

Brendan Hoban - Contemplative Prayer is all about Letting Go

Almost 50 years ago now, Thomas Green S.J. wrote a famous book called *When the Well Runs Dry*. While I have a general memory of what the book contains, I have a very particular memory of its opening words. Green related how on a walking tour of Ireland, he took shelter from the rain in a little hut at the side of the road. Inside was an old man who was praying. They fell into conversation and at one point they talked about prayer. Green asked the old man did he pray much to which the reply was ‘*Nearly all the time*’. There was a pause, and the old man continued, “*You know*” he said, matter of factly, “*The Father (God) is very fond of me*”.

Green, whose book is a classic of modern spirituality and who all his life was a practitioner of contemplative prayer (more about this later), understood exactly what the old man was saying – that he (the old man) had moved in his life across a telling boundary between a childish perception of God and a more contemplative space that has helped him to appreciate the presence of God in his life as a focus of a loving and fruitful relationship.

In my years in parish life I’ve met many people like that old man who instinctively knew, even though they might not have the words to articulate it, that God ‘*loved them beyond all their imagining*’ and that they succeeded for whatever reason to move from a childhood and childish image of a God of fear to a God of love and, in the process, who have discovered that (in the words of Donogh O’Shea, in his book *A Hundred Roads to Here, Introductions to Meditation*) ‘*God’s love is not a bounty we have to earn, but a gift that’s offered to us that’s life-enhancing, liberating and often a sheer joy*’.

And sadly too, I’ve met many people who have not transitioned from fear to love of God and in old age remain stuck on that road. So many wonderful, good-living, moral and holy people whose later years are blighted by worry, regret and unnecessary scrupulosity about sin and even imagined sin, when in the words of poet-mystic, Edwina Gately, *God only wants to look upon you with love*. Unlike the old man hiding from the rain, they don’t realise and will never know that God is very fond of them.

The word ‘*fond*’ denotes a close, personal, even intimate relationship that has words like ‘tenderness’, ‘warmth’ and ‘loving’ sewn into its seams. Factors that only very rarely describe the relationship most people have with God. We are more familiar with a more distant connection that has other more likely words associated with God – ‘obligation’, ‘duty’ and even sometimes ‘fear’.

This is very much reflected in the way we pray and in our formal contact with God. For some people prayer is an experience of being personally cherished – as in the fondness of a loving grandparent for his or her grandchild. For a small constituency of believers who call themselves ‘contemplatives’, (or like the old man, above, may

be unfamiliar with the word though not the experience), prayer is a joy – though challenging in its own way.

For most of the rest of us prayer is a duty, an obligation, a difficult and even more frustrating task with a distant, even colder God. While the contemplative warms to prayer, and the experience is usually (but not always) refreshing and life-enhancing for others it is less defined as it's by duty rather than satisfaction.

While for contemplatives like the old man who senses that God is '*very fond of him*', prayer reflects above all a sense of loving gratitude to God, for the second much more populous constituency of believers God is hard going. For contemplatives prayer is about sitting with God, basking in his (or her) company, '*saying nothing, doing nothing*' as one contemplative describes it, and not using formal, ritualized prayers like the Rosary. It's about indulging in the presence of a God who '*loves us beyond all our imaging*' and who longs to be with us, just to savour our company. For the rest of believers prayer is about '*saying our prayers*'.

That's why, for the latter group, 90 per cent of prayer is petition. Asking for things. Or imagining it's a way of getting God to do what we want him to do. Or reminding him of what we want, as if he doesn't know. Or, at times, attempting to manipulate God. The spiritual writer, Richard Rohr, draws a distinction between what he sees as a secular mind and a contemplative mind. The first is calculative, selfish, egocentric – what can I do to get God to love me? How can I get to heaven? The second is a right relationship with God, a new way of seeing things, a life transformed by a sense that God loves me '*beyond all imagining*'.

The difference is really between contemplative prayer – the way Jesus prayed – and '*saying our prayers*'.

So, what are the marks of contemplative prayer? How is it done? Fr Laurence Freeman, internationally renowned as an expert on the subject, helpfully explains contemplative prayer in five simple lessons:

- 1. To pray you don't have to go to church or kneel before the Blessed Sacrament. Go into your inner room and close the door. If you don't believe that God is with you where you are, you won't find him anywhere.*
- 2. Be silent. You don't need to babble prayers – as Jesus said about pagans, God knows what you need. You don't have to ask him. Jesus tells us.*
- 3. Let go of your worries and anxieties. Contemplation, Rohr writes, is essentially about letting go. Put your worries in a boat and let it down the river.*
- 4. Be attentive, it is the heart of contemplation. (This is why mindfulness is now so popular).*
- 5. Stay in the present moment. Don't worry about the past or the future. Contemplation is about sitting still and doing nothing – though sometimes doing nothing, as Donogh O'Shea points out, is the hardest thing to do.*

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