

Session 4, 7/4/20. Staying – seeking incarnation rather than ‘heaven’ on earth

- Intro quote and question:

‘If you are living in a monastic community, do not go to another place: it will do you a great deal of harm. If a bird abandons the eggs she has been sitting on, she prevents them hatching.’ *Synecletica, from Alphabetical Collection*

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Is there anything you feel ‘driven’ to change? If so, spend some time contemplating that drive. Is it an opportunity to live more fully OR a temptation to escape into fantasy and control? How can we tell the difference?

Silence.

- Synopsis:

Staying, here, is described as the supreme act of love. It is interesting that the quote at the start is from one of the desert mothers, as we might see this call to stay as being more often associated with the feminine impulse than the masculine.

We stay both for the sake of our self - whom we are called to know and love – and for those others we are placed alongside. There is always a temptation to start again, erase oneself, move. And it is almost always possible to act on this, especially when we are ‘affluent’. We are invited to consider the impact our moving on might have on others, including those others who do not have the luxury of escape.

Sometimes, we stay because we successfully distract ourselves. In the desert, the shapeless landscape that offers no distraction, the ensuing boredom can be quite terrifying to encounter. And yet here, we discover things about ourselves that we cannot see elsewhere. We are invited to consider what this ‘desert’ might be, for us.

We are never ready; we begin from where we are and we never arrive. We always want to be finished; yet almost everything we do is only a beginning.

The temptations Jesus’ faced are a good description of the way we might be invited to ‘stay’. He was invited to indulge in fantasy, in magic, rather than simply work with the reality of a limited human life. Similarly, we might see our own life as a thing we are betrothed to. Or our church. Or our work. Williams describes a judgement scene in which, rather than being asked why he was not like some other great and good person, he will be asked why he failed to be himself. Only in a very determined act of staying can we face and be who we really are.

- Questions:

1. What has been your experience of solitude? Is it a place crowded with fantasies and thoughts? Is it a place in which you encounter that ‘terrifying boredom?’ Share any specific examples.

2. Williams talks about bad weather, selfless love and illness / disability as situations where our ability to 'escape' is limited. Can you think of other examples? What do these things feel like, for you?
 3. The body is an important feature in this chapter. It is our ally and gift – the material prison that 'saves the soul' from its compulsion to escape. What is your reaction to this – are you able to be thankful for your body?
 4. Main question - is there anything you feel 'driven' to change? Is it an opportunity to live more fully OR a temptation to escape into fantasy and control? How can we tell the difference?
- Closing quote

'Somewhere else I could be nicer, holier, more balanced, more detached about criticism, more disciplined, able to sing in tune and probably thinner as well. Somewhere there is a saintly person who really understands me.' *Rowan Williams.*

Silence.

REFLECTION AND FAVOURITE QUOTES (Also on audio file)

Here are 10 quotes that have stood out to me this week, and some very personal reflections:

1. *Learning to stay where you are becomes one of the hardest lessons of the desert...bearing your own company and the company of those immediately and unavoidably around you requires some very special graces. p82*

'Staying' denies me most of the things I do for relief and release. I like spending time with people who are in my life but don't know me well enough to see through the 'masks' I choose to wear. I like being productive, improving on things. I like variety and movement. I like to achieve. I get a sense of security from knowing there are escape routes in place. I tend to get claustrophobic in my present situation, in my own life.

2. *We have in some sense been brought to where we really are [and] it is worse, not better. The distractions are not there, the games you can play in your relations with others for reassurance, are forbidden. p84*

3. *Sin, struggle [and conflict are]... everywhere, not least in facing myself. So to stay in the cell is most fundamentally to stay in touch with the reality of who I am as a limited creature, as someone who is not in control of everything. p86.*

For example, as I face up to myself and 'stay'.... I realise that:

I am – albeit in a socially acceptable, functional way - addicted to many things. To work. To certain luxuries, like peace and quiet, spare time, a gym.

I use my usual routines, food, alcohol, socialising, to soothe feelings of boredom and desperation.

When I cannot escape my moods with distraction, I tend to blame other people for them. Irritability, jealousy, agitation arise and I could simply witness and take responsibility for them. Instead, I often blame someone else or else this situation that has 'victimised' me.

I can become overwhelmed by my children's emotional responses – they aren't always conscious of their anxiety and it affects their behaviour; they need more time, attention, reassurance - and fuss if they cannot have it! This can feel unbearable, as if threatening my very existence. I resist it, making it worse. And then, I realise my own weaknesses as a parent and feel ashamed.

4. *The anxious search for an object of charity is a bit of a give-away. It is about you. p87*

It is interesting to notice social media trends at the moment (and my own impulse to use these platforms for various reasons). As well as heightened judgementalism, there is an abundance of 'self-dramatising', as people share with the world their coping-mechanisms, ingenuity, wisdom etc. And there is a proliferation of community support initiatives. These are not bad things necessarily and may even be good. But - they are also a way of medicating and distracting ourselves – of escaping the desert that is our own front room.

5. *The guidance we need is not so much how not to be bored, but how to face boredom without terror..... Satan preferred the idea of an unreal world of which he was in charge to a real world in which all glory was due to God. p89/90*

I often feel confused about who I *really* am and what it is I am *really* supposed to be doing. Instead of accepting that, I try to get this confusion resolved – a metaphorical and frantic search through the drawers of life, trying to find the lost item that would put me back in control. This is a type of sin, this need to master every aspect of life. There is an appropriate intelligence in simply being and leaving the big picture to someone else; to God. Can I accept and live with my feelings of confusion?

6. *Jesus above all is a body pledged to the walls, to the limits of this world.* p90

I find this idea of being a body pledged to 'the walls', to a very small number of people – or to myself, if I live alone – and to a small space, very hard and even frightening. The panic about being prevented from going outside arises partly because I like to *use* my body to give my mind and will certain kinds of relief. Currently, there is a collective sense of terror about giving up physical freedom. At any given time, *some* of us are unwell and disabled. On *some* days of the year and in *some* places the weather might limit us. But the current situation is one of communal, physical limitation: it makes us notice the many ways in which we usually 'use' our bodies.

7. *A church that is faithful to its basic task is telling people that willingness to be who they are, and to begin to change only from the point of that recognition, is fundamental to the encounter with God.* p93

Confession can be laid upon churchgoers as a burden – 'look how bad you are'. It should actually be offered as relief. Accepting who we *really* are and where we are *actually* starting from is the only way to approach the Divine. We are fine - and loved - as we are.

8. *Christianity encourages me to be faithful to the body that I am... living in the midst of limitations; it encourages me to accept unavoidable frustration [...] without anger.* p93

Can I accept the invitation to pledge myself to this solitude? Or am I still trying to escape it with my planning, my discipline, my indulgences, my projects, my resolutions for the future? If my body is the primary temple in which I meet God, am I home? Or am I stuck in my head, thinking compulsively? Am I stuck in my emotional responses to the situation, my passions? '*Only the body saves the soul*' p94.

Suddenly, considerations about the body have been magnified or changed: what should I eat and drink? How should I exercise? Should I bother to groom myself – and how can I get a hair cut!? It is interesting to reflect on how the answers to such questions have changed in the current context. Will we value our bodies more, after this?

9. *At the day of judgement, the question will not be ... why I wasn't Martin Luther King or Mother Teresa, but why I wasn't [enter your own name].* p95

Maybe I am being offered an opportunity to 'make friends with myself before God' (p96). This strange experience could be a time of healing, integration and resurrection. But at the crunch moment, it isn't very easy to take the cup I am being offered - or even know how to do so.

10. *Here we are daily, not necessarily attractive and saintly people, along with other not very attractive and saintly people, managing the plain prose of our everyday service, deciding daily to recognise the prose of ourselves and each other as material for something unimaginably greater – the Kingdom of God, the glory of the saints, reconciliation and wonder.* p97
