

Deep calls to Deep: Exploring Contemplative Intercession

“Deep calls to deep
at the thunder of your cataracts
all your waves and your billows
have gone over me.” Psalm 42:7

Psalm 42, for years one of my very favourites, connects us with the divine in and through vulnerability – our own and that of others. It draws us into longing and hope. Verse seven connects us at a profound level with what I intuit is the call to contemplative intercession. Contemplative discipleship and contemplative intercession rest, I believe, at the very heart of the Way of Christ. Be it in a small group or as an individual practice, this convergence between contemplative and intercessory prayer may well prove to be one of the distinctive ingredients of our emergent network, *Hidden Houses of Prayer*.

What follows is a quiet adventure in putting some words to the mystery of this way of praying. No words can begin to do justice, of course, to what each human person or community experiences as moments where beauty, wound, awe or love impact us.

Legacy and lineage. The biblical legacy and the lineage of the great ones of the faith make it clear that there are many ways of praying; from adoration to lament, from “the still, small voice” to the shout of praise. As Jesus was a man of prayer, so we are called to be people of prayer. What we explore and share about contemplative intercession has its starting point in God’s call for each of us to make personal response to St Paul’s injunction to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess 5:17). Psalm 42 beautifully draws the whole twenty-four hour period into the reality of God’s presence:

“By day the Lord commands his steadfast love,
and at night his song is with me,
a prayer to the God of my life.” Psalm 42:8

This article hopes to open an opportunity for dialogue and resource by means of a reflection on experiences that will be shared by many people of faith. Contemplative intercession may be described as a virtual “holding” of another, of a situation or group of people, in the depths of your being in prayer. This is a different and complementary way of interceding for others by using prayer lists that we, our prayer group or local church may use systematically.

Two ways of praying meet. In my ministry over the years, especially in The Quiet Garden Movement, in the dispersed community of Contemplative Fire and, most recently at Whirlow Grange Spirituality Centre (these three organisations are partners in the *Hidden Houses of Prayer* initiative), I have heard from and met with people whose contemplative practice is extending to incorporate an intercessory dimension. Sometimes in solitude, sometimes in a group, such people share the sense of the reality and power of being present to one or two focal points, persons or situations in what I can only call compassionate, contemplative intercession. These encounters and conversations have confirmed, stretched and enriched my understanding of prayer in the risen Christ.

If intercession, in its very different forms, is a mode of prayer that incorporates loving concern and spiritual outreach to neighbour, loved one or even “enemy”, what we call contemplative intercession may transpose this activity into an interior and perhaps

wordless key. This form of prayer for others can become a part of our own ontology, our being, with and within the life-giving God.

A simple, practical example of how a small group may engage with contemplative intercession, could be as follows: each member of the group is given a night light or votive candle. The group is asked to reflect for some minutes in stillness as to whom or what presents themselves as a focus for prayer. The invitation is then given for each person in turn to light their candle and to place it on a table or in something such as a sand tray. This placing can be done either in silence or a naming of the place or person or concern that has been highlighted for that individual. A collective silence follows.

Night prayer: stillness, aloneness and solidarity. Over the past few years, a number of people in different contexts have responded with real resonance to my outlining the possibility of prayer at night. We may find ourselves “woken up in the very early hours of the morning. This wake-up call may have the distinctive mark of an “eyes open” beckoning. This is different from a sleepy, waking-up for a few minutes or two to respond to the call of nature or to shift position and head back into slumber as soon as possible!

The wake-up has a touch of the imperative about it. No more sleep, at least for the moment! What can only be described as a compelling invitation, invites us, perhaps for 15 or 20 minutes or longer, to the sort of abiding that Jesus invites us to participate in when he said to his disciples, “abide in my love” (John 15: 9). This of course, can happen in the day time. If the call presents itself at night with a frequency or intensity that could jeopardise health or the efficient carrying out of the tasks of the day, then it is very important to ‘test the spirits’.

The clear injunction is to make ourselves available to be drawn by the Holy Spirit into a place of attentiveness to God, into a time of compassionate alignment with the suffering and need of others. Despite feeling completely inadequate to the task, the nudge is to dwell deep in Christ, in the silence and solitude of our own hearts. Jesus models what he expects from his disciples. As regards the early wake-up call, prior to his proclamation of the message to the towns, Jesus is pictured in Mark’s gospel as rising to pray “long before dawn” (Mark 1:35).

The gift of tears. This again, is to give an example of a prayer experience that is not perhaps very common but which can be a real grace-bearer both for interceder and for the one prayed for. Within the charism of contemplative intercession, some people find themselves accessing what the Eastern Christian tradition highlights as “the gift of tears”. These people discover that the tears flow not for and from their own struggle and reality but for and from those for whom they pray. For many or most of us, tears may not be a frequent or regular response in prayer, personal or corporate; nevertheless, at particular times within our own journey of faith, we may discover that our hearts are opened to this particular manifestation. Tears or sighs may be our companions as we journey into God.

Such tears are triggered not by one’s own emotional response, but are received and felt to be a gift from the Holy Spirit, a gentle enhancing of inner sensitivity on behalf of others in prayer. In those moments of response, we seem to be drawn into a graced resonance with the hurts or the hollowness, the anxiety or the alienation of people we may know or not know, near or far. As our consciousness in Christ expands to incorporate and embrace the hells and heavens of those around us, near and far, so we are drawn to exercise the ministry of hidden companionship and contemplative discipleship.

Your call. The different ingredients of contemplative, creative and intercessory prayer are important to name and value. I hope that you, the reader, will know yourself to be invited to consider penning your own words on how you draw together intercession and a contemplative perspective. If you are moved to write and share your thoughts, this may well help other pilgrims to gain fuller insight into this vocation of interior prayer solidarity. Each of us will discern and shape words and phrases that mean a great deal to us. We can be sure that if what we write flows from our own “felt engagement” with prayer and life, they will ring true at some level with someone else. We are nurtured by each other. As words naming your experience surface for you, do be bold and email them to: hiddenhousesofprayer@hotmail.co.uk They will help build a shared resource base for this particular expression of love-in-action.

Philip D Roderick, 10 November 2011

Hidden Houses of Prayer:

an invisible network of people drawn to the practice of contemplative, creative and intercessory prayer in their own homes