

***Inspiratiedag: Monastiek: anders missionair!?* Conference**

(Inspiration Conference: Monastic and Missional)

Monastic Practices and the *Missio Dei*

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It's good to be back in the Netherlands, sharing with friends old and new and I bring with me the greetings of the Northumbria Community, a new monastic community that is not now so new having been founded nearly 30 years ago.

Unlike the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, who is with other European leaders in Brussels today, I am pleased and honoured to be here as your guest speaker and I assure you that I am not here to make any demands that will satisfy some of my anti-European members! I am here as a committed European, a brother in Christ and a servant of his gospel and in no way will we as a Northumbria Community be leaving the emerging European new monastic networks.

In the dim and distant past I was once an aspiring young footballer and came to Rotterdam to play in a youth tournament. Around the same time I was in the Belgian Ardennes and found myself at a party where for some reason that I still don't know, I was asked to sing a song. Usually when I sing in church people think that the heating system is breaking down. However, with youthful enthusiasm I sang one of my favourite songs, Bob Dylan's ~ *The answer my friend is blowing in the wind*.

I hope that after listening to me this morning you will not come to the same conclusion that you might have been better to have stuck your head out of the window and listened to the wind blowing!

Dylan is one of my favourite song writers, which of course reveals something of my age. He penned the words of another of his famous songs, *The Times They Are A Changin* back in 1964.

There was indeed a major cultural revolution going on across the Western world in the 1960s and unparalleled changes were occurring in the social structure of North American and European societies.

During periods of global turbulence and social change there is often the emergence of movements both in reaction to what is and also as signs and symbols proactively of what can become.

And I believe that we are living through a significant period of global change and cultural upheaval today. We are witnessing significant changes in the political, economic and social realms. The reality of climate change is a symbol of what is happening on a global scale that is changing the world in which we live.

The first task of leadership is to define reality Max DePree...

I want to suggest that one of the challenges we face in being disciples of Christ and living out the gospel is that our efforts to renew or reimagine church for a post-Christendom world is still based on the assumptions and thinking of a Modernity.

As Modernism was rapidly diminishing and being replaced by post modern forms so our attempts as churches to address the changing situation were simply short-term arrangements, much like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. Something more fundamental, radical is needed.

Mike Riddell puts it this way: *The great ship of Western culture has been listing, terminally holed below the waterline.... The church, as one cultural vessel among many, finds itself in troubled waters. On the one hand, the ship of the church is itself floundering in the crosscurrents of cultural transition. And on the other, it has become a sort of hospital ship, attracting refugees from a former era who find in it hope of a return to more familiar waters. To employ a much overworked analogy, there is a good deal of rearranging of the deckchairs, not to mention angry arguments on the bridge. Meanwhile, some distressed passengers are leaping overboard, preferring their chances in the open sea.*

The church is not immune from significant cultural changes. Many contemporary theologians and sociologists would tell us that we are moving into an increasingly post-Christendom Western culture. What we can say with confidence is that the cultural, social and intellectual world we live in today is very different from that which existed in the 1960s.

eg. UK Church Scene TEAR Fund Report findings....

Put simply, the church finds itself in a post-Christendom era and it had better do some serious reflection of facing increasing decline and eventual irrelevance.

Alan Hirsch

Brian McLaren says: *You see, if we have a new world, we will need a new church. We don't need a new religion per se, but a new framework for our theology. Not a new Spirit, or denomination, but a new kind of church ... The point is ... you have to have a new spirituality. Not a new Christ, but a new kind of Christian. Not a new world.*

The Australian missiologist Randall Prior says: *"The form of the church which evolved in the era of Christendom and which served us well in that period is no longer sustainable. It is dying. It will die."*

Dean Inge said in the nineteenth century that *"If you marry the spirit of the age you will find yourself a widow in the next."*

Sadly this is true of many churches in the West, including many of its evangelical expressions, who are shaped more by the values of Western consumerism than the gospel.

I want to draw from a sociological insight, a discipline I believe, which is a very helpful conversation partner for theology. Max Weber, introduced us to the theory of the *routinisation of charisma*. He observed that what happens in the evolution of religion is that a new group gathers around a charismatic leader and is a dynamic, free, loose movement. Over time it rationalises, routinises and systematises its life and so loses its charisma. Some people become frustrated with this and break away around the edges to form a new charismatic group with new energy and dynamism. It is this that ensures the ongoing renewal of religion.

Looking at the history of Christianity in the West there is much that can be helpfully explained by Weber. There is no question that much of church life in the West has become routinised and rationalised and there is little dynamism and charisma. The Spirit has been routinised.

I believe the *Emerging Church / Fresh Expressions* movements can be understood in these terms, as can the Charismatic movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

What has happened often in the past is that the Established religious institutions, the Established churches 'dechurch' these new movements and the action is reciprocated by the movements, which leads to schism and separation.

Now when it comes to new monasticism I hope that we can avoid repeating history and that by remaining in communion and continuing conversation between what is *Established* and what is *Emerging* that we may together be part of a movement for both the renewal of the church, or the reimagining of the church that serves God's kingdom.

There is no doubt whatsoever in my mind that the Established church in whatever form and expression we think of, Baptist, Reformed, Lutheran, Catholic, even the Independent House Church movement needs renewing and monasticism offers a source and reservoir for such a renewing.

There is needed radical reform and renewal for Established churches that monasticism can serve and encourage. And for the Emerging and Fresh Expressions of church they can draw stability and sustenance, inspiration and illumination and wisdom from the catholicity of monasticism and by so doing both Established and Emerging serve the *Missio Dei*, the mission of God in the world.

Now, as we look at this subject of new monasticism it would be easy to see it simply as a means of refreshing or renewing the church but I believe that God has a far greater purpose in this movement of his Spirit that is beginning to emerge in both Europe and North America. It's interesting to see that the monastic movements in these two Continents, whilst drawing from the same source of monasticism, have different emphases. New monasticism in the States is in many ways considerably more radical and political in its outlook and expressions. In Europe, the emphasis is very much on rediscovering our spiritual roots and the spiritual disciplines that led to the transformation and shaping of society.

Quite simply I believe that during this period of phenomenal change which is posing enormous challenges across Europe, that God by his Spirit is raising up a new monastic movement for two primary purposes:

- to call the church back to something that has been lost and to
- help the church imagine and explore what living out the gospel

means in changing cultural context.

I want to suggest that among the things that we are being called back to is the imperative of the *Great Commandment*, to return to the primary call upon our lives, alone and together, *to seek and to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength to love our neighbours as we love ourselves.*

When we been captured by the activism, busyness and consumerism which can lead us into 'managing churches' with lots of organising programmes and running meetings, it is easy to drift or have our attention diverted from what the monastic tradition talks about as the, '*one thing necessary*' the primacy of seeking after God.

There is within monasticism an inherent embracing of the spiritual disciplines.

Spiritual formation, the transformation of the heart and a commitment to an intentional way for living, usually with a Rule of Life characterises both established Religious and new monastic communities. Living out the faith where values underpin and inform how we live out the gospel. A vocational way for living that is contemplative, providing both a reflective way of observing and critiquing our own lives, the church and wider society and also a framework that helps us engage prophetically and apostolically with the changing cultures.

I also want to suggest that God is not only calling us back to our first love of him but that he is reminding us of his *Great Commandment*, to, *Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations.*

This is one of the main reasons why new monasticism is both monastic and missional.

Missio Dei is a Latin theological term that can be translated as "*Mission of God*".

Aquinas who first used the term to describe the activity of the triune God; the Father sending the Son and the Son sending the Spirit.

Karl Barth, set out the idea that mission was God's work and that authentic church mission must be in response to God's *mission*.

That's the big picture. The grand landscape in which we live and move and serve. And it's important that we rediscover of the *Missio Dei* because so much of the evangelism and mission strategies of the last thirty and forty years have been attempting to arrest the decline of the

church, to work for the revival of the church, or at best to preserve or survive as the church.

In Britain in the 1980s, when I first entered ministry as a pastor, I was one of many people who were church planting. The emphasis was on church planting and I believe this was a flawed strategy. The emphasis, thankfully which is now being rediscovered should have been on planting the gospel, serving the kingdom and allowing the church to be shaped by the Gospel and the kingdom.

It is not the church of God that has a mission in the world, but the God of mission that has a church in the world...

Now, with the context set I would like to focus on one aspect of new monasticism that serves in this missional imperative. And to do this we need to refocus our reflection away from the personal application of the spiritual disciplines towards a consideration of the socially transformative aspects of spiritual formation.

In the same way that the Gifts of the Spirit are tools for mission and not toys for the church to play with, so spiritual disciplines are not self help aids for a happy life but the means for the transformation of the human heart and the world.

Spiritual disciplines that don't translate into a transformed life that engages with the world, run the risk of self-indulgence, rendering spirituality nothing more than a satisfying leisure activity that bolsters the ego but which diminishes participation in God's radical kingdom. Spiritual formation addresses the need of transformed hearts because without such, the ability to embrace the values of God's kingdom are unattainable, e.g. *to love our enemies, bless those who curse us, lend and expect nothing in return, forgive our enemies, live generously, serve sacrificially, denying ourselves, etc*

Spiritual disciplines are not merely to make us more committed members of the church but rather disciplines that lead to the transformation of our homes and neighbourhoods, the workplace, education, the arts, politics, the media and the environment.

God's vision for the redemption of the world encompasses every aspect of human life, including the casting down of the strongholds of injustice and the systems that degrade human life and society, tarnish God's creation and exploit people made in his image.

Spiritual disciplines can inform and invigorate missional practice.

The inward journey of spiritual formation has profound social implications.

Jurgen Moltmann reminds us that Christian spirituality is not a private issue, "*to be crucified with Christ is no longer a purely private and spiritualised matter but develops into a political theology of following the crucified Christ.*"

The spiritual revolution inaugurated by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount transforms not only our beliefs, ideas and habits but also our social relations.

Whereas God's desire for individuals is to be transformed into the likeness of Christ, (Romans 8:29), his vision for communities, societies and nations is that they may be transformed into the likeness of his kingdom, (Revelation 11:15).

In the Northumbria Community, consistent with the monastic tradition, we have embraced a Rule of life. Not the classic Rule of life that many religious communities possess of, poverty, chastity and obedience but *Availability and Vulnerability*. A Way for Living that I will explore further, with a particular emphasis this afternoon in the workshop that I am leading on the second of those vows ~ Vulnerability.

The Community's Rule of life conveys *compassion* as the defining characteristic of the kingdom of God and sacrificial love, *agape*, as both the object and the starting point of all Christian mission.

Compassion stands to mission in the same way as fire to flame.

Compassion is the heart and soul of mission. It concurs with Lesslie Newbigin's notion of '*mission as love in action*' and Paul's declaration about the centrality of love, (1Corinthians 13).

In the Community we believe that the missional challenges facing us as believers and the church in the contemporary post-Christendom context cannot be addressed simply by developing new strategies, mission statements new visions. Rather, what is needed is a renewed focus on the central component of the mission of Jesus as depicted in the Gospels: compassion, (*Matthew 9:36, 14:14, Mark 6:34, book 7:13, 10:33, 15:20*).

Visions and programmes come and go but Kingdom values endure.

The missional practices of the Northumbria Community arise out of our desire to serve people with Christ's compassion. To express *welcome and hospitality of God friend and stranger*.

This 'vision' is rooted in our Rule of *availability and vulnerability*. They provide a framework, or a compass bearing for our engagement in the

Missio Dei.

Embracing the Great Commandment, and being faithful to the Great Commission depends on authentic living and authentic living is encouraged by living in obedience to a Rule of life.

Let's now take a look at some of the monastic disciplines and how they relate to missional practice:

1 Hospitality

Our Rule includes a call to be available, not only to God but to the needs of others, and it issues a radical call to practice hospitality, not just to enrich our own Community life, to entertain others but also as a missional imperative that encompasses both availability and vulnerability.

It is very encouraging that after 10 years on from the Church of England's *Mission Shaped Church* Report which has made a significant contribution to *Fresh Expressions* of church, missional communities and of the emerging missional initiatives, a report last year, "*from anecdote to evidence*" found that in over 80% of these initiatives that showed signs of life and growth, the common characteristic was that of hospitality. In 2012 the *World Mission and Anglican Communion Panel* published a volume on mission, which refers to the practice of hospitality as an integral part of the *Missio Dei*:

Hospitality, as the mutual indwelling one with the other, becomes the modus operandi of mission as those in common participation in the life and mission of God meet and receive from each other... Hospitality is an attitude of the heart which is about openness to the other... This mirrors the hospitality of the Trinity as God chooses to open himself to the other through the incarnation and to subject himself to the created order... It is about a generous acknowledgement in meeting of common humanity as well as meeting the needs of humanity, emotional, spiritual and physical, with generosity will stop as such it mirrors the activity of God towards creation.

The Community's mother house, *Nether Springs*, exist to provide *heart, home, hospitality and hope* to all who visit. It is an expression of the monastic heart of the Community's Rule of life.

As it states in our rule: *Jesus was prepared to make friends with people who were marginalised in the society of his day and to risk misunderstanding in the process. We should do the same.*

The trouble with hospitality is that it is hard work! The cynical phrase,

'hospitality is making people feel at home when you wish they were' contains a degree of truth. And even the most enthusiastic extrovert cannot be hospitable all the time.

We should heed the warning of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who said, "*let him who cannot be alone beware of community. He will only do harm to himself and the community*".

In order to avoid the discrepancy between idealistic aspiration and actual practice, the spiritual discipline of hospitality must be intentionally nurtured and sustained by the disciplines of solitude, silence and prayer.

Henri Nouwen had a great deal to say about the relationship between solitude and hospitality and it was another monk, Thomas Merton, who remarked that, "*it is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers... Solitude and silence teach me to love my brothers for what they are, not for what they say*".

Anyone who lives in authentic community knows the necessity of the cell, that place of solitude, where the heart can be transformed and nurtured to reflect the nature and ways of God.....

Solitude and Silence sustain our commitment to hospitality and lend substance and authenticity to our missional engagement with people.

2 The Discipline Of Contemplation As A Missional Imperative.

A commitment to contemplative prayer helps us to focus upon God and be inwardly transformed. In our own Community, our commitment to *intentional vulnerability* finds expression in being *teachable in prayer, being saturated in the Scriptures and open to constructive criticism, allowing others to speak into our lives, recognising that we do not have the monopoly on truth.* Our commitment to *Availability* finds its expression in a number of areas, notably in our availability to God in the cell of our own hearts.

The spiritual discipline of contemplation is a transformative practice that is cultivated in the midst of every day, ordinary life. In the cell of our own hearts, seeking God we have also to face ourselves. Availability to contemplation leads to, '*a leaning on the breast of Jesus to hear the heartbeat of God*'. It is through contemplation, listening prayer that we discern His Spirit's prompting and find direction for our engagement in the world.

City Cloister...

3 The Discipline Of Celebration Has A Missional Imperative

'Celebration', writes Richard Foster, 'is central to all the spiritual disciplines. Without a joyful spirit of festivity disciplines become dull, death breathing tools in the hands of modern Pharisees'. It is the emphasis on seeking God in the midst of ordinary life, embracing simplicity and encouraging contentment that helps us to live as celebratory people. Celebrations on the great outward expressions of Christian hope. Our participation in the *Missio Dei* is itself cause for celebration, the joy of companionship with people who are travelling on a similar journey and serving a common purpose in relation to God's kingdom here on earth. We are to be party people!

The gift of community is cause for celebration; the sharing of our lives, praying for and supporting one another, journeying both alone and together, sharing meals, conversations, gathering and being on the road together, all carry with them elements of celebration.

By embracing this spiritual discipline we have discovered that being together feels less like being part of an institution and more a sense of family, community. The fruit of which is seen in people feeling that they *belong* and are at *home* with us.

We have discovered God's gift of unity that celebrates diversity, that creates a sense of celebration inspiring creativity, such as writing, singing, dance, all of which serve our participation in the *Missio Dei*.

Monastic missional living in a post-Christendom culture

Sociologists, theologians, missiologists and some journalists have all noted the decline of Christianity in Western culture. Terms such as, the *universalisation of heresy*, the *removal of the Sacred canopy*, the *Post-Christian era* have been used to describe the general shift in Western culture away from a single, unitary worldview formally conferred by the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

Instead of lamenting the passing of an alleged Golden Age of Christendom when the church wielded power, we need a new missional paradigm, focused on the kingdom of God.

We need to seek first God and His Kingdom, reflect upon what is happening and ask the searching questions about why God might have led the church into what feels like an exile, desert experience.

The challenge that confronts us is how to reclaim the subversive dynamism and vitality that characterised the pre-Christendom Christian communities which became such a powerful and world transforming missional movement in the first few centuries of the church. For

example, the monastic movement of the Celtic Saints who shaped European culture for centuries.

The spiritual disciplines, sustained and undergirded by an intentional Rule of life offer a way of witnessing to the Kingdom vision in a Post-Christendom culture. The disciplines of silence, solitude, prayer, study, submission, service and celebration are rooted in the monastic tradition, which, throughout church history has often been a radical voice speaking from the margins, reminding the church that the most basic factor in every expression of Christian spirituality is relationship with God.

At its best, however, monasticism has been more than simply a movement calling for the renewal of the church; it has also been a movement concerned with the holistic transformation of the social order and the extension of the kingdom of God outside the walls of the church to the wider culture.

In the Community we often say that if you want to see the signs of the kingdom of God, *don't look within the walls of the church, but seek for the kingdom in the streets*. This conviction corresponds with the Community's conviction that there is no divide between the sacred and secular realms of human activity.

Standing in the Johannine tradition of the early Church Fathers and the Celtic saints, the Community affirms the sanctity of the whole of life and the teaching of the scriptures concerning the recapitulation (*anakephalaiosis*) of all things in Christ' (Ephesians 1:10).

There is no sphere of human activity that is beyond the reach of the kingdom of God and the transforming power of the light of the gospel. When thinking about the most fundamental aim or *telos* of Christian mission in a post-Christendom context, the criteria of the success (or faithfulness) of our mission should not be determined by how many people attend our church gatherings, but rather by the extent to which we, as the people of God, live as transparent witnesses to the presence and reality of the kingdom of God.

This conception of the kingdom of God as a transformative vision for a new order of society may act as a catalyst for the emergence of the kind of new missional movements required for the new cultural contexts we are faced with in Europe.

Living in Post-Christendom context means living in our European cultures where Christian attitudes and values are no longer the dominant factors that are shaping Western culture.

In his book, *Church After Christendom*, Stuart Murray calls for '*action at the trans-local level*' that will lead to a paradigm shift from '*institution to movement*'.

By taking the kingdom of God as our first point of departure, we recognise that mission originates not in the church, but in the mysterious purposes of God for the redemption of the world.

'Mission is not an agenda item – it is the agenda. It is not something churches do, but a divine initiative in which churches participate. Mission, not church, is the starting point'.

We believe that the new monastic emphasis on *heart, home and hospitality* offers important '*waymarks*' (Jeremiah 6:16) for today's churches as they seek to break the old paradigm, which regarded mission as a series of church-centred programmes, activities, services and planned events.

Conclusion

We have derived great inspiration from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's proclamation that, *The renewal of the church will come about through a new type of monasticism which only has in common with the old an uncompromising allegiance to the Sermon on the Mount.*

Such '*uncompromising allegiance*' requires a disciplined and intentional appropriation of practices that are consistent with the kingdom vision of the Sermon on the Mount.

In our Rule of Availability and Vulnerability, we have tried – however inadequately and imperfectly, aspiring and often perspiring! – to pioneer a Way of Living that does not just enrich our own relationships as a Community, but which also models a way of life that invites people outside of the church to journey with us as we explore together the fundamental questions: *Who is it that you seek?, How then shall we live?, and 'How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?'*

Our practice of mission is seen in terms of inviting people to '*come and see*' (John 1:39, 46), journey with us as a Community, as we seek to participate in the life of the kingdom of God and to discover how to live with integrity, authenticity and hope in the midst of a culture marked by fragmentation and fear.

Seeking to rediscover the radically inclusive and holistic vision of Aiden, Cuthbert and other Celtic monastic saints, we believe that the message of hope and new life in Christ should be brought out of church buildings and applied in transformative and creative ways to communities, homes, families, workplaces, neighbourhoods and nations.

In keeping with this hope, we are persuaded that the monastic virtues of compassion, humility, self-denial and practices of *availability*, *vulnerability*, contemplation and the cultivation of attentiveness to listen to the heart of God should be brought out of the cloister walls and unleashed in order to bring renewal and a reimagining to the church by facilitating the development of new paradigms of missional practice. This is the challenge and the opportunity that confronts not only the Northumbria Community, but every community that wants to make a significant and enduring contribution to the *missio Dei* in our generation.

This is my prayer for Europe; hearts and hands across the boundaries that in God's eyes, are not boundaries but bridges.

Thank you.

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