

### Growing in faith – 3. Union (Cloud)

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‘Contemplate Christ in three stages’, writes 12<sup>th</sup> century Cistercian monk, Aelred of Rievaulx – ‘baptised in the Jordan, transfigured on the mountain, and glorified at length in heaven.’ Take these three moments ‘to represent three stages in the soul’s progress’, he says. ‘Christ’s baptism represents our purification, his transfiguration our probation, and his glorification our rewarding. We are purified by confession... proved by temptation, and ...rewarded by the fullness of charity.’

Well, I imagine we’re beginning to recognise this way of symbolising growth in the spiritual life, this three-fold pattern, long-held in both Eastern and Western branches of Christianity. The journey begins with awakening, which, I’ve said, can be painful, since it involves recognising the futility of our ‘egoic programs for happiness’ (Thomas Keating); ‘our soul-sickness’ (Alan Jones 1989.170) and, in older language, the impact of our ‘sin’ on ourselves and others.

This leads onto the *via purgativa*, the path of confession, clearing and cleansing, which Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510) likened to scraping rust from the soul. This first period of self-examination is vital in our growth; although, as Alan Jones points out, it tends to remain highly individualistic and private, focusing almost exclusively on ‘my conversion, my Saviour, and my faith’. ‘The history of religion provides a great deal of evidence of people who, albeit unconsciously, love and serve God out of sheer self-interest’, he writes; they aren’t bad or malicious people; just attached – to the consolations and comforts of religion. All goes well, he says, ‘until the Yellow Brick Road turns into the Via Dolorosa’, and the believer finds herself being ‘sifted as wheat’.

The second stage is all about detachment; learning to stay with Christ, to live ‘by faith’, when consolations and props are withdrawn. We are gradually receiving the light of God’s truth – illumination. But, as the apostle Peter learnt, the light of illumination can itself be hard to bear. When he first heard the call of Jesus, Peter followed with gusto. The early days were full of excitement and Peter was ever

enthusiastic – healing, preaching, feeding! But on the mountain of Transfiguration, he was privileged to glimpse the blinding light of Christ, and found it overwhelming, terrifying. He was wholly unprepared to bear with it. Later, on that Thursday evening in the high priest’s courtyard, three times in quick succession, he blatantly denied his Lord. And then... ‘*Jesus turned and looked at him*’... And the light in those eyes pierced Peter to the core...

And that’s how it can be, this season of illumination; searing, as the light of Christ reveals the distance between who we are and who we’re called to be; the sheer splendour of God’s love.

And yet, as Peter also discovered, this pure light of Christ can be gentle – healing, warming, making us strong. Remember that breakfast on the beach after Christ had been raised (John 21)? It was another moment of illumination; powerfully transformative for Peter. From that moment on, his ambition shifted. His aim no longer self-preservation, but to ‘*declare the praises of him who calls us out of darkness into his marvellous light*’ (1 Peter 2.9).

‘It is thus that souls are made...’ Jones writes: We move from an initial burst of life through a period of refining to ‘a bracing yet relaxing enjoyment of grace’. We become less a victim of our moods and emotions, less thrown by circumstances, less demanding in prayer... And, we grow – in wisdom, love, fortitude and faith.

And still, this is not the end, for there is a further third phase in this journey; ‘deeper and more devastating and more wonderful than the second’ writes Jones – the *via unitiva*, the way of union, of oneness with the ground of our being. In Greek, it’s called, *theosis* (becoming like God). Laurence Freeman describes this phase as ‘the blossoming of faith’ (75), and John Main speaks of it as ‘a holy, simple communion’ (53).

To offer a perspective on this experience, I’m going to refer back to Belden Lane’s story of accompanying his mother through the difficult years of her dying which I mentioned last week.

‘Two weeks before my mother finally died’, he writes, ‘I met with the hospice nurse, signing the necessary papers that signalled the beginning of the end’. ‘Her body had begun “systems failure”, I was told; it would not be long ... The long and lonely wait on the desert mountain was finally nearing its end.’

‘Over the past few months my mother had begun moving away, spending more and more time in a place distant from the nursing home around her’. ‘She’d gone inside.’ At first, he interpreted this as despair, thinking she was retreating from her long and unsuccessful effort at dying. ‘But one day when she was more alert than usual, I asked if she was glad still to be alive – having been through so much, having lasted longer than any of us had ever expected. Her answer surprised me. “Oh, YES!” she cried, with a joy I found astonishing.’

‘For a long time, I’d have rated the quality of her life as extremely low. She went nowhere, read nothing, spoke very little, watched no TV, attending only to the endlessly repetitive details of her immediate environment. Yielding to the long, warm silence of half-sleep and half-attentiveness, she accepted the slow passage of time, the routine of eating, sleeping, watching people’s movements, waiting for my coming. This was enough. More than enough, apparently. Life itself – unadorned, without artificial stimulation, without the excitement and wonder I imagined necessary for its meaning – life itself was enough.’

‘Somewhere along the way of her slow desert pilgrimage, she’d discovered the awakening of desire, a new hunger that gave meaning to her life’, he continues. ‘It was a subtle thing. Others might have misread it as boredom. She had acquired a detached attentiveness to things around her, a simple ability to be present to herself and to God, an indifference to the emotional and intellectual roller coaster on which she’d ridden much of her life.’

Lane acknowledges this is *his* reading of her experience; that there are risks in this. Yet, he says, ‘the quiet acceptance to which she gradually came was unmistakable.’ ‘Having endured the harsh but purifying experience of the wilderness, having ascended the mountain to await illumination that comes on the

wings of silence, my mother seemed to have been invited in those last few months to a third and final stage of union with God.’ There was nothing ecstatic about this experience so far as he could tell, she’d simply come to the point where ‘it was enough to be present to the moment, before God, no longer needing anything else’.

In the tradition, this phase of growth is often described in terms of entering a thick cloud. Psalm 97 proclaims that ‘*clouds and thick darkness surround God*’, and in Exodus 19, the Lord says to Moses, ‘*Behold, I will come to you in a dense cloud*’. A little later, in Exodus 24, after crossing the desert, and climbing the mountain, Moses entered the cloud of God’s glory and spoke with God ‘*face to face*’. Gregory of Nyssa writes of a ‘dazzling darkness’ and an anonymous author in the latter half of the 14th century speaks of *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

A cloud is a blurry, indistinct image and this seems apt, since the more deeply we enter into God, the more our ways of communicating the experience break down – God’s sheer ‘isness’ (‘I am who I am’) eclipses all the words and images through which we try to make sense of God.

Those who write of this mystical union are clear on one thing, however. It is sheer gift. Just as a gardener cannot make a plant grow so there’s nothing that can bring forth this blossoming of faith. A good gardener waters, feeds, weeds, and prunes, a good gardener cultivates the soil. This supports flourishing but the growth itself is gift, a miracle of grace. And so it is in the spiritual life, ‘there is much we can do to open ourselves to receiving God’s favours’, Teresa of Avila writes. Spiritual practice cultivates receptivity, the conditions for growth. But of itself, human effort cannot make it happen. The gift of divine union is just that – gift!

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So, I’ve spoken of three paths or phases of spiritual growth – three doors, three conversions, three landscapes, etc, etc. This is helpful, *and* it’s important to be wary of thinking too much in terms of linear progress or of focusing too intently on what stage we’re at. Whatever “progress” in the spiritual life is supposed to

mean, 'it certainly doesn't work like that', Martin Laird writes, in his wonderful book *Into the Silent Land* (2006.52). This something that Thomas Merton pointed out towards the end of his life. 'In prayer', he said, 'we discover what we already have'. 'You start from where you are and you deepen what you already have, and you realise you are already there.' 'We already have everything but we don't know it and don't experience it', he writes. Everything has been given to us in Christ. All we need is to experience what we already possess.' In other words, writes Laird, 'there is nothing that separates us from this depthless depth whose ground is God... The present moment is a gateless gate opening onto a pathless path.'

Such are the paradoxes and riddles of the spiritual life. And that, my friends, seems like a good place to stop. Amen!!

#### References

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