

HEALING OF THE NATION¹

I recently had an interesting exchange of emails with my cousin and friend, James Fanshawe, CBE, who has not long ago entered the world of business after a very successful career in the Royal Navy. He described what he found in the following terms:

What has changed, as we grapple with the Modus Operandi of the 21st Century, is our effective use of that invaluable, but constrained, commodity called time. The vast majority of people just do not have the time left to do the thinking bit in their average day...[P]eople are expected to do so much more than ever before. Most working people do the jobs of at least 2 former employees at every level and this principle increases as you advance up the hierarchical chain. The overall pace of life for most is ferocious. e.g. When I joined the RN it took roughly 2-3 weeks to turn round a single letter. These days people are champing at the bit if they have not had an answer to their e-mails within 2 hours.

There used to be far more people to make the world work in former times. The average CEO/MD does not even have a Secretary these days. They cost too much and it is all done on the hoof on the BlackBerry or in a virtual environment anyway. And then they get home and the dynamics are totally different. Gone is the wife who has spent all day engaged on domestic issues. She was also on the 0713 train and has just got back knackered. The children have just [got] back from their friends (to whom they have to go after school because there is no-one at home at 4pm). There is a rushed meal on the hoof as family members go about their individual lives. There are 4 phones and a selection of internet/e-mails in each household, all of which are in constant use. The average span of attention is the length of time it takes to read a text message (txt msg!) Most family members prefer to escape to their own 'space' rather than convene together, even if that is just to watch Coronation Street, which they will probably do on their own laptop or PC.

That is to say, people no longer have time to be *people*, just as parents no longer have time to be parents. We have lost control of the pace of our lives. And to this can be attributed many of the ills that we at E-men have been periodically discussing, such as burnout and the demand for instant gratification. In many cases it takes two incomes to support a family, so we have our children and then farm them out to someone else to bring up: childcare is something done increasingly less by parents. As the family declines, so grows youth disaffection; teenagers find their identity in the gang culture rather than their homes, fuelling crime and drug abuse. With increased stress comes mental illness. Everyone is in a hurry to make a fast buck. As I write, financial imprudence on the part of lenders has all but destroyed the entire world's banking system.

How do we heal such a country? One view is that we should convert them all and get them along into church. However if that is *all* we do, we risk simply turning busy people into Christian busy people. By the time we have got them going to all the meetings we want them to go to, their world will be revolving even faster than it was before; so their last state will be worse than their first. As Jesus said of the Pharisees,

¹ This talk was written for a meeting of E-men (Emsworth Anglican Church men's group) on 17 October 2008, when the selected topic for discussion was, What can Christians do to co-operate with God in the healing of the nation?

Healing of the Nation

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and then you make that convert twice as much a child of hell as you are. (Matthew 23:15 TNIV)

We do better to ask, how did the West get into this state in the first place? And what makes the Christian Church - a body riven with open wounds that are still unhealed after centuries - think it can heal anything? I have in my mind particularly the breach which opened up between Catholics and Protestants at the Reformation which still remains today, while the Protestant Churches themselves have been fragmenting ever since. That this wound should remain unhealed after nearly five hundred years in a body that proclaims the highest virtue to be *love* - and in the light of all the bloodshed which has since resulted² - seems to me to be a total scandal. We recall the proverb which was aimed at Jesus, 'Physician, heal thyself.' (Luke 4:23) How do we tackle this?

One approach is to examine critically the history of the Reformation as it has been handed down to us Protestants. According to this, by the end of the Middle Ages the Church had become totally debased from its biblical origins - corrupted by power, wealth, false doctrine, and wrong practice - so that the Reformers had to set it aside and make a completely fresh start. In other words, there was a two-party situation seen by both sides as "them" and "us". This is very easy to understand, and generations of Protestants have believed it and passed it on.

It would be very strange however if this were true. For time after time in the Bible, when mass apostasy has occurred, God always manages to preserve a remnant which is true to Himself. This is most obvious in 1 Kings 19 where Elijah, exhausted and depressed after his conflict with the prophets of Baal, complains twice (10 and 14) that he is the only follower of the Lord left, to be told however by God that there remain in fact seven thousand true worshippers (18) - an example that St Paul quotes in Romans (11:1-6) as though normative. We find the same thing in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the minor prophets. So we would expect to see a remnant even in the corrupt Middle Ages. And indeed this is the case. There was in fact a rich flowering of the mystical, contemplative tradition. One thinks of Thomas à Kempis (author of *The Imitation of Christ*), Hildegarde of Bingen, and in this country *The Cloud of Unknowing* and such names as Julian of Norwich, Marjorie Kempe, Walter Hilton and Richard Rolle. There had also been reformers before, such as St Benedict, St Francis of Assisi and the other founders and reformers of the monastic tradition, often at odds with the Church authorities.³

² I think particularly of the Thirty Years' War between Catholics, Lutherans and various other types of Protestant, all against each other, which devastated Europe between 1618 and 1648. By the Treaty of Westphalia at the end, the population of Germany had fallen from around sixteen million to under six million. (David Laird Duncan, *A History of the Synoptic Problem* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 158). One thinks also of the fighting in N. Ireland even in our lifetimes, which has crossed religious faultlines as well as purely political ones.

³ Evelyn Underhill paints the following picture of this age:

'Catherine of Siena was born at a time [1347] of almost unequalled ecclesiastical degradation. We know this, not from Protestant critics, but from the terrible words in which she and other Catholic saints of the fourteenth century have described the clerical corruption which they saw. Politically, too, Italy was full of internal wars, treachery, miseries of every kind. Yet in this period of violence, wickedness and suffering, the life of the spirit burned with a peculiar intensity; and much in Catherine's surroundings fed and developed her genius. In vivid contrast to the state of the official Church, with the

Most prominent at the time of the Reformation were St Teresa d'Avila and St John of the Cross, who dedicated their lives to reforming their own, Carmelite, order. Moving around Spain, they established and strengthened convents and monasteries as bastions of the contemplative tradition against what they saw as the new Protestant heresy. Yet at the same time they frequently aroused the hostility and opposition of their own Catholic authorities; indeed in 1577 St John of the Cross was actually imprisoned by the hierarchy of his own order. A little earlier in Spain, St Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556) founded the Society of Jesus, to which Teresa herself owed some of her early training.

Thus the contemplative or mystical tradition represents a *third party* at the time of the Reformation, which was as inimical to corruption as were the Protestant Reformers themselves. However, it was, crucially, rejected by Luther, who, though a monk himself, had no time for the contemplative life. As he warned,

We must beware that the active life with its good works, *and the contemplative life with its speculations*, do not lead us astray. Both are most attractive and yield peace of mind, but for that very reason they hide *real dangers*, unless they are tempered by the cross and disturbed by adversaries.⁴

As is common knowledge, "good works" was something of a negative concept for Luther. So he and his followers rejected the contemplative tradition, thereby - to my way of thinking - throwing out the baby with the bathwater. As a result Protestantism - alone, to my knowledge, of all the major faiths - was born without a contemplative dimension. In this country this did not reappear until George Fox's Quaker movement (1646 onwards).

Most of the abuses to which the Protestant Reformers were objecting were subsequently rectified by the Catholic Church in the Counter-Reformation which centred on the Council of Trent (1545-63); and that, along with making the Bible available to ordinary people, seems to me to have been the Reformers' major success.

So what is contemplative prayer? I have put together some Frequently Asked Questions.

Q. What is contemplative prayer?

Papacy at Avignon, and sins and abuses of every kind flourishing almost unchecked, was the network of mystical devotion - mostly propagated by groups of lay-folk gathered round some saintly character - which spread over Western Europe and attracted to itself all fervent spirits. In Germany, during her childhood, the movement of the Friends of God was at its height; in England the followers of Rolle continued his work; in Italy Giovanni Columbini, a rich Sienese merchant who had embraced utter poverty, was founding the congregation of the Gesuati, which sought to revive the simplicity and ardour of St. Francis, and caused a considerable reformation among the friars; whilst St Bridget of Sweden (1303-73), a mystic of the type of St. Hildegarde, was pouring forth apocalyptic prophecies and political denunciations at Rome.' (*The Mystics of the Church*, 152-3)

⁴ Quoted in *The Darkness of Faith: Daily Readings with Martin Luther*, ed. James Atkinson (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987), 41; emphasis added.

A. Contemplative prayer is wordless prayer, time spent in stillness waiting upon God. All we do is present ourselves to God and let Him do the rest. We may compare it to lying on an operating table, perfectly still, allowing the surgeon to carry out whatever he needs to do in order to restore us to health. We do not rush around the operating theatre in frantic busyness, nor do we issue the surgeon with a list of instructions. We just trust Him to act in our hearts and minds and lives as He knows best.⁵

Q. I don't find "contemplative" in my Bible index. Is it really biblical?

A. It is prescribed by the psalmist who wrote as God's mouthpiece, "Be still then and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10) But generally, it is known in the Bible - especially the older versions - under names such as "waiting on" or "hoping in" God. For instance,

They who wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40:31 RSV)

For God alone my soul waits in silence: from him comes my salvation. (Psalm 62:1)

It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD. (Lamentations 3:26)

Q. Is it also in the New Testament?

A. The story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42) is often taken as illustrative of the need for contemplative prayer. On this interpretation Martha is seen as the activist who is forever *doing*, while Mary just sits at the feet of Jesus, listening to Him. It is she who receives the Lord's commendation for attending to the "one thing needful".

Beyond that, in John 15, the departing Jesus enjoins upon his disciples the need to "abide" in Him. Since the Greek word *meno* used here is the normal word for to wait, the phrase "abiding in Christ" sounds like a deliberate echo of the Old Testament "waiting upon God": staying in one place and enjoying His company.

Q. Has anyone written about this?

A. There are innumerable books about prayer. John Pritchard, *How to Pray*, is an excellent all-round introduction. On contemplative prayer my favourite is Andrew Murray's most helpful little book *Waiting on God*, written around 1900, which consists of 31 daily meditations on Bible verses such as the above. I first read this over thirty years ago, and it taught me what is still the only thing I know about prayer, which is that PRAYER TAKES TIME. There are plenty of other books on contemplative prayer. Among the most recent is Martin Laird's excellent study, *Into the Silent Land*.

⁵ A Carmelite nun who is well known for her books on contemplative prayer has commented on my description of it given here: '[T]he simple state of being there, trusting and desiring to be surrendered, presumes not a little faith and a well-informed mind so that the one to whom we expose ourselves is really God, the Father of Jesus, or Jesus, not a projection of our own selfish desires. In our tradition which, of course, fosters contemplative prayer, we take a serious view of spiritual reading and meditation as an essential background or foundation.'

Q. What effects does it have on us?

A. Besides deepening our faith, it *slows us down*, enabling us to take charge of the pace at which we live. This slowing down strikes at the very heart of the problem defined at the top of this paper. It enables people to start being people again. It also enables us to make better use of our minds. For me it is the point at which the supernatural - or what theologians call *mystery* - enters everyday Christianity, in the sense that we get far more out of it in terms of inner and outer transformation than ever we put in. This is what is going on in Romans 12:1-2, where we are commanded to present our bodies to God, with the result that we are "transformed by the renewing of [our] mind." In time, the effect spreads to our environment: the world around us begins to spin a little more slowly.

Q. Can you give an example?

A. This is what happened at Worth Abbey, where three or four years ago five modern day men spent forty days sharing the contemplative life of the (Roman Catholic) Benedictine community, four of whom it would seem were markedly transformed by the experience, as was subsequently documented in the BBC2 television series *The Monastery* in 2005. In the aftermath many thousands of inquirers and visitors have been touched by the overspill. Abbot Christopher Jamison explains the Benedictine thinking behind this in his book, *Finding Sanctuary*.

In our day among Protestants the picture is beginning to change. The (mostly) Protestant community at Taizé, Burgundy, established at the end of WW2, introduces thousands of young people who visit it every year to contemplative prayer, completely bucking the trend elsewhere where the young generation increasingly avoid church. There are similar communities, modelled upon Taizé, elsewhere in the world. In this country there is a network of Julian prayer meetings for women, recalling the ministry of the English mystic Julian of Norwich (c.1342-1413). Numerous Anglican dioceses have appointed Wardens or Advisers in Spirituality, such as Peter Lippiett in our own diocese of Portsmouth, whose primary task is to encourage prayer in general and contemplative prayer in particular.

If this trend continues, and we ourselves participate in it, two things could happen. First, our own personal lives will begin to slow down. We ourselves will then become more effective channels of God's grace to the outside world, bringing the possibility that ultimately this, too, may slow down and so begin to heal. But second, another prospect opens up. The fragmentation of the Christian Church, and especially of our own Anglican Communion, could begin to reduce. I was less surprised than most at Dr Rowan Williams' recent success in completely warding off the long-heralded schism at this year's Lambeth Conference. A contemplative himself, he is a natural peacemaker and has even written a book on peacemaking. Further, Protestants and Catholics will cease to see themselves as

entrenched theological enemies, and the seemingly unbridgeable divide of the Reformation may begin to heal. I would judge this to be no harder task, and no more improbable, than the dissolution of European communism in 1989-90 (towards which incidentally, in Poland, a considerable contribution was made by Pope John Paul II in his support for Lech Walesa's Solidarity movement⁶). Such things do happen. Both sides will then have a fresh experience of healing to share with the rest of the world. This hope I would commend to us all.

Martin Mosse,
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⁶ Lech Walesa subsequently gave the credit to Pope John Paul for the fact that the Polish revolution was bloodless and non-violent.