

Ridley Hall Spirituality Lecture 1-2007

The Christian journey

I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:12-14 NIV)

One of the best known Desert Fathers of 4th Egypt, St. Sarapion the Sindonite, travelled once on a pilgrimage to Rome. Here he was told of a celebrated recluse, a woman who lived always in one small room, never going out. Sceptical about her way of life – for he was himself a great wanderer – Sarapion called on her and asked: “Why are you sitting here?” To this she replied: “I am not sitting. I am on a journey.”¹

Baptism marks the beginning of a journey with God which continues for the rest of our lives, the first step in response to God’s love.²

As we set out on our journey today, we pray for the presence of Christ, who has gone this way before us.³

Spirituality is not taught by experts, but by fellow pilgrims.

General remarks

1. Metaphor of journey for reflecting on our spiritual life
 - a. obvious in one sense
 - i. life is easily portrayed as a [series of] journey[s];
 - ii. it is also a biblical metaphor;
 - iii. though not just a metaphor. It is a biblical reality as well.
 - b. not so obvious to some
 - i. runs counter to the idea of identity: either I am in Christ or I am not;
 - ii. can be a metaphor that privileges the idea of travelling rather than that of moving towards a goal, a final destination.
 - c. personally important to me
 - i. it has been for a very long time for me personally an overarching metaphor, a hermeneutical tool to the canon as a whole: the journey of God, into which I place my own tiny though not insignificant journey. [Miroslav Volf in *The End of Memory* describes the Exodus and the Passion of Christ [suffering, death and resurrection] as *regulative meta-memories*. In similar vein, for me, the metaphor of journey is *regulative*. It is part of the way in which I frame my self-understanding in

¹ Ware, Kallistos, ‘Signposts on the Way’ in http://orthodoxnorth.net/articles_of_interest.htm, accessed 08-08-05

² CW page 345. David Stancliffe says that “the Church of England’s initiation rites for a generation has been based on a theology that was almost exclusively paschal in tone.... It had almost entirely ignored the epicletic strand in the tradition, which speaks of baptism as a new birth by water and the Spirit and holds up Jesus’ baptism in Jordan as modelling baptism as the starting point of a pilgrimage journey towards God. [SL31 (2001) page 21]

³ CW Pastoral Services page 253 ‘On the Morning of the Funeral’

the light of Scripture, part also of the way in which I read my relationship with the Holy Trinity.]

- ii. Part of my self-understanding as a West Indian.
2. We'll use 4 themes to keep to time constraints: Journeying with Jesus; Journey into Growth; Journeys of Pilgrimage; Journeys of Adventure.

SECTION 1

Journeying with Jesus: 1st element

To journey with Jesus is to be a **follower**. In the Synoptics, the Christian journey is summarised by Jesus' words, "Follow me." It is a journey of learners [disciples] with the Teacher. It is a powerful way of locating me spiritually 'behind' Jesus.

1. In following Jesus we see the world through his eyes [e.g. of wildflowers]
2. In following Jesus we:
 - learn how to carry out God's mission: "I will make you fish for people." [Mk. 1.17]
 - learn how to take responsibility for that mission: "Take nothing for the journey except..." [Mark 6.8]
 - learn how to live: this is the true *Imitatio Christi* – c.f. John Tinsley, *The Imitation of God in Christ*. we don't aspire to overtake our guru, we aspire to follow more closely.
 - learn how to "come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." [Mk. 6.31]
 - learn in stages what it means to follow Jesus. Cf. Mk. 8.31, 9.31, 10.33 and Hebrews 12.
3. Journey [as in 'following Jesus'] reminds us to stay
 - close
 - humble
 - open
 - obedient
4. Journey involves a radical choice, to go here, and not there; to follow x and not y; a change of direction. [In the language of 1 Timothy 6, to 'shun' y and 'pursue' y. The Beatitudes deal with this radical choice e.g. in the 'narrow gate' [Mt. 7.13] and the service of 2 masters [6.24].

In the case of St Francis, this links in with the high medieval theme of *apostolic simplicity*.

Case Study 1: The Spirituality of St Francis

Battle was the best place to win the glory and prestige he longed for. He got his first chance when Assisi declared war on their long-time enemy, the nearby town of Perugia.

Most of the troops from Assisi were butchered in the fight. Only those wealthy enough to expect to be ransomed were taken prisoner. At last Francis was among the nobility like he always wanted to be...but chained in a harsh, dark dungeon. All accounts say that he never lost his happy manner in that horrible place. Finally, after a year in the dungeon, he was ransomed. Strangely, the experience didn't seem to change him. He gave himself to partying with as much joy and abandon as he had before the battle.

The experience didn't change what he wanted from life either: Glory. Finally a call for knights for the Fourth Crusade gave him a chance for his dream. But before he left Francis had to have a suit of armour and a horse - no problem for the son of a wealthy father. And not just any suit of armour would do but one decorated with gold with a magnificent cloak. Any relief we feel in hearing that Francis gave the cloak to a poor knight will be destroyed by the boasts that Francis left behind that he would return a prince.

But Francis never got farther than one day's ride from Assisi. There he had a dream in which God told him he had it all wrong and told him to return home. And return home he did. What must it have been like to return without ever making it to battle - the boy who wanted nothing more than to be liked was humiliated, laughed at, called a coward by the village and raged at by his father for the money wasted on armour.

Francis' conversion did not happen overnight. God had waited for him for twenty-five years and now it was Francis' turn to wait. Francis started to spend more time in prayer. He went off to a cave and wept for his sins. Sometimes God's grace overwhelmed him with joy. But life couldn't just stop for God. There was a business to run, customers to wait on.

One day while riding through the countryside, Francis, the man who loved beauty, who was so picky about food, who hated deformity, came face to face with a leper. Repelled by the appearance and the smell of the leper, Francis nevertheless jumped down from his horse and kissed the hand of the leper. When his kiss of peace was returned, Francis was filled with joy. As he rode off, he turned around for a last wave, and saw that the leper had disappeared. He always looked upon it as a test from God...that he had passed.

His search for conversion led him to the ancient church at San Damiano. While he was praying there, he heard Christ on the crucifix speak to him, "Francis, repair my church." Francis assumed this meant church with a small c - the crumbling building he was in. Acting again in his impetuous way, he took fabric from his father's shop and sold it to get money to repair the church. His father saw this as an act of theft - and put together with Francis' cowardice, waste of money, and his growing disinterest in money made Francis seem more like a madman than his son. Pietro dragged Francis before the bishop and in front of the whole town demanded that Francis return the money and renounce all rights as his heir.

The bishop was very kind to Francis; he told him to return the money and said God would provide. That was all Francis needed to hear. He not only gave back the money but stripped off all his clothes - the clothes his father had given him - until he was wearing only a hair shirt. In front of the crowd that had gathered he said, "Pietro Bernadone is no longer my father. From now on I can say with complete freedom, 'Our Father who art in heaven.'" Wearing nothing but cast-off rags, he went off into the freezing woods - singing. And when robbers beat him later and took his clothes, he climbed out of the ditch and went off singing again. From then on Francis had nothing...and everything.⁴

Case Study 2: Henri Nouwen [*The Selfless Way of Christ: Downward Mobility and the Spiritual Life*]

In speaking about downward mobility as Christian vocation, Nouwen has this to say: "We will never come to know our true vocation in life unless we are willing to grapple with the radical claim the gospel places on us. During the past twenty centuries many Christians have heard this radical call and have responded to it in true obedience. Some became hermits in the desert, while others became servants in the city. Some went to distant lands as preachers, teachers, and healers, while others remained where they were, raised families, and worked faithfully. Some became famous, while others remained unknown. Although their responses reveal an extraordinary diversity, these Christians all heard the call to follow Christ without compromise.

Regardless of the particular shape we give to our lives, Jesus' call to discipleship is primal, all-encompassing, all-inclusive, demanding a total commitment. One cannot be a little bit for Christ, give him some attention, or make him one of many concerns. [20-21]

Question: What does it mean to follow Jesus in apostolic simplicity?

2nd element

To journey with Jesus is to walk the **way of the cross**

1. in remembrance of what Christ has done for us – Stations of the Cross as a sacramental representation.
 - a. Roy Hession's *The Calvary Road* is one literary version of this narrative:

The only way on to the Highway [referring to Isaiah 35 – the highway of holiness] is up a small, dark, forbidding hill – the Hill of Calvary. It is the sort of hill we have to climb on our hands and knees – especially our knees. [25]
2. through participation in Christ's death [Romans 6.3-4] by baptism – a journey into righteousness, holiness, slavery to Christ
3. through taking up our cross [Mark 8.34f] 'for the sake of the gospel'
4. is to walk the walk of martyrdom, bearing in mind that 'martyrdom' means witness and not necessarily death. It does mean 'death to self' and may mean persecution [Beatitudes Matthew 5.11]

3rd element

To journey with Jesus is to walk the **Emmaus road**

1. and encounter the risen Christ
2. through the Scriptures
3. in the breaking of bread
4. through our hearts burning with joy

SECTION 2

Journey into Growth

Philippians 3.12-14 – the idea of a goal in the spiritual life

Case Study 3: John Wesley

At seven I went to the Germans. I had long before observed the great seriousness of their behaviour. Of their humility they had given a continual proof, by performing those servile offices for the other passengers which none of the English would undertake; for which they desired and would receive no pay, saying, 'it was good for their proud hearts,' and 'their loving Saviour had done more for them.' And every day had given them occasion of showing a meekness which no injury could move. If they were pushed, struck, or thrown down, they rose again and went away; but no complaint was found in their mouth. There was now an opportunity of trying whether they were delivered from the spirit of fear, as well as from that of pride, anger, and revenge. In the midst of the psalm wherewith their service began, [wherein we were mentioning the power of God,] the sea broke over, split the mainsail in pieces, covered the ship, and poured in between the decks, as if the great deep had already swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans [looked up, and without intermission] calmly sang on. I asked one of them afterwards, 'Was you not afraid?' He answered, 'I thank God, no.' I asked, 'But were not your women and children afraid?' He replied mildly, 'No; our women and children are not afraid to die.'⁵

1. Am I a better person than I was thirty years ago? Does our Christian journey into growth have as its aim Entire Sanctification? Is it possible to find an approach to holiness which is neither legalistic – rule-bound, nor antinomian, as in Paul's [imaginary] opponent in Romans 6.1
2. Illustration from the life of Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh: *This Holy Man*, with the Epilogue enquiring what it means to be holy. Described by Metropolitan Methodios in 1986 as 'this holy man' and on a radio broadcast as a 'living icon.'
 - a. A 'paradoxical contrast between the greatness of the man and the smallness of his character.'
 - b. Anthony said that holiness was our absolute vocation. It is the journey towards the goal of perfection. However, 'he knew... that the path to holiness lay through prayer: the placing of oneself – one's true self, totally vulnerable – in the presence of God.' [241] Paradoxically, the journey towards holiness begins when we stop journeying towards holiness, and stay still – when we can say with St Sarapion, 'I am not sitting; I am on a journey.'
 - c. So, 1st, journey into growth is a **journey into holiness is a journey into God**, through prayer.
 - d. Gillian Crow writes of the first time she met him: '[w]hat eclipsed everything else was the awareness I felt, for the first time in my life, of the love of God. I also came to realise that it was the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that enabled a person such as Metropolitan Anthony to become a channel for God's love.' 2nd, **journey into holiness is the Spirit's journey into my soul**.
 - e. But then, she reflects that '[t]here would be other occasions when I experienced the sad fact that his openness to the Spirit was by no means constant. Sometimes he could be as opaque as anyone else. But the one situation did not negate the other.' [242] 3rd, the **journey into holiness is godly restlessness**, a 'divine' discontent, a hungry energy for 'more.'

⁵ Curnock, Nehemiah (ed), *The Journal of the Rev John Wesley AM*, London: Epworth, 1938, page 143

- i. not guilt which paralyses;
- ii. not self-satisfaction which smothers;
- iii. not fatalism, which stalls;
- iv. not striving, which overreaches itself:

I have no spur

To prick the sides of my intent, but only

Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself

And falls on the other. [Macbeth, Act 1, Scene 7]

Case Study 4: Anthony of Egypt

8. Thus tightening his hold upon himself, Anthony departed to the tombs, which happened to be at a distance from the village; and having bid one of his acquaintances to bring him bread at intervals of many days, he entered one of the tombs, and the other having shut the door on him, he remained within alone. And when the enemy could not endure it, but was even fearful that in a short time Anthony would fill the desert with the discipline, coming one night with a multitude of demons, he so cut him with stripes that he lay on the ground speechless from the excessive pain. For he affirmed that the torture had been so excessive that no blows inflicted by man could ever have caused him such torment. But by the Providence of God - for the Lord never overlooks them that hope in Him - the next day his acquaintance came bringing him the loaves. And having opened the door and seeing him lying on the ground as though dead, he lifted him up and carried him to the church in the village, and laid him upon the ground. And many of his kinsfolk and the villagers sat around Anthony as round a corpse. But about midnight he came to himself and arose, and when he saw them all asleep and his comrade alone watching, he motioned with his head for him to approach, and asked him to carry him again to the tombs without waking anybody.⁶

Question: Can we be restless – in a godly way, and yet also content in the way Paul means it in 1 Timothy 6.6?

SECTION 3

Journeys of Pilgrimage

1. Holy places – ctr. John 4 and where the 'right place' is to worship God

- a. "What then, in the light of the Resurrection, is the role of holy places, defined as those places to which people are drawn? I believe that they should act as common ground, hallowed by God, to which people may freely come, and, crucially, from which they go away. There are three related diseases from which such places suffer: inflated claims, possessiveness and the failure to send people away with an enthusiasm similar to that with which they are welcomed."⁷
- b. They are common ground, - for the church rather than for individuals, sometimes a recall to the apostolic tradition, sometimes a context within which the church can be more truly church, as in Lourdes, which has a much better lived theology of sickness and disability than most Christian communities. Sometimes too they are expressions of continuity with a long Christian story, as in a certain church in Nottinghamshire, where the Anglo-Saxon mud floor is a symbolic point of contact with the feet of the worshippers of a 1000 years.

⁶ from Athanasius' Life of Anthony

⁷ Christopher Lewis, in 'The Risen Lord and the Liberation of Place' (Contact 147 (2005) pp. 34f

- c. hallowed by God, - sometimes hallowed by the church, taking the high places and holy places where people have sought to encounter the Divine, as used them as places where the true gospel of the unsearchable riches of Christ may be celebrated and proclaimed, and him alone honoured. e.g. the holy wells of Derbyshire. But sometimes also hallowed by God. There are places where heaven seems to break through the 'membrane' separating it from earth, and though when we try to construct theologies around our experience, we end up exaggerating, speculating or flying in the face of Scripture [e.g. John 4], time and again some places seem to be a gift from God as a sign to those who are searching.
 - d. to which we come, for magic, for our own purposes, or to discover a God who – when we return home, will be there too. How many pilgrims have asked themselves, 'Why did I need to go there, and then when I got home, he was there all along?'
 - e. and from which we go. Holy places are places of preparation for the task ahead, not refuges from it, or from the world.
 - f. Roger as illustration of the need for a spirituality of holy space, holy place, and holy journey.
2. Labyrinths as prayer pilgrimage [A labyrinth has only one path. It is unicursal. The way in is the way out. There are no blind alleys. The path leads you on a circuitous path to the centre and out again. The labyrinth retains its connection with death and a triumphant return].

A metaphor for the journey to the centre of your deepest self and back out into the world with a clearer and wiser understanding of who you are. From a Christian perspective, the journey into the centre must be a journey to an encounter with Jesus in that centre.

I have questions about whether the spiritual centring that the labyrinth exercise requires can be done 'in miniature' and it may be that here in particular, *fast spirituality* on the analogy of *fast food* falls down.

3. Journeying into the desert

- the discipline of stripping – silence, stripped of words – poverty, stripped of possessions – honesty, stripped of the means of avoidance – 'Decluttering'
- the discipline of waiting: there is disclosed in Jesus a free activity of God which culminates in the surrender of freedom, in the handing over of Himself, in a willed transition to passion. Jesus destines Himself, by His own will, to wait upon the decisions and deeds of men: He works, one might say, towards a climax in which He must wait. If the truth of God is disclosed and the glory of God is manifest in Jesus, then the truth of God must be this, and the glory of God must appear in this – that God so initiates and acts that he destines Himself to enter into passion, to wait and to receive. [WH Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting*, 94]
- spiritual warfare
- The Orthodox *poustinia* (desert) and the *poustinik*. For now, let me simply focus on the hospitality element of the journey into the desert. Catherine de Hueck Doherty writes of a *poustinik* that she and her mother visited when she was a child: It is difficult to simply relate this man... with what is called a 'hermit.' There was some kind of difference. The *poustinik* seemed to be more available. There was a gracious hospitality about him, as if he were never disturbed by anyone who came to visit him. On the contrary, his was a 'welcome' face. His eyes seemed to sparkle with the joy of receiving a guest. He seemed to be a listening person. A person of

few words, but his listening was deep, and there was a feeling that he understood. In him St Francis' prayer seemed to become incarnate: he consoled, he understood, and he loved – and he didn't demand anything from anyone for himself. He was available in other ways. If someone from the village was in need... he rushed over to the poustinik and asked his help. The poustinik immediately dropped everything and went with the farmer. He was always available. [40-41 c.f. also 53]

4. Journeying without the destination

- restoring risk to a risk-free life;
- learning dependence and trust – Angola and MFC;
- returning control of our destiny to an adventurous God;
- providing space for the times of doubt, uncertainty and for those who are looking for God;

SECTION 4

Journeys of Adventure

- Exploring your shadow side
- Exploring your vulnerability or incompetence
- Play – godly play is not just for children
- Seeing the world through 'five year old eyes'
- Cross-cultural experiences – difference, diversity, strangeness, disempowerment

One aspect of Anglican spirituality that I have noticed since becoming a member of an Anglican congregation is the approach to the Christian life as a pilgrimage or journey. One of the Christian discovery courses our church used was called Emmaus referring to the journey taken by two disciples after Jesus' death when he meets them and walks with them, explaining the meaning of what has happened and the scriptures along the way. I also remember clearly the laughter from local clergy when I wrongly described another Christianity Discovery course as "Christianity Explained" instead of "Christianity Explored". The refusal to try to remove the mystery from the Christian life and to show it for a continual process of learning and discovery at first frustrated me but appeals to me more as time goes on. This focus on discipleship is helpful in preventing a Gnostic-like belief that some have 'arrived' in some way. It also helps us to maintain hope in our final destination even when current events of circumstances seem discouraging or overwhelming. Indeed, as in the allegory of Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, we can see events as being part of our being moulded by God into his people. As we see ourselves as being on a journey, then we are helped in our understanding of what it means to meet together as fellow disciples. The range of worship styles and traditions within the Anglican communion, held together despite the inevitable tension, leads to a greater understanding of the different facets of God. It becomes harder to see your congregation as the one that has all the answers and that has 'got it right'. [Steve Taylor – Something in Common]

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Appendix 1: Definitions of 'spirituality'

[T]he experience of consciously striving to integrate one's life in terms not of isolation and self-absorption but of self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.⁸

Spirituality... points to those aspects of a person's living a faith or commitment that concern his or her striving to attain the highest ideal or goal. For a Christian this would mean his or her striving for an ever more intense union with the Father through Jesus Christ by living in the Spirit.⁹

Appendix 2: Supplementary material

from the Introduction to John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress

This book it chalketh out before thine eyes
The man that seeks the everlasting prize:
It shows you whence he comes, whither he goes,
What he leaves undone; also what he does:
It also shows you how he runs, and runs,
Till he unto the gate of glory comes.
It shows, too, who set out for life amain,
As if the lasting crown they would obtain;
Here also you may see the reason why
They lose their labour, and like fools do die.

This book will make a traveller of thee,
If by its counsel thou wilt ruled be;
It will direct thee to the Holy Land,
If thou wilt its directions understand
Yea, it will make the slothful active be;
The blind also delightful things to see.

⁸ Sandra Schneiders, quoted in Wiseman: 4

⁹ Walter Principe, referred to in Wiseman: 5