

CONTEMPLATION IN A WORLD OF ACTION¹

(Based on reading the Gospels of Mark and John)

INTRODUCTION

We are living busy and distracted lives. We are impacted by huge changes taking place in the workplace. We are working longer hours than ever and we are so mobile that we have lost a sense of groundedness and connection to place.² We have become the nomads of the modern urban world. The sociologist, Zygmunt Bauman, has identified the fractured nature of our existence³ and the fragility of human bonds,⁴ highlighting our exilic status.

Being part of the church, in some ways, has not helped. For many, it has added only another dimension of busyness to already busy lives. There are not only the pressures of family, work, further training, participation in various associations and frenetic attempts at recreation, but there is also church and the call to be God's missional people in the world.⁵

Sadly, many churches only push the activist line. Thus our Christian significance is rooted in our much-doing. And this much-doing can so easily become a beast of burden. This sense is deepened when we so often feel that we are working *for* God who seems to be so absent from our lives and world.

As corrective to this rather unhappy picture, I am proposing that we need to return to the ancient wells of the Christian tradition with its emphasis on the relationship between contemplation and action, and by way of extension to the importance of self-care and service, nurture and self-giving, prayer and ministry, and work and Sabbath. All of this is so that we don't run on empty and avoid what Thomas Green called giving water "when the well runs dry."⁶ Put bluntly, and in good Dutch fashion, we need to find the Monk within.⁷

CONTEMPLATION AND ACTION IN THE ANCIENT CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Living an integral spirituality which brings together head (theological formation), heart (spiritual formation) and hand (missional formation), or bringing together contemplation and action, was a theme Christians wrestled with from earliest times.

St. Augustine (354-430)

Augustine notes that there are three forms of life – "contemplation and examination of the truth," being "buried in carrying on human affairs," and a "third which combines both of these."⁸ He goes on that one should not be so reflective "not to think of his neighbours' welfare," nor so busy with the ordinary affairs of life "not to seek after contemplation."⁹ In the active life one should not seek honour and power but to do the work of mercy and justice for its own sake. He explains, "the obligations of charity make us undertake righteous business," and the love of truth calls us to contemplation. Augustine combined both the active and

¹ Based on the title of a book by Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971. See also W. A. Barry & R. G. Doherty, *Contemplatives in Action: The Jesuit Way*. New York: Paulist Press, 2002.

² See S. Bouma-Prediger & B. J. Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008.

³ Z. Bauman, *Postmodernity and Its Discontents*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997.

⁴ Z. Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Fragility of Human Bonds*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003.

⁵ D. L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending Church in North America*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.

⁶ Thomas H. Green, S.J., *When the Well Runs Dry: Prayer Beyond the Beginnings*. Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1979.

⁷ See J. M. Talbot, *The Universal Monk: The Way of the New Monastics*. Minneapolis: Liturgical Press, 2011 and D. Okholm, *Monk Habits for Everyday People: Benedictine Spirituality for Protestants*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007.

⁸ Quoted in Dom Cuthbert Butler, *Western Mysticism: Augustine, Gregory and Bernard on Contemplation and the Contemplative Life*. (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003. First published 1926), p.164.

⁹ Butler, *Western Mysticism*, p.165.

contemplative life and speaks of the blessedness of an inner communion with God. He writes, “this I often do, this delights me, and as far I may be freed from necessary duties, unto this pleasure I have recourse. And sometimes Thou dost admit me to an interior experience...[of] a wondrous sweetness.”¹⁰

St. Gregory the Great (c.540-604)

“[E]very one who is converted to the Lord, desires the contemplative life...but first it is necessary that in the night of the present life he work that good he can, and exert himself in labour.”¹¹ Gregory goes on, “it is the right order of living to pass from the active life to the contemplative” and “for the mind to turn back from the contemplative to the active.”¹² He goes on to point out that “the active life is by necessity, the contemplative [is] by choice.”¹³ Gregory further points out that it is necessary to “put aside the tumult of temporal activities” and in one’s “contemplation [to] search out the...divine will.” Thus “we hear inwardly and in silence what we must do openly.”¹⁴ He concludes, “The voice of God is heard when, with minds at ease, we rest from the bustle of this world, and the divine precepts are pondered by us in the deep silence of the mind.”¹⁵

St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153)

St. Bernard reminds us that contemplation and action “are intimately related, they are chamber companions and dwell together.” He goes on to note that adequate time spent in contemplation is difficult “because the duties of office and the usefulness of work press upon us more urgently.” He goes on to note that it is easy for us to “fall from the state of contemplation...[and] resort...to action.”¹⁶ But conversely warns us that it is possible to “desire the repose of contemplation” and not to bring forth the “blossoms of good works.”¹⁷

JESUS THE CONTEMPLATIVE ACTIVIST¹⁸

From these and other leading church figures,¹⁹ we gain some idea that both contemplation and service are important themes in the Christian life. These two themes are inter-related, but often activism is our default mode and contemplative practices are easily neglected.

So we turn once again to the Gospels and seek to learn from the One who is the icon of all that we are to be and become. In Mark’s Gospel, we predominately meet Jesus the activist. In John’s Gospel, Jesus the contemplative shines through most clearly.

Mark’s Gospel

This Gospel shows Jesus in action. Mark makes clear Jesus’ *modus operandi*. And if Jesus is the paradigmatic human and we are committed to the *imitatio Christi*, then here are some of the things we can readily learn and emulate-

- Jesus central concern was the coming of the Kingdom of God involving the presence, rule and restorative work of God in human affairs. Jesus mirrored what this looked like.
- Jesus was so committed to seeing this come about that he was willing to give his life for this.
- Jesus, despite the importance of his mission, always had time to minister to individuals.

¹⁰ Butler, *Western Mysticism*, p.165.

¹¹ Butler, *Western Mysticism*, p.172.

¹² Butler, *Western Mysticism*, p.173.

¹³ Butler, *Western Mysticism*, p.174.

¹⁴ Butler, *Western Mysticism*, p.182.

¹⁵ Butler, *Western Mysticism*, p.183.

¹⁶ Butler, *Western Mysticism*, p.193.

¹⁷ Butler, *Western Mysticism*, p.194.

¹⁸ St. Gregory notes, “Christ set forth in Himself patterns of both lives, that is, the active and the contemplative, united together.” Butler, *Western Mysticism*, p.176.

¹⁹ See B. McGinn, ed., *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*. New York: The Modern Library, 2006 and C. Ringma, *Hear the Ancient Wisdom: A Meditative Reader for the Whole Year from the Early Church Fathers up to the Pre-Reformation*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013.

- Jesus drew others into his mission. He was not the solo hero.
- Jesus was a community builder and was a member of an intentional common purpose community.
- Jesus sought to bring healing and to restore broken relationships.
- Jesus pushed back the powers of darkness in people's lives.
- Jesus confronted the religious leaders and system of his day by pointing them to a new way of being and exercising power.
- Jesus was involved in civil disobedience by deliberately healing on the Sabbath day demonstrating thereby a whole new set of values.
- Jesus shows a special concern for the poor, the needy and cultural outsiders.
- Jesus demonstrated a servant leadership.
- And finally for now (but not exhaustively) Jesus showed that the way rejection and marginalisation can be the grand way to life.²⁰

Mark's Jesus is in a hurry to fulfil his mission. Only very briefly do we get snippets of the contemplative dimension of his life – Jesus' testing in the desert (Mk. 1:13); Jesus praying at the beginning of the day (Mk. 1:35); Jesus going to a deserted place to rest (Mk. 6:31); Jesus' experience of transfiguration (Mk 9:1-8); Jesus in Gethsemane (Mk. 14:32); Jesus' prayer of forsakenness on the cross (Mk. 15:34).

John's Gospel

It is in John's Gospel that we more fully meet Jesus the contemplative. This gospel highlights the intimacy between Jesus and his Father, their mutual indwelling and their common participation in all Jesus sought to do. Jesus does what the Father wants him to do and their bond is so close that Jesus can say "the Father and I are one" (Jh. 10:30).

The heart of the contemplative experience is attentiveness and gazing. It involves the practices of solitude and prayer. And most importantly has to do with embracing an emptiness that God alone can fill. The gift of contemplation is joining, abiding and union with God. It is more about friendship with God, than it is about getting wisdom and life direction, although that is part of it. Let's then learn from this gospel-

- Jesus speaks of knowing the Father – "but I know him" (Jh. 8:58, 17:25). This is an intimate and not simply an intellectual knowing.
- Jesus speaks of a reciprocal knowing – "just as the Father knows me, I know the Father" (Jh. 10:15).
- Jesus speaks of a mutual indwelling – "the Father is in me and I am in the Father" (Jh. 10:38, 14:20, 6:57).
- Jesus testifies that he is doing the work that the Father has given him and not doing his own thing – "I have not spoken on my own" but the Father has "given me...what to say" (Jh. 12:49, 7:16) and he speaks of the "works that the Father has given me to complete" (Jh. 5:36).
- Jesus constantly acknowledges that the Father has sent him (Jh. 5:36, 7:16, 8:16, 14:24).
- Jesus confesses that he has fully revealed the Father- "I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father (Jh. 15:15).
- And finally, Jesus asserts that he is such an embodiment of the Father that - "if you know me, you will know my Father also" (Jh.14:7).

Behind the busy Jesus of Mark's Gospel stands the contemplative Jesus of John's Gospel. In Mark's Gospel we see the public persona of Jesus. In John's Gospel we catch a glimpse of the inner life of Jesus. It was the inner life that nurtured and fed the outer life. The challenge for us is that our society and church celebrates the outer life in terms of what we do and achieve, but knows little of the necessity and power of the inner life. We are often the "hollow people."

²⁰ Ched Myers in *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Marks' Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988) notes that this Gospel is "a story by, about, and for those committed to God's work of justice, compassion, and liberation in the world" (p.11). He goes on to say that Mark's Gospel is "the manifesto of an early Christian discipleship community" which was seeking to live as a contrast society (p.31) "from below" (p.40).

THE INTEGRATION OF CONTEMPLATION AND ACTION

There are many ways of integrating contemplation and action. The most basic is to think about a double movement of contemplation.²¹ The movement we are most familiar with is the movement of transcendence where we contemplate the face of God. Here are the practices of the reflective reading of scripture, the discipline of solitude, and the life of prayer. The second movement is that of incarnation. Here we contemplate the way of God in the world, the hidden face of Christ in friend or stranger, the vulnerable and the poor, and the movement of the Spirit in our society. Both forms of contemplation move us to action and our action calls us back to prayer and further reflection.

Put in other words, when we seek the face of God, God will always draw us back to his concerns for the world. Involved in the concerns of the world, we are always called back to be nurtured and loved and sent out again cloaked in greater wisdom.

Reflection and action, service and prayer, work and Sabbath are amongst the most basic rhythms of the Christian life.

SOME FURTHER INSIGHTS INTO CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES

The most basic contemplative practice is to make time to draw aside from normal life's activities and to enter into a space of stillness and attentiveness and receptivity. We do this in the presence of God. This has nothing to do with creating a blank mind.

In coming to this space, we most basically need to wait. This is not an attempt to make something happen. It is waiting for God to give what he wills.

We may engage in the reflective reading of scripture, journaling, art or other practices, but one's basic posture remains one of attentive listening with a heart of prayer.

The great gifts that may come out of making this a regular part of one's life are: 1] a growing sense of being well-loved by God; 2] a deeper sense of one's dependency on the Spirit; 3] on-going transformation into the likeness of Christ; 4] a deeper repentance; 5] a growing sense of God's calling for our lives; 6] a deeper understanding of the needs of our world; 7] a costly and risk-taking service to the world.

A model of the elements of contemplation may help –

1. *Consolatio* – where we are held and comforted in God's presence. The "word" we hear: you are my beloved son/daughter.
2. *Discretio* – where through the Spirit new possibilities and directions are opened up. The "word" we hear: this is the way you should go.
3. *Deliberatio* – where we wrestle with God's direction and come to a place of surrender. The "word" we say: Yes, Lord, I love to do your will.
4. *Actio* – where we live out God's call in our refractory world. The "word" we say: Help me Lord to be faithful to your call.²²

And a more general model could look something like this –

1. We enter the cave/desert/closet/the quiet place to be purged and empowered.
2. We gather as faith community for worship, formation and fellowship.
3. We are on the road in our work and service to the world.

²¹ See S. Galilea, *Following Jesus*. Manila: Claretian, 1994.

²² See L. S. Cunningham & K. J. Egan, *Christian Spirituality: Themes from the Tradition* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), p.39.

CONCLUSION

The invitation is simple enough. The deepest challenge facing each one of us is not first and foremost a new career, or place, or relationship, but a new self. A self shaped by the contemplative-activist Christ is both the call and an invitation. Modelling Christ in these areas of his life could make a significant change in the way in which we engage life and our world. While activism is our default mode in the modern world, to become more contemplative will change the way we are and act.

The words of the great Franciscan theologian, Bonaventure, challenge us-

“The reader might think that reading is sufficient without heavenly anointing;
or thinking without devotion;
or investigation without admiration;
or mere observation without rejoicing;
or effort without piety;
or knowledge without charity;
intelligence without humility;
endeavour without divine grace.”²³

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²³ Quoted in C. Ringma, *Hear the Ancient Wisdom*, p.169.