

Cultivating Love and Desire (III) – belonging

Romans 8:28-39 & 12:1- 5; 1 Corinthians 10:15-17; 11:17-22, 27-34;

Luke 22:14-20

Two weeks ago, in the first of this series, *Cultivating Love and Desire*, I shared with you my frustration at the elusiveness of sustaining a relationship with God which empowered us to live as we really wanted to but seemed incapable of doing. I finished by quoting the words of Saint Paul, who, having lamented this very dilemma in his own life, then urges us to lay hold of the *life in the Spirit* and our future hope in Christ.

The question I addressed last week was: how does this happen? How do we move Christian spirituality and ethics away from impossible idealism and appropriate this life in Christ's Spirit to ourselves? How can we cultivate this devotion to God, this *empowering* love of the Spirit filled life? How can we make our relationship with God as real and life giving as it is with our lover or family or friend, so that we do what the law calls out for us to do? And how can what the law requires become what we *really* desire to do, so that we can actually live an everyday spiritual life which sustains and nurtures – a Jesus centred spirituality of the road??

In answer I suggested this had to do with three things: 'revelation', 'encounter', and 'surrender'.

Revelation

Living a satisfying, sustainable spiritual life in God, is to do with *revelation* because if we are to live such a life we need to know the truth about ourselves, the truth about our situation and the truth about God.

According to the scriptures, we are incapable of seeing this truth without help. Rather, it is God's Word, *working within us*, that reveals this truth to us. Put

differently: The basis of an empowered Christian spirituality is being *formed in and by* God's word so that we "see" things as Jesus does.

John's Gospel, of course, links this also to the work of the Spirit of Truth,¹ the one who comes along side to show what we need to know. Yet this kind of revelation is no passive, mystical experience. Rather, it involves robust engagement with both the scriptures and God's world. In this wrestling, out of the conflict, we are formed in God's word.

Encounter

Secondly, I argued, this life in the Spirit has to do with *encounter* with Jesus – an encounter which overwhelms me and elicits from me a sense of deep *gratitude* for all that Christ has done for me and is my inheritance in him.

The paradigm here was our Gospel reading of Jesus' encounter with the sinful woman at the house of Simon. We could also cite Zacchaeus' response to Jesus, where in joy this deep sinner, put things right with those he defrauded our times over.² In either case, we see that *gratitude* is the motive force in fostering our desire *for* God and empowering our life *in* God.

Surrender

Thirdly, we saw that this spirituality was to do with *surrender*: a life given over to following Jesus. This is what Paul means by life in the Spirit.

According to him, this life in the Spirit, is the Spirit *controlled* life – life not enslaved to our human nature with its superficial desires and broken ideals, but a life lived in *accordance* with the Spirit of God;³ and this Spirit controlled life is generated from the Spirit of God *dwelling within* us, giving us the *desire for intimacy* with God – indeed, to call God *Matua*.⁴

What's more, says Paul, it is the Spirit's mysterious working within us which

¹ Jn.16:4b-15.

² Lk.19:1-9.

³ Rm.8:5-9. See also Gal.5:24-25.

⁴ Rm.8:14-16.

enables us to pray and so sustains us in this life in Christ.⁵

In summary then, so far I have argued that a sustainable spirituality, one that nurtures and empowers, brings life and freedom instead of guilt and bondage, will centre around the dynamics of *'revelation'*, *'encounter'* and *'surrender'*.

This week I want to briefly look at the fourth ingredient: *'belonging'*

Belonging

In the first part of our reading today from Paul's letter to the Roman Christians, we heard how this life in the Spirit is embedded in the eternal purposes of God. God works all things "together for good... for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose". God takes us as well as out of our sinful ways and works his good purpose in us and through us. And Paul tells us this purpose was to form a large family in the image of his Son – a family who belong together because they belong to Jesus and, in how they live, "look" like him.⁶

This is no mere theological side note. Rather it is an essential requirement of the life in the Spirit Paul has just described, since the Spirit filled life is *sustained by God* working through his body, not by us trying to be the best we can. Whereas we are mired in conflicting desires and failed attempts at individual self-improvement, in our interdependent life in Christ we find a liberty that lasts and is satisfying since it is achieved by God.

All this comes from God. As we heard, later in his letter to Rome Paul writes:

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

(Romans 12:4-5)

⁵ Rm.8:26-27.

⁶ Rm.8:28-29.

Paul says this following his earlier challenge:

Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is *God* who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is *Christ Jesus*, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

(Romans 8:33-34)

Paul is saying that it is in the activity of God, purposed in eternity and enacted in Christ, which secures our life together in God against the vicissitudes of life. *Nothing*, Paul asserts, can separate us from God's *love* as found in Christ, through whom "we are more than conquerors".⁷

Belonging to such a family whose foundations stretch from the beginning to the end of time and out side of time, gives us strength. It is what keeps us going. Individually we lapse. In the new people of God, living with each other and for each other in Christ, we thrive.

In the next two chapters Paul looks at the veracity of this claim. "After all", it could be asked, "God made these same promises to the children of Israel and where are they now in God's scheme of things?" Paul argues that God has by no means finished with Israel but rather that belonging to the people of God has been opened up to all. The important thing is not privilege, but our new life found *in* Christ – the one who has died and risen and gives us new life together in himself. This is what the life in the Spirit looks like.

Three times in chapter eight Paul speaks of being "indwelt" by God's Holy Spirit.⁸ In chapter twelve, as we have noted, he again comes back to the life in the Spirit, Paul emphasising the *belonging* that this life implies. Because we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit we belong to one another. This has implications for how we then live. Paul goes on to describe the contours of the Spirit life of the community:

⁷ Rm.8:37.

⁸ Rm.8:9-11.

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, but be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all... ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink’... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

(Romans 12:9-21)

So, for Paul, this is what being “members” of each other means – it means *belonging* and it is a belonging to each other which flows from our belonging to God as those indwelt by God’s Spirit. Such a belonging is empowering.

Here is a description of a happy revolution that turned the Roman empire on its head and could do the same for our highly individualised, fragmented and disorientated society today.

Food for the Journey

For Paul, this is expressed powerfully in the Lord’s supper which he talks about in his first letter to the Corinthians. For Paul it’s a kind of enacted parable. In this “meal”, mundane actions break open a new reality as we participate in what God is doing in our midst. When we set aside the wine and break the bread we are in fact sharing in the blood and body of Christ.

“Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all *share*

the one bread”, writes Paul.⁹

The word *share* here is *koinonia*. It means a sharing of something in common with others and is also translated as “communion”. The idea is one of mutual participation. It has the sense of a giving of one’s self.

In Acts 2:44 and 42 we read that after the day of Pentecost “all who believed were together and had all things in common; [and] they *devoted* themselves to the apostle’s teaching (the word), and *koinonia* (fellowship), the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

So here are the same elements found in the Spirit community straight after pentecost which Paul talks of in his letters to the Roman and Corinthian believers – word, sacrament, fellowship and prayer.

At core in the drinking of the wine and the eating of the bread, then, is not only communion with God, but *communion with each other* as members of one another through the indwelling Spirit of Jesus . It is in the enacting of *this* communion – this indwelling of God within and among us – that we discover *power* in our individual life in Christ while also *enhancing* our belonging to Christ together.

This is why for Paul, the wealthy believers not sharing with the poorer ones was such a travesty and so serious. How could there be any participation in the life of God without participation in the lives of one another? Such a spirituality negates the meaning of being indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

Ultimately it *disempowers* any attempt made by those involved – both those sharing and those being denied – to lay hold of a truly liberating spirituality in their daily life and witness.

⁹ 1Cor.10:16-17.

A ‘Spirituality of the road’?

So how does this relate to *our* quest for a sustainable spirituality?

I can't help but think of the radical implications of Paul's argument for our life in Christ. Many of the world's poor live in the same areas of the globe where our own church, not to mention the other ancient churches and the rapidly growing new churches, are concentrated. As we have noted often, the typical Anglican is black, she is under 20 and she lives in East or West Africa. The only thing which separates her and us is geography. We when gather around the Lord's table to share in the body and blood of Christ, we gather with her united in the Spirit. Yet *how can we* unless we also share the bread and wine with her, not to mention her children and extended family?

This leads to the topic of my sermon next week: prophecy against the subversion of desire and the opportunity this brings for a us to practice a genuinely liberating spirituality of the road.