ and to each other.

This is why for Paul, the wealthy believers not sharing with the poorer ones was such a travesty and so serious. How could there be any participation in the life of God without participation in the lives of one another? Such a spirituality negates the meaning of being indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Ultimately it *disempowers* any attempt made by those involved – both those sharing and those being denied – to lay hold of a truly liberating spirituality in their daily life and witness.

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So how does this relate to *our* quest for a sustainable spirituality?

On this All Saints sunday, I can’t help but think of the radical implications of Paul’s argument for our life in Christ. Many of the world’s poor live in the same areas of the globe where our own church, not to mention the other ancient churches and the rapidly growing new churches, are concentrated. The typical Anglican is black, she is under 20 and she lives in East or West Africa. The only thing which separates her and us is geography. We when gather around the Lord’s table to share in the body and blood of Christ, we gather with her united in the Spirit. Yet *how can we* unless we also share the bread and wine with her, not to mention her children and extended family?

This leads to the topic of my sermon next week: prophecy against the subversion of desire and the opportunity this brings for a us to practice a genuinely liberating spirituality of the road.

¹ Jn.16:4b-15.

² Lk,19:1-9.

³ Rm.8:5.

⁴ Rm.8:28-29.

⁵ Rm.8:37.

⁶ Rm.8:9-11.

⁷ 1Cor.10:16-17.