

# Celebration LINK

July 2011

## Materialism and the Spiritual Life

I had a mental throwback to university days a few weeks ago when I was thinking about the concept of 'union with God'. It was a logic class, where we learnt all about necessary and sufficient conditions. I was reminded of it whilst thinking about the relationship between monastic life and the knowledge of God.

Is monastic life a necessary or a sufficient condition for true knowledge of God? It is not a sufficient condition, clearly, for it is perfectly possible to live as a monastic and yet for one's heart to be far away from God. But is it a necessary condition? The spiritual tradition in Christianity would tend to say so, certainly, or at least most of the literature up to the twentieth century could give that impression. But perhaps that is because the bulk of it was written by people who themselves lived a monastic life.

The argument is fairly clear. God is Spirit, and therefore although we may well use the ordinary language of humanity to talk about him it is evident that he is not attached to the things of the material world in the way that we are. If we want to know him in the deepest sense possible, we need to extricate ourselves from our attachments to material things. In a sense the monastic life is a way of giving God a helping hand. By renouncing material benefits the monastic voluntarily puts himself or herself in a position to be trained in detachment. In his work of transforming the spirit God is therefore less likely to be hampered by our addiction to materiality.

When I was young the idea of 'union with God' would have seemed a bit strange. We did not use language like that to describe our Christian experience. The focus was either on doing things for God or on eradicating sin. But sin was usually conceived in a way that lent itself to moralising. Whatever it meant practically, it was in some sense a form of transgression. Despite having been taught plenty of theology about the effect of Adam's sin, only with experience did it dawn on me that sin is a condition rather than an act.

To say that sin is a condition means that it has a much broader meaning than the limited notion of transgression. Nothing is beyond its scope. In the religious milieu in which I was brought up, there were many things in life which were regarded as good or at least morally neutral until they were misused. Only then did they become sinful. For example, it never occurred to me that there might be anything sinful about normal middle class life and its aspirations. Only when the effects of that lifestyle began to cause problems for human life in other areas did questions begin to be asked.

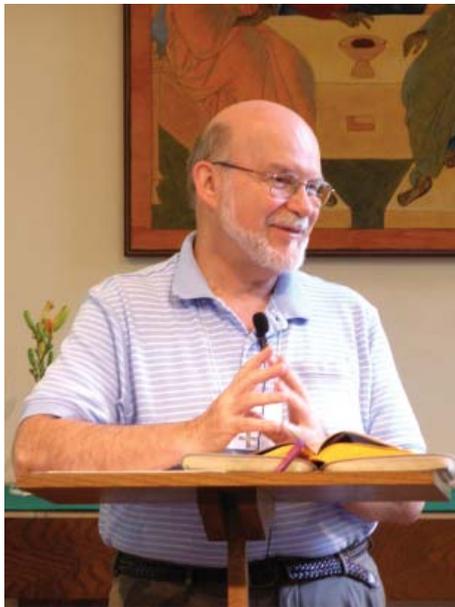
Dealing with the questions was quite difficult. There was a natural resistance to the suggestion that 'normal' life, minding one's own business, was somehow sinful. But that was because of the way that 'sin' tended to be understood. If we imagine God as a deity who imposes laws that have to be obeyed, we may well resist being lectured by others on the way we have

chosen to live our lives. We dislike being told we are disobeying God. But when sin is understood as a condition, it introduces a more objective way to think about it that puts the responsibility on us and the choice in our hands.

Potentially anything we do in life may be sinful. Even eating a normal meal could be sinful, if God has asked us to fast. The 'sin' is not so much in the act as in the choice for something other than God – a choice which we may well feel is hardly a choice at all, given the realities of living in the modern world. We may well deny that our choice is a choice against God. But whether we rationalise it or not, sin is a predilection for making certain kinds of choices.

The choices are not, in essence, moral choices (although they can be) but choices for the material rather than the spiritual, including whatever feeds my own ego. (I use the word 'spiritual' here rather than 'God', because most of us would find it difficult to make a conscious choice against God.) Despite our beliefs, tenaciously held, the fact is that the material world is by far the most real for us most of the time.

This means that our feelings, including whatever resources of love we have to offer, are invariably attached to things that belong to the material world. I love my family, listening to music, my favourite food, my ideal place to live. This is what determines the way I behave, my decisions in life, the friendships I make, the way I choose to live and so on. But God's love is not



Fr Bernie Tickerhoof TOR

This year's annual conference was led by Fr. Bernie Tickerhoof TOR (Third Order Regular of St Francis), a speaker with wide experience of spiritual ministry and retreats. Over the course of five sessions, he explored the Lord's Prayer and what it says to us about the world view of Jesus.

Session 1 introduced the theme. Sharing the world view of Jesus is not necessarily the same as being his disciple. We can be a Christian yet have a very different view of God, e.g. God as an angry judge, Santa God, a militant God on our side etc. These ideas are



easily dismissed by unbelievers. The foundation of the Lord's Prayer is relationship with a God who gives us everything we could possibly have, but that involves reciprocity. The proper response is not adolescent but from the heart, initiating more grace in return.

Session 2 looked at relationships of love. Prayer is a relational activity, in which by desire and intention I encounter God in mutual presence and invite him in. Through connectedness to God we recognise our connectedness to all things. We cannot be just objective

observers; in fact, we might even ask how objective God is. Did he create the world and just let it go? No, he sent his Son, which changed the process. He knew he had to invest in the system and that investment is love. In which case, what am I investing? In this



prayer, relationships with God and each other are inseparable.

In the next session we explored the meaning of 'your kingdom come, your will be done'. The kingdom is God's intention for us. In Mark, the first gospel, life is in black and white while Jesus supplies the colour. In Matthew, the rich young ruler has kept the law but wants to cross the line from black and white to colour. He learns that perfection resides in becoming selfless. The kingdom of God is a system of which all other systems are shadows. The right response is to give everything to it, as God and Jesus gave their all.

We then moved on to think about forgiveness. Jesus never asks anyone if they are sorry, not even Peter. Forgiveness is tied to what we are doing now. Are we loving now? The woman who wiped Jesus' feet was forgiven 'because she has loved much'.

## The World View of Jesus: The Lord's Prayer

The Prodigal Son is not a parable about contrition or repentance – the son never delivers the speech he planned to make. Forgiveness is about relationships. Holding on to debts destroys them.

The final session was entitled 'Living in the Shadows'. Suffering, pain, failure and loss are issues addressed by the Lord's Prayer. In the rabbinic tradition it was covetousness that made the commandments difficult. We reach for God but hold something else close. We set our sights too low and need to purify our ideas of what is mine. 'Deliver us from evil' invites us into freedom. We need to distinguish between pursuit of happiness and pursuit of transformation. The former leads to guilt but the latter is always on track even if bad things happen. The power



for evil is in me but its success depends on whether I feed it. The question is, which wolf am I feeding?

Of course, this is only a smidgeon of a weekend conference, which is hard to summarise in just a few words. But the programme also allowed plenty of time for fellowship and catching up with friends. We all went home feeling stimulated and refreshed.



The ministry today in Aliquippa is multi-faceted. The Community is one focus for it through its historical presence in the town which includes its chapel, offices and housing. Other agencies such as the Church Army and Aliquippa Impact Ministries (AIM) work independently yet also in association with the Community, sharing facilities and accommodation with plenty of interaction. Those attending the conference had plenty of opportunity to gain some impression of this extensive work.

Some time ago a building in nearby Spring Street was burned down. The derelict site was cleared and in the picture (left) one of the AIM workers explains to a group of conferees how the land is being converted to grow produce.

Another aspect of the AIM ministry is a mentoring program for young people in the town who might otherwise have little prospect in life and can easily drift into drugs and crime. One place they can go to is the Church Army's cafe in the main street of Aliquippa. This is more than just an eating place. It is also a centre for worship, an arts and cultural centre and a place with facilities for working with families and children. We had a good lunch there - very cheap, and all part of the Aliquippa experience.

It goes without saying that these ministries are very labour intensive, need-

ing a lot of hard work and dedication while at the same time having to face many setbacks. Money is tight and many of the human resources are volunteers. The time scale for 'success', if that is the right word, is measured in years rather than weeks or months.

Nevertheless, this patient commitment, addressing the real needs of local peo-



ple, is bringing signs of hope to a town that long ago lost its soul.

Much of our work in the UK is at local level, preaching, taking services, pastoral work, choir, music group, administration of parish safeguarding policy, PCC. It all makes for quite a full life.

In recent times there has been an increase of interest in spiritual life generally, which is challenging both in terms



of meeting the need and in terms of personal life and growth.

Nevertheless, it has been extremely enriching to see the fruit of many prayers and conversations over the years begin to mature, even though it can only be referred to here in general terms.

In the meantime we try to keep ourselves connected with what is going on in the church at large, not just through the church press but also attending events such as the Christian Resources Exhibition (see photo above).

The informal group which organised the reunion last September met again in May, in the pleasant surroundings of Ivy House in Wiltshire (photos below). We reviewed the effect of the



reunion and agreed that it had stimulated a lot of online activity reconnecting old members.

In itself this was not particularly significant (it might have happened anyway, with the growth of social networking) but the reunion did act as a catalyst

for bringing together various strands of our history. For those of us who felt the weight of that history in our current lives and ministries it was an important thing to have done.

We agreed to continue to meet to share what God is doing with us and for mutual encouragement.

## People

On the way to Ivy House we called in on our old Community friends Lorna and Stephen Ball (photo below). Stephen is now an Anglican priest in charge of



four parishes. He and Lorna have an extremely busy life but are doing well.

In August Michelle Farra gets married to Christopher Guzie.

Jerry Barker, one of the original leaders in Houston, died on 25th April.

attached to any of these things in that natural sense. God is not attached to my career, my standard of living, my family and friends, my health, my status and reputation, anything.

Hence the reason for renouncing such things is not because of an eleventh commandment 'thou shalt not enjoy any good thing in life', nor is it to do with identifying with the poor or saving the planet (good though those motivations may be). It is, in the first instance, so as to draw near to God and to allow God to be God in our lives.

As soon as we sacrifice anything in life we become aware of how attached we are to it. This experience may be so painful that we are unable to carry it through, and we may well conclude that one needs a special calling from God to live a life of renunciation. However, while it may be true that one needs a special calling to live in a particular kind of situation, we miss something if we imagine that God does not call every one of us to a life that transcends the material.

The essence of sin is our addiction to materiality and that which massages our ego. Much of this passes unnoticed as normal life at the same time that we pursue what we believe to be our Christian calling. This means that we view renunciation as deprivation, or perhaps as a sacrifice that one needs to make for God, rather than a source of grace. But spiritual life is not about deprivation. It is about being at one with God as far as is possible with our limited capacity, and about experiencing the presence of God in our souls.

What is that experience like? Here, we are entering a region that is very difficult to put into words, but it may help in following this discussion if I say that it seems to be a very tranquil feeling, a feeling that sets us free from any investment in anything. It is not that I psyche myself up into making sacrifices. When God within comes to the forefront of my consciousness, I feel spiritually detached – as God is, in fact – from all material things and agendas.

The mere taste of that experience is so irresistible that some people will go to extraordinary lengths to obtain it. It is fulfilling in the deepest possible sense.

It is also enlightening. In our natural way of thinking, we suppose that God's love is infinite and that this is why he is able to love everyone, even the unlovable. Since our capacity for love is limited, there are limits to its reach. In fact, the issue is not quantity but quality. The peaceful detachment of God's love operating within us is transforming. It sets us free from natural habits of going after what we want and avoiding what we fear or dislike. It makes a godly perspective on the world a realistic possibility. I am reminded of Jesus' remarks about faith: if we had as much of it as a grain of mustard seed, we could dispatch a mountain into the sea. That is what the taste of God's love is like.

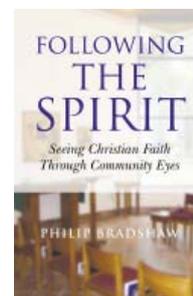
Over the last 50 years or so in some respects the religious and secular agendas have come together in the pursuit of social justice. You see that at Greenbelt, for example, where it is common to have political or non-religious speakers as well as Christian personalities. It is not surprising that more narrowly focused religious groups are feeling marginalised and tend to fragment. But what may be lost in this general trend is the widespread experience of a God whose love operates not through passionate attachment to a cause but precisely in detachment from all such agendas, including religious ones. It is the taste of that love that in times past enabled various martyrs to not even hang on to their own lives.

In previous ages when the church has been under pressure it has often been the monastic movement which has preserved the authentic spirit of Christ. Some expect the same to happen in our own time, but I do not think it will happen through organisation based experiments such as the 'new monasticism' movement. Our own community history shows how such movements wax and wane.

Whatever its institutional expression, what the church needs more than anything is people who are genuinely seeking God at a deeply spiritual level in their lives. That means the rediscovery of basic Christian concepts that are often taken as read, such as repentance or humility without which access to God's grace is virtually impossible. The most direct route to God is a life of prayer, which is really what the monastic experience is all about. Prayer opens us up spiritually to God – if that is our aim, as opposed to merely going through the motions.

Through prayer we hear the still small voice that lures us away from our material lives and into the ineffable experience of God who transcends materiality. That in turn equips us to live as human beings in the world of computers, recessions and banking crises – a threatening world which is spiritually empty and promises to undermine the foundations of life at any time. We do not have to be monastic, or even to live in community, to be such a person. But we do need to desire God enough to let him speak to us on his own terms.

**Phil Bradshaw**



*"A must read for those who want a bona fide look at the genesis of this movement and way of religious life and community...as one who lived within the bounds of this phenomenon for several years, I felt affirmed, empowered, renewed and challenged to continue the mission" (US review).*

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