

Our Experience: the Silence of Real Knowledge

1) Mystery of life

One of the challenges we all face is to be continually sensitive to the unfolding of God's plan in our lives: to give free and open assent to the destiny his love is shaping for us. It is so easy to lose that sensitivity. So much of our life is dominated by the mechanical, by the response that is expected or demanded of us, by attempts to predict or anticipate growth, that we are always in danger of losing contact with life as a mystery - and so with life itself. When we cease to respond to life with wonder we begin to understand it merely as a problem, a series of complicated interlocking processes. But our life is whole. And the wholeness is both its mystery and its simplicity.

2) Harmony of our experience

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.

3) Divine perspective

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.' Whatever else befalls us the divine perspective can be a redeeming reality for us because all possible human experience, all reality, has been shot through with Christ's redeeming love. We are each of us called to know within this perspective, to be ourselves wholly penetrated with his consciousness, and we are so called simply because we are human and our destiny is to become fully human.

- 4) Consciousness of Being** 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.
- 5) Gift of vision** 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.
- 6) Christ's light** Christ is light. He is the light that gives range and depth to our vision. He is also, in his fully realised human consciousness, the eyes with which we see the Father in the divine perspective. Without his light our vision would be tied to the partial dimension and our spirit could not soar above itself into the infinite liberty and crystal clarity of the unified state. Our consciousness would, however wonderful, remain an observer on the periphery of his space, unfulfilled by union with his consciousness, unco-ordinated with his Body. Without his Spirit dwelling in our mortal bodies and opening up the infinite

dimension within our spirit, we would be like men restricted by their own innate limitations from moving freely in the liberty they have been given. But the light that transforms our weakness, that makes our limitations the crucible in which his power is brought to perfection, has been freely given, poured into our heart as the pure effulgence of the Father, for Christ is the radiance of the Father. The light we need to empower our vision is less than this radiance, the glory of God itself. 'For the same God who said, "Out of darkness let light shine," has caused his light to shine within us, to give us the light of revelation - the revelation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6).

7) Now

For those of us humbly treading the pilgrimage of prayer into this experience of light this is the only fundamental knowledge we need. It is the word that summons us out of the fixed pattern and inspires us to align ourselves on the expand reality, to place our centre of consciousness beyond the limits of our own self-preoccupation and to discover that our centre is in God. How any of us come to begin this journey is not important as that we do in fact begin. To begin, it is only necessary to enter into one moment of commitment - one chink in the wall of the ego allows in the light that will flow more and more powerfully and will steadily overcome all that prevents complete translucence. This moment of commitment is always upon us. It is never an absent ideal, a future possibility but always a present reality. The only question is whether we are sufficiently present to ourselves to be able to see it, to hear the invitation and respond. Every moment is the moment because all time has been charged with divine meaning. Our age is the age of Christ, the age of the glory of God, and awaits the completion of its transformation by our awakening, our realisation. 'Now is the acceptable time.'

8) Day-to-day life

Our day-to-day life is of vital importance, as this mystery of transformation is worked out in us and through us by the power of Christ. No detail is insignificant if it is seen in the true light because the reassimilation of all creation in Christ is to be complete. And so our hours of prayer are of supreme importance within the continuous expansion of the mystery, if our spirit is to expand in harmony with it and receive the life and light it offers us. Nothing should be allowed to retard this process of expansion or to obscure the power of the light. Indeed, nothing can, except our own heedlessness. .

9) To be One

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.

10) Finding our own centre

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 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.

11) Relentless ordinariness

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

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

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. The teaching of every major Christian source points to the same set of simple truths: our way into the mystery of life is the way of becoming centred in God, the way of prayer. For John Cassian² it was prayer as the way of poverty, a becoming 'grandly poor' in the utter simplicity of the single verse. For the *Cloud of Unknowing*³, too, it is prayer as a journey of progressive simplification, a going beyond all words and thoughts in the stark simplicity of the one little word. 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.

12) Power of silence The, silence releases the power of the glory of God in-our heart. Indeed we find the silence itself as a power within us, the power of the Spirit who in silence is loving to all, and the silence we find through the poverty of our mantra. As we approach that profound silence reigning in our heart that is the Spirit, we know that it is itself the light, the glory that beckons us onwards. And as we pass more fully into the transforming aura of this silence the greater becomes our wonder, the deeper our joy that we are on this pilgrimage at all.

(Extract from John Main OSB, *The Present Christ, Further steps in Meditation*. Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1985)

² John Cassian: monk (355 - 435)

³ Cloud of Unknowing: English mystic (12 or 13th century).