

*Preached by Professor Philip Sheldrake, on Sunday 23 February 2014, in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford.*

1 Corinthians 3:16-23, Matthew 5:38-48

“Do you not know....that God’s Spirit dwells in you? (1 Cor 3, 16)

The word “spirituality” has become immensely popular these days – well beyond its Christian origins, indeed beyond religion itself. There seems to be a widely-held belief that there is a spirit-filled side to life and this fuels a quest for the spiritual. The concept of spirituality even appears increasingly in a range of professional worlds such as healthcare, social work, education, the arts and business studies. This widespread use of the word makes it difficult to offer a simple definition. However, in general terms, it stands for lifestyles and practices that encourage an aspirational approach to life. Indeed, contemporary spirituality reflects a sense that a truly fulfilled life involves more than purely material success or intellectual satisfaction.

Current literature on “spirituality” regularly highlights the following themes. Spirituality encourages a holistic, integrated rather than fragmented, approach to life. It reflects people’s quest for the “sacred”. This may include belief in God but may refer more broadly to the numinous, the depths of human existence or the boundless mysteries of the cosmos. Further, spirituality is frequently linked to a search for meaning. What is life’s underlying purpose and how may we more effectively tap into that? Spirituality is also regularly associated with human “thriving”. What is it to thrive? How may we thrive? Finally, contemporary notions of spirituality promote a value-driven rather than purely pragmatic approach to life. All of this encourages a self-reflective existence as opposed to an unexamined life.

This quest for spirituality is often supported by spiritual practices including different forms of meditation, bodily disciplines such as yoga, tai chi or fasting, undertaking a pilgrimage to a place of spiritual power (for example, walking the “camino” to Santiago de Compostela) or going away on retreats – for example, to a monastery like Caldey Abbey.

“Going on retreat” reinforces the importance of cultivating self-reflection. Like “spirituality”, the concept also has Christian origins although nowadays you can go on a Zen Buddhist retreat, a Sufi retreat or a yoga retreat. You can also go on a corporate business retreat. Details of how to plan these appear on such websites as “business-retreats.co.uk”. Equally, “spa retreats for health and detox”, “yoga holidays” and “holistic breaks” are on sites such as “chilloutretreats.com” or “theretreatcompany.com”.

Christian “retreats” have a long and varied history. They may be solo or in a group. They may be entirely solitary, or involve listening to talks as an aid to personal reflection or they may be individually guided throughout. They can last a day, a weekend, a week or even a month, as in the “Spiritual Exercises” of Ignatius Loyola. For Ignatius, the purpose of a retreat is to facilitate a movement towards spiritual freedom. This begins by confronting the disorder, dependencies or fears that imprison us. The person on retreat then focusses extensively through meditation on what it means to be called by Jesus Christ to serve God by serving other people and the world. Underlying this process is the cultivation of true wisdom rather than, as in today’s first reading from 1 Corinthians 3, “the wisdom of this world” or mere craftiness. True wisdom implies the art of discernment - how to recognise the difference

between superficial impulses or attractions and our true desire. How are we to make choices in harmony with our life-directing desire and our best purposes rather than simply respond to immediate “wants”? How may we develop a capacity increasingly to “find God in all things”?

Whatever else the word “retreat” implies, it involves stepping aside from our everyday routine. The scriptural reference is often to Jesus’ invitation to his disciples in Mark 6, 31, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile”. However, we shouldn’t be misled. People “retreat” from everyday life for many reasons - including to escape its pains and pressures. But, Christian retreats are not an escape. Rather, to go on retreat is to slow down in order to become more reflective. In the stillness and silence we open ourselves to God and to our own inner truth that leads us not to forget but to remember truly. In the words of the Welsh poet R S Thomas:

“But the silence in the mind  
is when we live best, within  
listening distance of the silence we call God.  
It is a presence, then,  
whose margins are our margins;  
that calls us out over our own fathoms.”<sup>1</sup>

The reading from 1 Corinthians speaks of us, collectively and individually, as holy, as “God’s temple”. “God’s Spirit dwells in you” – that is, God is the core of our deepest identity. Indeed, years later St Augustine used the image of the heart for “the true self”. In his *Confessions* (Book 10) he speaks of “my heart, where I am whatever it is that I am”. For Augustine, God created us with the divine image in our hearts. This “image of God” is the true self but we easily become disconnected from it. In his reflections on John’s Gospel Augustine invites us to reconnect with this real self. “Why do you go away from yourselves?... You go astray by wandering about... an exile from yourself... Return to your heart! In your inner self you are renewed according to the image of God”. For Augustine we not only find God in the heart - in God we also find everyone and everything else.

While reconnecting with our true self is part of “going on retreat”, this is not essentially a self-centred activity. One of the fruits of a true spiritual awakening should be a more balanced participation in the everyday world and a deepening sensitivity to the needs of others. Thus, Christian writings on the spiritual value of silence, including the Rule of St Benedict (chapter 6), emphasise not merely the *absence* of conversation or noise. The heart of “silence” as a spiritual discipline is the avoidance of destructive speech which demeans other people. Be reticent in what you say. Go inwards and learn not to rush into thoughtless or useless words. Cultivating true inner silence is a vital preparation for meaningful and constructive speech.

The spiritual challenge to deepen our sensitivity to the needs of others brings me to today’s gospel, from Matthew 5. This is part of the famous Sermon on the Mount, a series of pointers to the key areas of ethical behaviour and of a truly religious life. Today’s verses are deeply challenging. They begin with a negative: “do not resist or retaliate”. However, this counter-intuitive behaviour is not limp passivity. It can only arise from a painfully learnt spiritual freedom that transforms us. A key word (v 42) is “give”: “give to everyone who begs from

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<sup>1</sup> From AD, in *Counterpoint* (Bloodaxe Books, 1990), p. 50.

you”. We become fully human through self-gift - generosity without judgment or exclusion. But the reading takes us one step further (vv 43-48): “love your enemies”. In the end the “neighbour” of v 43 is not to be defined geographically, socially, ethnically or politically. We are provoked to recognise a true neighbour in everyone, including those who are distasteful to us. Here the key phrase is v 48 “Be perfect...as your heavenly Father is perfect”. That is the highest of vocations.

The heart of “the self” – our deepest truth – is God. And God’s perfection is to be all-embracing and non-exclusive. By definition God alone encompasses the mystery of “the whole”. So, when we “go on retreat” we don’t just take time out. We take the risk that in the silence and stillness we may not only encounter the divine but, more provocatively, be touched by it in ways that draw us down a path of radical transformation towards the challenging perfection of which the Sermon on the Mount speaks.