Reflections on 'Solitude' – 27th October 2021 – prepared by Hazel



Opening words: This week, we are meditating in person again and have a transcript for those unable to join us. We have included some pictures and resources to help you in your meditation. If you are meditating alone but would like to feel 'with us' we meditate at 7.30pm on Wednesday in Wisdom Centre/ our homes. The tradition we meditate in is Centring Prayer which is fully inclusive of all traditions of Christian Meditation and welcoming of World Traditions.

Welcome to Christian Meditation in the Centring Prayer Tradition: A very warm welcome from Fiona, Marie, Rob, Hazel and Paul, the leaders of the Christian Meditation group at Wisdom Centre, Romsey. The whole session is about 50 minutes. We meditate beginning with an opening prayer followed by reflections and then 25 minutes of silence. We hope you enjoy your meditation with us.

Opening Prayer: Eternal God, through our meditation may the ears of our hearts be attentive to your Word. May we seek and find You. Awakened to Your presence may we be joyful, embodying peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-awareness. May we follow Your teaching, seeking also, the wisdom of the Holy Fathers and Mothers. May we, therefore, commit to community, love of earth, peace and justice making. **Amen**

Introduction: This week's meditation is on 'solitude' and it follows on from previous explorations of 'stillness' and 'silence'. Whilst all three may be sought externally in order to support meditation, solitude is relational and therefore, perhaps less tangible. Just as 'Stillness' might be experienced as the reduction of movement outside of us or within us, 'Silence' might be external and internal reduction, or absence, of sound through our auditory senses or inner 'noise'. Similarly with 'Solitude', its definitions relate to the external experience – i.e. 'a lonely or uninhabited place', and the internal experience – i.e. 'the state or situation of being alone'. Both definitions are relational. As with silence and stillness, solitude is experienced very differently by different people in different contexts. This is an opportunity to explore what solitude means to each of us and how this might link to our meditation practice.

Self-care in solitude: You might notice your reaction to the two pictures below. Is there any sense of solitude in one or the other and how does that feel? Sarah Maitland[1] explored silence and solitude in herself and in others and elaborates on what she calls the 'dark side' of solitude, as well as the 'bliss' of solitude. She concluded that the strongest determining factor in whether solitude was experienced as positive or negative





was whether it was sought or enforced, along with its context. Personality and past experiences also influence this. Thomas Merton[2] wrote of 'the love of solitude' as well as describing what many would view as perils. The perils can range from mild feelings of loneliness in solitude to psychotic symptoms or deep despair. This is sadly evidenced by use of solitary confinement as a means of inflicting pain and exerting power.

So we need to follow our own deeper knowing around what is right for each of us as we venture into solitary spaces, whether this be for one minute or 25 minutes or a long silent retreat. Some of us are very used to solitude, especially having experienced lockdown, and all of us hearing or reading these words have chosen to engage in meditation.

The wisdom of past spiritual seekers: We may find some aspects of solitude more difficult than others, but many spiritual seekers have trodden the path before us. As Henri Nouwen[3] wrote: 'Without solitude it is virtually impossible to live a spiritual life'. Thomas Merton observes: 'Society depends for its existence on the inviolable personal solitude of its members. Society, to merit its name, must be made up not of numbers or mechanical units, but of persons. To be a person implies responsibility and freedom, and both of these imply a certain interior solitude, a sense of personal integrity, a sense of one's own reality and if one's ability to give himself to society - or to refuse that gift. ... When society is made up of men who know no interior solitude it can no longer be held together by love; and consequently it is held together by a violent and abusive authority. But when men are violently deprived of the solitude and freedom which are their due, the society within which they live becomes putrid, festers with stability, resentment and hate.'

Merton continues, 'The only cure is, and must always be, spiritual. There is not much use talking to men about God and love if they are not able to listen. The ears with which one hears the message of the Gospel are hidden in man's heart, and these ears do not hear anything unless they are favoured with a certain interior solitude and silence.'

Where do we go for solitude? Does inner solitude render the external surroundings a place of solitude? Does external solitude enhance inner solitude? Where do we go to seek solitude? Where did Jesus go?

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness. Luke 4:1

But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. Matthew 6:6

He said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while'. Mark 6:31

Having visited the Wisdom Centre last week, I decided to set out from the centre of Romsey to explore the role of 'place' in solitude experientially. I could perhaps have found glimpses of it in a supermarket, but I was drawn to head south-west, past the gushing waters of Saddler's Mill, through the field beyond and up the hill that looks down on the town. There were no other people in sight. I could see the Abbey and the approximate location of the Wisdom Centre below. It was not silent as I could hear road traffic, birds and





Romsey from hillside above Saddler's Mill; Top right, Wisdom Centre labyrinth

the breeze. As I stood there in isolation, I saw a money spider drop down from my hair and picked it up briefly before it dropped away elsewhere. There were cattle that I had walked past, not far away. There were flies on their dung pats, and no doubt millions of microorganisms within these. The pasture contained grass with some thistles and nettles. Looking onto the town, I sensed the presence of presence of friends who I had just seen in the Wisdom Centre and I noticed a spiritual presence, perhaps solitude, in the sight of the Abbey and the mental image of the labyrinth in the Wisdom Centre grounds. A lorry came out from the water treatment works below and cars were passing on the road behind me. All of these were with me in my apparent solitude. There was the light of the sun and the clouds too. Even on shutting my eyes, the breeze, gravity and sounds were companions. My overwhelming sense was of not being alone. I was in relationship with all of these, dependent upon them for my existence and experience in this moment. Thoughts and memories came and went that involved relationship with others. Through my genes, I am in relationship with my ancestors (including pre-human evolution) in my very presence. Time has no hold on my interconnectedness. I rested in the space of whatever degree of solitude this was and allowed it to just be. I did not need to 'do' anything, but just rest in it. I walked back, noticing solitude in a slightly shifted way

Solitude in the presence of others: So in the place of solitude we can find relationship with the 'other'. Conversely, when we come together and meditate, perhaps we are seeking interior solitude in the presence of others in community around us. Rev Holly Bean[4] gives an brief history of solitude in Christian spiritual practices, and she describes how the desert Fathers and Mothers evolved into a Benedictine community, even though they went to the desert to seek solitude. Christine Paintner[5] writes: 'The desert is an archetypal experience, one that transcends geography and physical location.'

Merton writes: 'To love solitude and to seek it does not mean constantly travelling from one geographical possibility to another. A man becomes a solitary at the moment when no matter what be his external surroundings, he is suddenly aware of his inalienable solitude and sees that he will never be anything other than solitary. From that moment, solitude is not potential - it is actual.'

Solitude in the presence of nature: On Sunday 31st October, the much anticipated COP26 UN Climate Change Conference begins. Merton's words at the beginning of his book on Solitude seem to hold meaning here: 'There is no greater disaster in the spiritual life than to be immersed in unreality, for life is nourished in us by our vital relations with realities outside and above us. When our life feeds on unreality, it must starve. It must therefore die.' We might perhaps notice more the reality of our relationships with nature and how it needs to be nurtured and cultivated just as our human relationships do. This includes solitude for all.

Some final reflections before meditation: Let us open our awareness to some more perspectives on solitude before we go into our meditation[6]:

'It is sometimes said that each of us is ultimately alone. This idea is compelling not because of birth and death, but because so often our moments alone seem more true, more real. I need solitude like I need food and rest, and like eating and resting, solitude is most healing when it fits the rhythm of my needs. A rigidly scheduled aloneness does not nourish me. Solitude is perhaps a misnomer. To me, being alone means togetherness - the re-coming-togetherness of myself and nature, of myself and being, the reuniting of myself with all other selves. Solitude especially means putting the parts of my mind back together, unifying the pieces of my mind back together, unifying the pieces of myself scattered by anger and fear, until I can once again see that the little things are little and the big things are big.' Hugh Prather' (Lay minister and counsellor)

'Finding solitude in the concrete jungle is powerful and peaceful.' - Mike Dolan

'Solitude is the great teacher, and to learn its lessons you must pay attention to it.' - Deepak Chopra

'Nowhere can man find a quieter or more untroubled retreat than in his own soul.' - Marcus Aurelius

'In a soulmate we find not company but a completed solitude.' - Robert Brault

'But your solitude will be a support and a home for you, even in the midst of very unfamiliar circumstances, and from it you will find all your paths.' - Rainer Maria Rilke (Letters to a Young Poet)

Beginning Meditation: As we prepare for our meditation today, we might feel more attuned to others close to us or distant from us; we might notice relationships within ourselves or our awareness of our external environment; and we allow all of this to be just as it is. As our awareness moves into thoughts of what is around us, or towards relationships or sensations, we let them go, not clinging to them not rejecting them either. You might take a moment to notice any tightness or tension in your body and tighten into these and let go as you need to. Allow your back to rest upright. Be conscious of where your body is touching the chair. Allow your breathing to settle; allow your body to slow down. You may wish to repeat a sacred word silently, bring to mind an image or simply return to the rhythm of your breath when your mind wanders.

Meditation for 25-minutes.

Final blessing: *A Blessing "For Solitude",* by John O'Donohue[8]

May you recognize in your life the presence,
Power and light of your soul.



May you realize that you are never alone,
That your soul in its brightness and belonging
Connects you intimately with the rhythm of the universe.

May you have respect for your own individuality and difference.

May you realize that the shape of your soul is unique,
That you have a special destiny here,
That behind the facade of your life
There is something beautiful and eternal happening.

May you learn to see your self
With the same delight,
Pride, and expectation
With which God sees you in every moment.

Closing prayer: Loving and Eternal God, we thank you for the gifts of prayer, meditation and contemplation. We thank you for being with us and for this community. May we, therefore, pray with all others, as one community, one world and one spirit to One God…Moments of your personal prayer follow…**Amen.**

Thank you for meditating with us, please join us again soon. Stay safe and well.

Resources:

(1) Sara Maitland (2008) 'A Book of Silence: A journey in search of the pleasures and powers of silence' Granta Publications.
(2) Thomas Merton (1958). 'Thoughts In Solitude'. Guildford: Burns & Oates
(3) Henri Nouwen in Bible Society (2021) Jesus and Solitude
(4) Rev. Holly Bean (2014) 'Meditation on Solitude'
(5) Christine Paintner quoted by Holly Bean as above.
(6) Quotes from Gardener Digest https://gardendigest.com/solitude.htm
(7) Hugh Prather (1990) 'Notes to Myself; My struggle to become a person'. Bantam Dell Publishing Group
(8) O'Donohue, J. (2007). 'Benedictus: A Book of Blessings'. London: Bantom Press.

Pictures: Pixabay.com and the author



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