

Cultivating Love and Desire (IV)

– a spirituality of desire

Ecclesiastes 5:11 f.f.; 1 Timothy 6:7-19; Luke 18:18-24

Over the last few weeks we have been looking at how we can cultivate a sustainable “spirituality of the road”, which empowers us to live as we really want to but seem incapable of doing. We have seen that this question was of concern to Saint Paul who was dismayed at his own inability to live such a life. I have argued that a rule based spirituality will not achieve this, for, in the end, all of us live as we *want* to, not as we say we would *like* to.

Taking this as a starting point I have argued (along with St Augustine), that Christian spirituality is about loving God and then doing what we want. Spirituality is about *desire*. It is only a life lived out of desire for God that we live the life of God – the Spirit *controlled* life, what St. Paul calls the Spirit *filled* life.

The question becomes: how do we achieve such a life? How do we become “indwelt”, as Paul describes it, by God’s Spirit and so enter into this abundant life God promises?

I have argued so far, that such a spirituality, a spirituality that nurtures and empowers, which brings life and freedom instead of guilt and bondage, will centre around the dynamics of ‘*revelation*’, ‘*encounter*’, ‘*surrender*’ and ‘*belonging*’:

- **revelation** from God through scripture as to our *real* needs;
- **encounter** with Jesus in an experience of his forgiveness;

- **surrender** or abandonment to a life in the Spirit;
- and **belonging** to the new people of God who are those who are indwelt and controlled by the Holy Spirit.

In short, I have argued that only in a deeply personal engagement with God which at the same time is experienced in a profoundly communal way, will we discover the gratitude and intimacy with God which will empower us to live as followers of Jesus in our everyday.

The Subversion of Desire

To conclude this series (if not my quest for such a life!), I want to return to the words of Jesus which we have heard today. These are recorded almost at the end of Luke’s narrative of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem – that place where he is to be “taken up”.

As we have noted before, throughout his narrative Luke has been concerned with Jesus’ call of his would-be followers to true discipleship. In a way, almost every passage from chapters 9 to 19 is concerned with this and explicitly so in at least six clusters of stories and teachings. What is especially noticeable is that in almost all of these the dangers of wealth as a hindrance to loving God are underlined: loving or serving “wealth” and “money”, laying up “treasure”, and being “rich” are all cited as issues for those who would be true disciples. All these warnings appear in our Gospel story today.

[start PPT]



Some time around 2006 I was driving through Johnsonville. There on a bus stop I saw just four words:

I want I need

Below it was a large picture of the then new iPod Nano which spoke even more clearly than the words:

I want I need I Pod



I wish I could say that little has changed since Jesus' time but it seems to me it has. We're not just talking about greed or the idolatry of money here.

On the face of it, there is nothing wrong with the desire for something beautiful and well designed, something that brings music and joy into our lives. But it seems to me there is something more going on than this; namely, the *subversion* of desire by a rampant, globally driven consumerism that comodifies all it touches.

First there is the creation of false need. Then its satisfaction. What is being promoted in the iPod is not just a device for listening to music but something that is to do with your identity. You have to have this gizmo

or you will be incomplete. But more, here is something you want: a globally marketed, mass produced gadget that is personal, will bring love, good times and community into your life – even, ironically, while it cuts you off from these with earplugs and fantasy images hardly connected to the concrete reality they purport to portray.

[PPT off]

The subversion of desire... We could point to any number of other examples though electronic communication media provide the more obvious ones. We all long for community, to connect, to be part of something bigger than ourselves, to transcend even while we develop our individuality. And so we settle for... Face Book. Instantly we can have 200 “friends” who are vitally interested in what we are doing at that very moment, in our opinions, and even if we are “in a relationship”. When have we ever been so connected yet so isolated?

The subversion of desire... That which we long for in the depths of our being, traded for the image, for the lie, for the superficial, for the instant, for the *false* desire of the abundant life achieved through consuming and what surrounds it: I work therefore I am. I earn therefore I am. I choose, therefore I am. I have therefore I am.

Think of our four components of a spirituality of desire: ‘*revelation*’, ‘*encounter*’, ‘*surrender*’ and ‘*belonging*’: The parallels between such a life found in Jesus and the lie which presents itself as the abundant life are striking:

- ‘*Revelation*’: never before have we been able to know so much but lived in such stupidity.
- ‘*Encounter*’: never before have we so instantly been able to access

and experience so much but *truly* encounter so little –let alone the living God.

- ‘Surrender’: not to the one who sets us free to become who and what we really are, but enslaved to seeing ourselves in the glitzy hall of mirrors of consumerist culture.
- ‘Belonging’: not to the company of the forgiven, indwelt and connected by the Holy Spirit, but to the front end curve of “early takers” or the masses of the market’s bell-shaped centre.

Religion, of course, is not exempted from all this. Skye Jethani, of *Christianity Today*, reports:

The Christian Booksellers Association represents the \$4.2 billion dollar industry that sells Bibles, books, bubble gum, bracelets, CDs and DVDs to Christian consumers. The economic power wielded by the CBA has grown so rapidly that in 2003 President George Bush even took notice.

Bush, whose ascent to the Presidency would not have been possible without conservative evangelicals, addressed the 2003 CBA Convention via video. “You know as I do the power of faith can transform lives,” he said. “You bring the Good News to a world hungry for hope and comfort and encouragement.” Interestingly, Bush was praising Christian retailers, not churches, for spreading the light of Christ.

The other memorable appearance at the 2003 Convention was actor / director, Mel Gibson. The Hollywood hero and ostensibly devout Roman Catholic gave a preview of his upcoming film, *The Passion of Christ*. Gibson’s movie was

promoted as a way for Christian retailers to leverage the Easter holiday. The CBA's President said, "we want to play a role in reclaiming the holiday for Christ! We want to draw people into our stores and drive seekers into the Church!" Of course, *The Passion of the Christ* became one of the most profitable films in history, grossing nearly \$700 million worldwide and triggering a new wave of Christian-friendly productions.¹

How then do we counter this subversion of desire and with it the subversion of our spiritual lives?

Cultivating a Spirituality of the Road

I have argued that the Christian life cannot be sustained through high minded idealism. Rather it is one lived out of desire for God. This is given content and shape through the practices of wrestling with scripture, engaging with God and belonging to each other in the unity of the Spirit.

These practices are essential if we are to discern the spirits ² that beset us – to exercise good judgement as to what is false and what is real desire and so what is true spirituality and what is self indulgent and destructive nonsense; to see the truth so as to be able to live it. At the same time these practices don't just happen. They require effort and *discipline*, *focus*, *restraint* and even *courage*.

Contrary to the orthodoxy of our time, desire is not about feeling, it is about the *motivation* that springs from virtue.

It is said our "habits form whatever virtues we have. Our practices form our faith. Do good until you become good. Preach faith until you have

¹ Skye Jethani, *The Devine Commodity*, Zondervan 2009, p18.

² 1Jn.4:1.

faith. This is what John Wesley, of all the Christian traditions, best taught.”³ Wesley could have added: attend church until you want to attend; go to that Life Group bible study until you want to go; love that difficult parishioner or work-mate until you really like them; serve until to want to serve; give until you want to give; work at reconciling with that alienated relative until you want to reconcile.

As Tom Wright puts it:

Virtue is what happens when wise and courageous choices have become “second nature.” Not “first nature”, as though they happened “naturally.” Rather, a kind of second-order level of “naturalness”. Like an acquired taste, such choices and actions, which started off being practiced with difficulty, ended up being, yes, “second nature”... and yes, you have to *want* to do it, [you have to want] to chose to learn it, [to want] to practice doing it. Again and again. But then, when the moment comes it happens “automatically”...⁴

So here, then, is the paradox: it is love and desire which empower us to live the abundant life, not rule keeping. Yet it is the disciplined practice together of the spiritual life which shapes our love and desire.

³ Robert Hill <http://deanhill.blogspot.com/2003/11/once-more-to-lake-habit.html> sourced 08-06-08

⁴ NT Wright, *after You Believe*, HarperOne, 2010. P.21.