Reflections on Advent: What are we waiting for?- 1st December 2021 – prepared by Rob

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 and Hazel, 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: The Sunday just gone marked the beginning of Advent. It is traditionally a time of waiting, expectation, excitement and preparation running up to Christmas. There is much to be learnt and developed from that approach, but tonight I would like to explore a different perspective. What, actually, are we waiting for?

In reality God is already here, in our hearts, and our task is to find Him there and to let him out. In recent times a great deal has been made of the practice of mindfulness, the practice of being fully in the present moment, in the 'here and now', and of being fully aware of what we are doing and what is happening in each moment. It is only through that practice that we are able to find God who is always right here in the present moment. I would like to share a passage from one of my favourite clerics, Dave Tomlinson who explains this so well in his book 'The Bad Christian's Manifesto', and I would also like to share some reflections from Bhikkhu Analayo and HH the Gyalwang Drukpa on the Buddhist concept of mindfulness from their books 'Satipatthana, the Direct Path to Realisation' and 'Everyday Enlightenment'.

Behind the Sofa:



First Dave Tomlinson from his chapter 'I found God!': "After a lifetime of seeking to know God better, the most important thing I have discovered is that we cannot find God. The notion of 'finding' God is in fact the most absurd idea on earth. God was never lost. And we were never lost to God. God is everywhere, named or unnamed, recognised or unrecognised, bidden or unbidden – behind the sofa, under the sofa, on the sofa and within the sofa.

"Deepak Chopra says that if you can't find God in a blade of grass, if you can't find God in the eyes of another being or in the smile of a child, you will not discover God in a book of religion.

"The impression we are often given is that we have to do something in order to find God: 'accept' Jesus, read the Bible, pray, go to Church etc. However, there is nothing we have to do in order to find God but open our eyes. We already know God, we just don't necessarily use that name to describe her. God is part of all our lives. When we experience unconditional love from a friend, we experience God. When we sense the wondrous grace of another day dawning, we experience God. When we reach out to another person with compassion, when we resist an injustice, when we sacrifice our own comfort to make another person

comfortable, when we forgive until it hurts, we experience God. There is a magnet in each of us that repels hatred and injustice, and impels us towards kindness, integrity and friendship. Inasmuch as we surrender to that magnetic force, rather than work against it, we connect with the presence of God within.

"Joan Chittister, a wonderful Catholic nun whose writings constantly inspire me, says, 'Wherever I am, whatever my state of mind, God is the spirit within me, and the life in me. God is there for the taking. God is the air I breathe, and God is the path I take. God is the womb in which I live.'

"This description of God differs radically from the vision of God we are often given: the 'man upstairs', the supernatural being 'out there' who created the world and occasionally intervenes in it. What Joan Chitister points to is a God who surrounds us, who is the breath in our lungs, the very basis of our existence, a God it is impossible to avoid even when we ignore her."

Opening our Eyes:

I will come back to Dave Tomlinson, but I would like to share two passages on mindfulness from the Buddhist perspective, because this is how we 'open our eyes' and find that ultimate reality is 'there for the taking'. Dave Tomlinson and Joan Chittister do make it sound as if the process is quite easy, but there has to be a fundamental honesty and realism in our practice, which I think the following passage illustrates. We are, after all, uncovering reality. Satipatthana is the main and most profound teaching of the Buddha on mindfulness, and Bhikkhu Analayo's book is a very erudite analysis of it. The principal Pali word for mindfulness is 'Sati' and since Analayo uses that word throughout, I will keep it rather than having to translate each time it comes up.

"Sati can interact with other, much more active factors of the mind, yet by itself it does not interfere. Uninvolved and detached receptivity as one of the crucial characteristics of Sati forms an important aspect of the teachings of several modern meditation teachers and scholars. They emphasise that the purpose of sati is solely to make things conscious, not to eliminate them. Sati silently observes, like a spectator at a play without in any way interfering. Some refer to this non-reactive feature of sati as 'choiceless' awareness. 'Choiceless' in the sense that with such awareness one remains impartially aware, without reacting with likes or dislikes. Such silent and non-reactive observation can have quite active consequences. Yet sati's activity is confined to detached observation. That is, sati does not change experience but deepens it.

"This non-interfering quality of sati is required to enable one clearly to observe the building up of reactions and their underlying motives. As soon as one becomes in any way involved in a reaction, the detached observational vantage point is immediately lost. The detached receptivity of sati enables one to step back from the situation at hand and thereby to become an unbiased observer of one's subjective involvement and of the entire situation.

"This detached but receptive stance of satipatthana constitutes a 'middle path' since it avoids the two extremes of suppression and reaction. The receptivity of sati, in the absence of both suppression and reaction, allows personal shortcomings and unjustified reactions to unfold before the watchful stance of the meditator, without being suppressed by the affective investment inherent in one's self-image. Maintaining the presence of sati in this way is closely related to the ability to tolerate a high degree of 'cognitive resonance', since the witnessing of one's own shortcomings ordinarily leads to unconscious attempts at reducing the resulting feeling of discomfort by avoiding or even altering the perceived information."



The Gyalwang Drukpa puts this in the context of everyday life: "If you can go about your day-to-day life with a little more mindfulness, you will find life infinitely more relaxing and rewarding. Mindfulness encourages appreciation, which in turn helps us to be

more generous and kind to others, which in turn is bound to bring us happiness. With mindfulness you can make even the most mundane of activities something to enjoy, like doing the washing up, and it will also help you to stop and think for a moment before you react to situations, before your anger suddenly bursts forth or before you speak harsh words without thinking. And if you can make mindful decisions, then you will be following your path, taking your time to choose but also accepting whatever may happen because you are following your heart.

"I don't wish for us all to become terribly conservative and abandon the laughter and spontaneity in our lives or to become very slow in all our decisions or actions because we then start analysing and over-thinking everything. The key with mindfulness is that it is about developing your inner awareness rather than allowing your thoughts to take over. It is to allow all your senses in on the act and your heart too. Really it is about opening your eyes, taking a breath and seeing your world around you and richly experiencing everything you do, from a walk in the park to dealing with a very awkward person at work with patience and maybe a little understanding, however challenging they are! Wherever you are, whatever you are doing, you apply the skill of investigating your mind. It needs to be there all the time, in daily life, rather than something you bring out of the dusty cupboard just once every so often."

Breathing:

So whatever we notice and take in mindfully puts us in contact with that pure spark of divinity which is within each of us. Dave Tomlinson calls this the Spirit. He says, "If we think of God as Spirit, then, like the air, God is all around us and within us. We cannot escape God, because we breathe God constantly. God is the breath in our lungs and the oxygen of our soul. I think of breathing as a sacred act, a prayer without words, a spiritual practice. Every breath is a gracious gift of life. When I sit calmly and become aware of my breathing, I cannot but feel gratitude, but I also feel peace.

"Breathing is the most primitive form of prayer we have. Nothing is more soothing and relaxing than quiet, conscious breathing. It calms fears and discharges panic. It grounds us in the body, re-centres the mind and spirit, and helps us to get the world in perspective.



"Sometimes when I have a church full of non-churchgoers, gathered for a baptism or a wedding, I invite them to take a few moments of quiet, to place their feet on the floor, then breathe and focus on the young child or couple. After a short while I ask them to open their eyes, then tell them that they have just prayed. Conscious breathing is one of the simplest and most effective ways of connecting us to this life force, which is God. That is how close God is: as near to us as our breath."

Preparation for meditation:

This leads me neatly to our period of meditation of effective, silent prayer. Moving into a comfortable position relaxing the body and letting go of the efforts, difficulties, triumphs and worries of our day. Bringing ourselves into the peace and the completeness of the present moment. Noticing our breathing as it slows and deepens. Giving attention to any points of tension or discomfort in the body. If you use a sacred word you might notice its rhythm, perhaps co-ordinating it with the rhythm of the breathing. Or you may wish simply to focus on a candle or to follow the breath. Returning to our meditation object or point of focus whenever we are aware of the mind wandering off, in a spirit of choiceless awareness.

We will meditate together for 25 minutes.

Post Meditation:

I shall end with some words of St. Teresa of Liseux:

“If I did not suffer minute by minute, it would be impossible for me to be patient, but I see only the present moment, I forget the past and take good care not to anticipate the future.

“If we grow disheartened, if we sometimes despair, it is because we have been dwelling on the past or the future.”

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:

The bad Christian’s manifesto - Rev. Dave Tomlinson - Hodder and Stoughton

Satipatthana – The direct Path to Realisation – Bikkhu Analayo – Windhorse Publications

Everyday enlightenment - Walking the Path to Happiness in the Modern World – His Holiness the Gyalwang Drukpa – Michael Joseph

St. Teresa of Liseux

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