

Such a text is of course rooted in the practice of meditation; it is a teaching about meditation which will interest mainly the people who practice it. But we have chosen this text for another purpose. It speaks about experience which is often a neglected aspect of our daily practice as Christians: yet, experience is the root of our faith because it allows us to integrate the teaching and to make it personal. Without our own experience the teaching remains a dead belief. The teaching of the Church becomes alive because, thanks to our own experience, we become able to recognise in our daily life the more hidden reality which the teaching is trying to make us aware of. Our personal experience is rarely very striking; it is pretty mundane and simple, but it nevertheless makes the presence of God recognisable in our own life.

This text, like any text, says things which may talk to me and not to you, may to some seem abstract or difficult to grasp. To some, it may even seem contrary to our beliefs or experience. This text has to challenge us to see more clearly into our own life. We do not need to agree with everything it says. What seems abstract or difficult to understand can be an opportunity to discover something unknown to us; it may of course also remain completely strange to us. The importance is not the text itself - which is only a tool - but it is the path we can share together today.

When one speaks of experience of God, one might think of great events with supernatural effects and exceptional powers. I imagine that very few people experience God in this way. For most of us, God is a hidden presence which is difficult to identify, yet real. God is like the wind; we cannot see him, but we can recognise his influence and effects on our surrounding: the wind is not visible but we can observe how it moves the leaves. God is also like the sun; we are not aware of his presence and how, without it, everything would die; yet from time to time we remember his presence, we open more consciously to his warmth and we marvel at what we forget too often. It seems to me that, as soon we have a glimpse of the divine presence in our life, it vanishes. God seems to make himself available only just enough to make us thirsty for more, but not enough to allow us to grasp a clear image of him. It is like a quick flash; we do not know exactly what we have perceived or even whether we have experienced anything real. God cannot be seen, God cannot be caught, yet he is real and central to our lives and it is why we experience his presence all the time, not so much in supernatural events but mainly in everyday mundane living: in nature, in a landscape, in a smile, in our own transformation, in our knowledge of ourselves, in community, in the discovery of the other.....

Because of this difficulty to identify what our experience of God is, I propose that we start our reflection about experience today with the minimal statement that our experience is real because it is what gives a concrete body and meaning to what we believe about God. Even if it is minimal, it is what roots our faith into our personal life. Inasmuch as God is a true reality for us, then our experience is also a true one. It is difficult to speak about it, but it is also important to reflect on it, because it is what makes our faith real. It seems to me very important to look deeper at our own experience, because the teaching of the Church explains mainly who God is and what we have to believe; it rarely helps us to identify in our own life how this discrete presence of God is felt daily. We have to learn to trust our own intuitions and our capacity to listen to God; our daily experience is the raw material of our faith which the teaching helps us better to understand. Sharing is an excellent tool for discovering more about these experiences and our small community is the ideal place for this sharing; we need each others help and support in this search.

10.30 am **Presentation of one another:** am I attracted by new experiences?

10.45 am **A) Spiritual experiences and harmony:
uniqueness and repetition**

Let's read John Main, paragraphs. 2 and 3:

The wholeness of our life is the harmony of our experience, both its inner harmony, the inner sense it persuades us it has, and the harmony with which it resonates, its reality stretching far beyond the frontiers of our limited experience; the reality which we come in time humbly to realise contains our experience. Experience, though, does not become significant experience, our life does not become charged with meaning, until it begins to repeat itself. The meaning and inner purposefulness of our life usually reveals itself in the pattern of our experience; every pattern is the projection of creative repetition. But of course the pattern is never completed. At least, it can only be said to be complete within the infinite space of God's inner expansion, where all is both new and familiar - eternity. Any fixed pattern we try to impose on our life falsifies the truth of the mystery that is eternally present and so unpredictable. Rigidity is an attempt to evade the challenge our life constantly places before us to remain continually open to the unfolding of our destiny. It is fear of the expanding interiority of truth that tempts us into trying to protect the ground gained rather pushing the frontiers further, to self-cultivation rather than selfless exploration. Our insensitivity to the mystery of life can wrap itself around us like a strangling vine, stifling the circulation of our spirit and making us ever more closed in upon an examination of our own pain. In the outward circumstances of our life this lingering spiritual death is manifested in the diminishing returns of our attempts at self-distraction, in the deepening fear of boredom. The kingdom of the ego is a grey world without laughter.

If we live merely within the perspective of a fixed pattern, from day to day, we are wasting our deepest response to life on what is passing away. We have not engaged with life on the level at which things endure. To remain thus unaware of the eternal that unfolds itself within our lives out of our inmost being is the saddest fate that can befall anyone. And the great Christian insight is that this is a fate that need have no power over us. 'Fear not, for I have overcome the world.'

Our experience gives meaning to our lives; it allows us to discover an unknown order or harmony, which may not be self-evident. Some experiences are unique, and some are repetitive although never completely identical in their repetition. Some experiences are just routine, and others can change our lives deeply. I invite you to investigate which experiences in your life have changed you deeply.

Try first to remember one experience which has been unique but has changed the course of your life or at least has been an eye opener, an AHA moment. It does not need to be something very extraordinary; it can be a very simple experience but which has been significant for you. **Own example**

And then try to remember a more repetitive spiritual experience. By that I mean an experience that has repeated itself over time and so has become a pattern. It could be in your practice of prayer, in your participation in Sunday masses, or at work with colleagues... Look at how repetition has been a key factor. And how, through repetition, the pattern evolves. **Own example**

In these 2 categories of experiences, try to see what has helped you discover an unknown aspect of God or of faith. See how faith and experience combine.

Which experiences have changed your life (1 unique and 1 repetitive)?

How does a pattern appear? Which role does repetition play?

Are faith and experience opposed?

(personal reflection 10" + group 30")

11.30pm B) Consciousness of Being and gift of vision: no expectation yet divine perspective

Let's read John Main, paragraphs 4 and 5:

Our gift of spiritual knowledge, our capacity to know by participation, is our gift of life. Whatever our experience may be, it recalls us to the grounding realisation that we are and, in contacting this ground of our being - the consciousness that we simply are - we are filled with joy: and the consciousness that Being is Joy once more transforms the pattern of our experience. 'Though our outward humanity is in decay, day by day we are inwardly renewed' (2 Cor. 4:16). Each time we meditate we return to this grounding consciousness of Being, and each time we return to the changing pattern of our life more firmly rooted in our being and so more able to perceive life as mystery and to communicate this perception in joy to others. Our ability to see this is itself the gift of our creation - the gift that is being given with ever-increasing generosity moment by moment. Our creation is ever expanding in harmony with the overflowing love occurring in the secret depths of the Father's timeless mystery. As his being fills our being, our heart is purified and we are led deeper into the vision of God that is his own infinitely generous self-knowledge.

This gift of vision is the wonder of our creation. The perspective with which we are empowered to see is the reality within which we live and move and have our being. It is not a gift we possess but one that we receive and, in returning, receive again more fully. That is why, however long we have been meditating, we meditate without demands and without expectation. Thus the knowledge that God has created us to share in takes possession of us - in a way without our knowing it, yet the consciousness we gain is complete as the self-consciousness we lose could never be. We live no longer but Christ lives fully in us.

Silent meditation or simply silence or prayer make us aware that we are. Not that we are what we are, but that we simply are. We do not need to be something: a woman, a father, a child, an Australian, etc. We simply are alive independent of any attributes or roles. The practice of silence is mainly an exercise which makes us aware of our own experience of simply being. It seems paradoxical but we can also experience this mindfulness of being at any time of the day, even during our busiest activities.

Usually we are very much absorbed in what we do and in what we want. Rarely do we stop in order to just be. It is essential we learn just to be. I find it interesting to reflect on what is the essence of being, of doing and having, how these 3 states are not necessarily related: we can simply be without doing nor having, or be busy doing without any awareness of really being.

How do you become more aware that you are? Concentrating on your breath, becoming aware of your own skin or pulse, listening to what is around you, etc. there are many means which help. What is your experience? How do you practice being?

And John Main writes about our participation in divine knowledge: “This gift of vision is the wonder of our creation. The perspective with which we are empowered to see is the reality within which we live and move and have our being. It is not a gift we possess but one that we receive.”

What is in your own experience this gift of vision, this divine perspective, this knowledge that God has created us to share in? How is this divine knowledge linked with our awareness of Being? When you simply are, do you perceive things differently?

Reflect on the relations between being, doing and having.

How do you become more aware that you simply are?

What is, in your own experience, this gift of vision, this divine perspective, this knowledge that God has created us to share in?

What has this divine perspective to do with Being?

(with your neighbour 5” + all 15”)

12.00 pm Silent Meditation (20”)

12.30 pm LUNCH

**13.30 pm C) To be self-centred / to find one’s own centre:
to be brought to completion**

Let’s read John Main, paragraphs 9 and 10:

The besetting fault of Christians in every age is that they become so busy about so many things that they forget that only 'one thing is necessary': to be one as he is One. The plan being worked out in the life of each of us is the same as that being realised in all creation, the bringing into unity with Christ of all that is. It is a unity that lies beyond our capacity to describe. No part of us is left outside the final mystery of oneness. (...)

We will then have begun to know, and our daily meditation will confirm and deepen the knowledge, that the first sphere of this great movement into unity is the achievement of wholeness within ourselves. As the mantra¹ roots itself in our being it gently but surely draws all the distracted and scattered parts of our being together. It calms and disciplines the unruliness of our mind, the tree filled with the chattering monkeys. It takes us beyond our self-centred attachment to our own moods and feelings, beyond all desire including spiritual desire. It takes us too through the turbulent periods in which our unconscious fears or anxieties are run off, often disappearing for ever without our knowing what they were. Through all this the mantra leads us into the discipline that allows us to be silent and it is in

¹ Mantra: the word which is repeated at each breath during the Christian meditation.

the silence that our spirit naturally expands. From day to day also our inner confidence in the reality of our own being is deepened and the fear that we are slipping into non-being or that we do not exist at all, which are the besetting fears of our time, are exorcised. The unfolding of our own harmony is the experience of wonder and beauty that allows us to recognise the wonder and beauty of all creation. The wonder is that we are becoming fully conscious of our own creation, knowing that we are being brought to completion. Yet we are not as it were witnesses at our own creation. We are at one with our creator and the uncovering of our own harmony serves to set up a resonance with the source of all harmony. To find our own centre is the reverse of becoming self-centred. It is to awaken to the centre beyond ourselves, whence we are created and to which we return with Christ, the centre where we find ourselves and him in that experience of communion we call the Kingdom.

We are called to harmony, first as wholeness within ourselves, then becoming one with our Creator. “To find our own centre is the reverse of becoming self-centred” writes John Main. He describes here a very special quality of harmony and peace which we can find in many ways, among them in silence and prayer; he says that we can become more centred through our practice in silent meditation or prayer. How do you understand this statement, in your own experience? What is this harmony, and this wholeness within ourselves, this becoming one with the Creator? What is the difference between self-centredness and being centred? What does it mean to be centred?
Whiteboard??

We propose you go now for a silent walk and meditate about this meaning of being centred, and we meet here again in one hour and share among us what we have discovered and experienced in our own life. You can use of course other forms of exploration: crayons and paper....)

Can we find harmony and peace in silence and prayer?

How do you understand that in your own experience?

What is this harmony, and this wholeness within ourselves, this becoming one with the creator?

What is the difference between self-centredness and being centred?

What does it mean to be centred?

(walk 45” + all 25”)

14.45 pm Prayer of Intercession.

15.00 pm AFTERNOON TEA

15.30 pm D) Ordinariness of life and being One: fidelity to daily practice.

Let’s read John Main, paragraphs. 9 and 11. (We have already read the first 6 lines today):

The besetting fault of Christians in every age is that they become so busy about so many things that they forget that only 'one thing is necessary': to be one as he is One. The plan being worked out in the life of each of us is the same as that being realised in all creation, the bringing into unity with Christ of all that is. It is a unity that lies beyond our capacity to describe. No part of us is left outside the

final mystery of oneness. This oneness is at the same time the primal simplicity of being, the unrefracted consciousness of innocence, and the highest point of evolutionary creation, the omega point that is the genesis of infinite growth. We do not, however, need to be able to describe or even understand this mystery in which our own deepest life-process and inner meaning is rooted. All we need is to have begun to experience this plan as a fully personal reality in our own heart, to have known our creation in its dimension of mystery and to have rejoiced in this knowledge of the One who is One.

I spend much of my time talking with good people who would agree with this at the level of theory and yet are often reluctant to set out on the pilgrimage that realises it in practice. The ideas and the language we use to express them can become so intoxicating in themselves that they make the pilgrimage, in its wonderful but relentless ordinariness, seem by contrast very mundane. Our distracted need for novelty is better satisfied by the wares of the spiritual supermarket than by the simple labour asked of us in the garden of our daily meditation. We need to be recalled to the practical simplicity of the way in which the mystery of life is made real for us, or rather perhaps how we are made real in the mystery. We are recalled in so many ways it is difficult to understand how the tradition that teaches us this simplicity is so often read, preached and lectured on and yet so rarely followed. It seems to me more and more that any talking about prayer that does not recognise that the talking must come to an end and the practice of it begin soon has little value in leading us into the actual experience of the mystery. The gospel itself lies across our theorising paths at every turn with its implacable injunction to 'become as little children'. In the mantra we have a means that is at one with our end: a way that is simple and absolute. Our daily fidelity to meditation and our fidelity to the mantra throughout the meditation is the sign that we have heard and attended the gospel's call. Each day that rests on the twin pillars of the morning and evening meditation is a step on the pilgrimage from theory into reality, from idea into experience as we turn aside from all complexity, all trivial concerns, simply to be one in Him, with Him and through Him.

John Main writes that the plan of creation consists in the bringing into unity with Christ of all that is. Christ in his last prayer to the Father prays that we become all one as he is one with the Father. This Oneness is a core reality in Christianity. What does it mean in fact for us in our daily life? Do we experience a sense of Oneness? This dimension seems often a bit abstract to us, as if it were reserved for only a very few people who are most advanced on their spiritual path. Yet I believe that it is something we can experience too: oneness with the surrounding beauty of nature, a deep feeling of belonging; compassion is nothing else than oneness with the other; etc. Oneness is difficult to become aware of: what is helping to experience it?

In John Main's text another dimension appears to be essential: the simplicity and regularity of our own spiritual practice of prayer or silent meditation. Day-to-day life seems very mundane, yet it is in this ordinariness and simplicity that we can find this sense of oneness. We have to de-clutter our lives in order to find peace and silence. It seems very paradoxical but the experience of God is given to the ones who are child like. This experience seems not for the sophisticated but is for the simple-of-heart.

How are ordinariness and unity linked?

(personal reflection 5-10" and then we will listen to a talk of the Benedictine monk Bede Griffiths who will talk to us how even the new science is re-discovering that all things in this universe including ourselves, are indeed interconnected in relationship networks of being.

Talk: Fr Bede Griffiths - Physics and the new creation (45")

How are ordinariness and unity linked?

Oneness is difficult to become aware of: what is helping to experience it?

(all 20")

16.50 pm Conclusion: Prayer. (with action)

For you, deep stillness of the silent inland
For you, deep blue of the desert skies
For you flame red of the rocks and stones
For you, sweet water from hidden springs

*hands stretched out and open
raise outstretched hands to sky
hammer fist on palm
with two hands scoop water & drink*

From the edges, seek the heartland,
And when you're burnt by the journey,
May the cool winds of the hovering Spirit
Soothe and replenish you.

*outstretched hands to heart
hands together on chest, head bowed
waving movements above head &
Wash over head and face.*