

Cultivating Love & Desire (II)

Last week in my sermon, *Cultivating Love and Desire – toward a spirituality of the road I want to own*, 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 life, then urges us to lay hold of the *life in the Spirit* and our future hope in Christ.¹ Paul's summary statement is as profound as it is to the point:

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. To set the mind on the sinful nature is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit, is life and peace.

(Rom.8:5-6)

But 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 spirituality of the road?

I want to suggest that the answers to these questions have to do with four things: '**revelation**', '**encounter**', '**surrender**' and '**belonging**'.

Today [this evening], I want to deal with just the first three of these, coming back to the fourth in my next sermon.

...

Firstly, as we noted last week, if we are to live such a life in God we need to know the truth about ourselves, the truth about our situation and the truth about God. In a world that tells us what we *think* we want to hear so as to sell us something, this sort of truth is hard to come by. It is not through therapy or self improvement techniques, nor “relationships”, nor the ad-man, nor the internet, nor the academic, nor the politician that we learn this truth. It is through a ***revelation*** of Christ.

Both the Psalmist and the writer to the Hebrew Christians say that it is God’s word, *working within us*, that reveals this truth to us.² Saint Peter tells us that it is this same living and enduring word of revelation through which we are born anew ³ and Paul again echoes this throughout his writings.⁴ Jesus said that it is his word which cleanses us ⁵ and that it is the one who hears his words and responds obediently to them, who not only builds their house upon a rock able to withstand life’s vicissitudes ⁶ but is enabled to live a fruitful life in him.⁷

The Evangelist John tells us that it is Jesus the word who reveals the Father to us ⁸ and brings us life.⁹ The writer to the Colosians also affirms that this comes as a *gift* from God; that it is through the word of Christ living in our hearts by faith that the saints can comprehend God’s love – and live it:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and
admonish one another with all wisdom... (Col.3:16)

Put simply: The basis of an empowered Christian spirituality is being *formed in and by* God’s word.

This formation is easy task. As with Jacob wrestling with God all night,¹⁰ revelation from God does not come cheaply, it involves sweat and engagement and may even leave us wounded. Fleeing from his exploitive father-in-law who had virtually enslaved him, Jacob faced the even more

daunting prospect of running into his alienated and possibly vengeful brother whom he had previously cheated. Jacob knew, in a kind of way, he was under God's blessing but it wasn't obvious to him how this was to play out. He was fearful. He wanted to know more of God and his place in God's economy. So Jacob wrestled with the mysterious man who came to him in the night of his doubt and anguish; and he wouldn't let go.

We too need to wrestle with God as we travel, facing life's ambiguities on the way. We need to search out God with all our hearts; and when we do so, says the Prophet Jeremiah, God shall let us find him and will restore us as his people.¹¹

God's word to us is found through scripture. Being formed in Christ then, means taking our scriptures seriously, paying attention as we "read, mark, learn and inwardly digest" them (as the prayer book puts it). This means not accepting superficial "applications" and easy congruencies – "the bible says", will not always do, not at first reading anyway. We need to discuss meanings vigorously, to debate them like they really mattered; and yes the meanings of the text do matter and, because of this, we need to attend to the text carefully, even while we embrace this struggle as an open ended and, at times, ambiguous process.

Jacob was not, in the end, told the Divine Being's name. In the struggle, however, Jacob *was* given a *new* name and with it a new identity – he became 'Israel', "the one who strives" with God and humanity.¹²

So the first necessity of a sustainable spirituality, is 'revelation'; and this revelation will involve robust engagement with both the scriptures and God's world. In this wrestling, out of the conflict, we will be formed in God's word.

...

Secondly, 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.¹³ Our Colosians verse we heard before finishes, “...sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with *gratitude* in your hearts to God”.¹⁴ Gratitude is the motive force in fostering our desire *for* God and empowering our life *in* God.

The paradigm here is our Gospel reading of Jesus’ encounter with the sinful woman at the house of Simon.¹⁵ The woman sees the truth of who Jesus is while others miss this. She senses in him God’s grace and forgiveness at work and she wants this in her life. Even her humiliation before the judgmental Pharisee cannot quench her desire to reach out and touch this man in whom she finds acceptance. So she opens herself to Jesus in the only way she knows – sensually, provocatively and without shame. Jesus doesn’t stop her. So she weeps in heart felt *gratitude*. This is her repentance.

This connects directly to our first point: We cannot be grateful if we do not know the truth about Jesus ¹⁶ – who he is, what he has done for us. This is only made real within me as it is revealed in God’s word to me. My desire for Jesus, to follow him, to live like him, to be with him, is based on God’s gracious and mysterious initiative of self revelation in this same Jesus whom I find in scripture.¹⁷ As public as this revelation is, however, it is also deeply *personal*. This is what empowers me to live as I want in Christ.

In our reading from Romans, Paul puts this need for such a personal encounter with Jesus this way, when he says:

You, however, are controlled *not* by the sinful nature but by the *Spirit*, if the Spirit of God lives in you. [For] anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

(Rom.8:9)

...

This brings us to my third point: this life in the Spirit, this spirituality of the road, is about **surrender**. We're not told where the woman goes after her encounter with Jesus. She knew she was a sinner – even if a profoundly forgiven one. I suspect, that in Jesus' absence, her issue would have been the same as ours. How can this encounter be sustained in the every-day, particularly one where we feel separated from God?

Later in Luke's Gospel, now on the road to Jerusalem, Jesus challenges those who have met him to give themselves entirely over to following him.¹⁸ His call is for a disciplined life – a life offered up, surrendered to him. Years later, Paul urges the same response from the Christians in cosmopolitan Rome.¹⁹

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a *living sacrifice*, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

(Rom.12:1-2)

There's little talk of the "spiritual disciplines" here. As Bonhoeffer would observe, there is simply a call to discipleship without qualification. We need to just do it. When we *will* to please Jesus from the depths of our hearts, he will give us our heart's desire.²⁰

"Easy to say, but hard to do", you might say. And aren't we in danger here of again falling back into a type of Pelagianism, the very form of "new year's resolution" ethics and "self talk" we recognised last week as a dead end? It can be: it depends on where the ground of that willing is located...

It is noteworthy that this is just where Paul goes in today's reading from

Roman's 8, which immediately follows his "struggling with sin" discussion we looked at last week.

According to Paul, life in the Spirit, is the Spirit *controlled* life – life not enslaved to our human nature but lived in accordance with the Spirit of God;²¹ and this Spirit controlled life is generated from the Spirit of God *dwelling within* us, giving us the desire for *intimacy* with God. It is by the Spirit that we call out to God as a child calls for their dad.²²

For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ... (Rom.8:15-17)

Note from how this work of God in us is profoundly Trinitarian in nature. The Father, the Son and Spirit are all working here to set us free from a defeated life of bondage, into what Paul calls "the glorious liberty"²³ which is our inheritance in God.

Just the same, Paul emphasises the Spirit's role in sustaining and empowering us in our life in Christ; and for Paul this is especially so in the Spirit's mysterious working within us enabling us to pray. It is in open hearted prayer that we receive the first fruits of the Spirit even as we "groan inwardly" awaiting our redemption along with the rest of creation. When we pray in the Spirit we enter into the very life of God in Christ.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints

according to the will of God.

(Rom.8:26-27)

This Spirit prayer, then, has its origin in the initiative of God. Again, it is active in character even as it sustains us in our journey. But, according to John, we are at the same time responsible in the dynamic – there is a kind of dialectic at work, it is all God's work and it is all ours:

“If you love me you will obey what I command... Whoever has my commands and obeys them, they are the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love them and show myself to them”.

(Jn.14:15,21)

...

In summary then, I am arguing 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'. Next week I want to discuss the magic ingredient: 'belonging'.

¹ See Rom.8:1-28 where he devotes a large part of his letter to this.

² Ps.119:9-16; Heb.4:12.

³ 1Pt.1:22.

⁴ Eph.6:17; Rom.10:17; 1Cor.15:2; Eph.1:13;

⁵ Jn.15:3.

⁶ Matt.7:24.

⁷ Jn.15:7.

⁸ Jn.1:1-14; 15:3-5; 17:20-23.

⁹ Jn.10:10.

¹⁰ Gen.32:24-32.

¹¹ Jer.29:13-14a.

¹² For an expanded treatment of this, see Kenneth Leech, *'Spirituality and Pastoral Care'*, 1986, Sheldon Press, London: Chapter 1 – Spirituality and the Word of God.

¹³ Rm.8:14-17.

¹⁴ Col.3:16.

¹⁵ Lk.7:36-50.

¹⁶ Rm.10:8-15.

¹⁷ Jn.17:6-8.

¹⁸ Lk.9:57-62; 18:18-29.

¹⁹ Rom.12:1-2. See also the rest of the chapter.

²⁰ Lk.11:5-10; 18:4-8.

²¹ Rom.8:5.

²² Rom.8:14-17.

²³ Rom.8:21.