

29th September 2010

A Gaelic Spiritual Sanctuary

There is something seriously wrong with our world: it is sick, diseased, ailing. It seems to be getting worse day by day.

I could be referring to the general misery and corruption that has always been around in human societies wherever they are. But I want to be more specific about our dis-ease this afternoon.

I am referring to the disease of busyness. This is something that I personally suffer from, and so I fear do some people in this room. Most of us spend too much of our time rushing around trying to fit more and more into our lives, and we know this is wrong but we still go on doing it. The church provides virtually no escape from the disease, and many of the most afflicted sufferers are Christians engaged in good works, and indeed clergy. Clergy work almost every evening, and on the Lords Day when the fourth commandment tells them they should not work.

In my work as a coach this matter of busyness comes up with almost every client, concerned about what is now called work life balance. But I do not believe this is just a matter that can be corrected by rebalancing, as if one were wobbling along on a bicycle. I believe it is a contagious infection. It is in the air like the bugs that give you a common cold, in a crowded underground on a damp November day in London. We drive each other on towards more and more busyness. Several years ago I was coaching a young manager in an advertising agency, and he told me that he started to come into the office early to get through all the written work before all his colleagues arrived. But then they started coming in early too because they did not want to seem less hard working than their boss. So he had to come in earlier still!

The busyness is in fact a generalised pressure that is in the air around us. It affects children who are constantly being stimulated, it affects working people, it is endemic.

But we do notice when we go away on holiday, if we go to some rural haunt, that people there seem to live with the pressure of busyness greatly reduced. The whole pace of life is less, we have time to stand and chat, to take in the view, to notice things in a deeper way, and – in a word – to be happier.

The desert fathers, the very first Christian monks, were directly conscious of this scourge of busyness. Arsenius heard a voice from God telling him to flee the world: and the word *flee* comes into the writings and exhortations of the desert fathers with some regularity.

In 1999 my wife, Jo, and I were due to have a holiday in Venice, I felt a need to deepen my personal spiritual search.

One evening at dinner, when I mentioned my 'what's life all about' agenda, Jo suggested that I should go on a pilgrimage. She said to me later that it was almost as if it was a voice inside her saying this, and she could not believe it as she heard the words come out.

This was never to be a holiday. If I were to 'go round the world' it would have included perhaps Assisi, Bodhgaya in north India, and Kamakura in Japan. But as the plan evolved, it became centred on my first love, the Celtic world of the west coast of Scotland. Even then, the initial thoughts I had were to sample a wide variety of different experiences, with some solitude and some community involvement. But such options started to close down, and the path started to seem clear ahead: solitude, unbroken by anything other than a Zen retreat which I had already planned.

The experience that ensued gave me an appetite for solitude. And a few years later, in 2007, I decided to try to find a hermitage of my own, which I would be able to share with other people who also longed for occasional solitude. I wrote a careful letter to about sixty Highland landlords whom I had found on a website called whoownsscotland.com, explaining that I was looking to rent a remote hermitage, not a holiday cottage. I had 22 replies, and this eventually led me to Cuil (Gaelic for a recess or nook), of which I now have a ten year lease.

Curiously, the place I was going to be on that first trip in 1999, the peninsula of Applecross in Wester Ross, facing across the sea to Skye, is called in Gaelic, An Comerach, which means the sanctuary. It is almost an island, a natural fortress, protected on its land side by the steepest and most alarming mountain pass road in the British Isles – Bealach Nam Bo, the pass of Cattle - and with the wild west highland seas on the other three sides. So if one had wanted to flee the world and find a safe haven, An Comerach would have been a good refuge.

When I first tried to taste the joy of solitude, it certainly was not in my mind to flee anything. I think I felt it was an adventure I was launching into, rather than fleeing.

Of course, if I did in effect flee from busyness, I did not flee from myself. In fact I felt as I arrived in my sanctuary that I had an appointment with God, and an appointment with myself. And yet my neuroses and weaknesses come to the fore when I am alone, and I cannot avoid facing them. I do try to avoid them: I waste time doing Sudoku puzzles, or in useless fantasies about personal success or failure.

But this brings me to want to tell you something about the stages that one may go through as one tries to enter this sanctuary:

LONELINESS

REALISATION OF SOLITUDE

ARRIVAL OF THE DEMONS: the therapy stage

THE DEEPER CALM AFTER THE STORM

REALISATION OF EMPTINESS

ORDINARY LIVING

BACK TO THE WORLD, WITH SOLITUDE

LONELINESS

First, the sting of loneliness; almost a moment of panic, like agoraphobia, when you find yourself alone. This is very significant in itself. It carries a level of realisation with it. The realisation that we are alone is a fundamental part of human development. You are born alone, you die alone. This is sad stuff. And as I go round pontificating about the joy of solitude, I also become acutely aware that many, many people really are lonely – through bereavement, or just the inability to relate to people, or through being like a fish out of water in whatever environment they find themselves in. Years ago I had a client who said she felt she was like someone looking in through a window from a dark street, into a room where people were all having fun and laughing and feasting. That is real loneliness.

SOLITUDE

But for the voluntary hermit, this panicky sense of loneliness can turn into something quite different: Solitude. You may still feel lonely, but within the loneliness there is a dimension which is quite different. It is as if the stab of loneliness has brought with it an expansion of the spirit to fill the available space.

This difficult road is the road of conversion, the conversion from loneliness into solitude. Instead of running away from our loneliness and trying to forget or deny it, we have to protect it and turn it into a fruitful solitude. . . To live a spiritual life we must first find the courage to enter into the desert of our

loneliness and turn it by gentle and persistent efforts into a garden of solitude. . . .As hard as it is to believe that the dry desolate desert can yield endless varieties of flowers, it is equally hard to imagine that our loneliness is hiding unknown beauty. The movement from loneliness to solitude is the beginning of any spiritual life because it is the movement from the restless sense to the restful spirit, from the outward-reaching cravings to the inward-reaching search, from the fearful clinging to the fearless play.

Henri Nouwen: Reaching Out

THE DEMONS

My own experience of solitude is that it is in some ways like being in therapy. You have to face your own demons, because you cannot run away – just as you can't run from a good therapist. Likewise solitude is ultimately kind to you, if you are able to be kind to yourself.

But the demons are frightening and so is solitude sometimes – so is therapy in fact. This is a direct parallel with the experience of Jesus and St Anthony in the desert. Facing demons. Why does this happen? Because when you make space for something beyond just thinking, the contents of the unconscious start to emerge. Most of the time we are keeping them down and masking them with thinking and activity and all that busyness. Alone, it is no longer possible to do this. In the stories of the desert fathers the nasty contents of the unconscious were the demons, and I must admit this is a fitting description of what some of it feels like: everything should be lovely because you are in a beautiful tranquil place, and yet you are assaulted by doubts and fears. The demons suggest temptations: well yes but my language is not quite so much about sin as about dis-ease: but perhaps there is no essential difference.

I think this is all so far an understatement of the struggle which can go on inside us. It's not just about temptations (which is how the Desert fathers mostly expressed it) and nor is it just like a kind of therapy. It is a much greater struggle towards **transformation**. Therapy can be that too,, and so can the struggle with "Sin". But transformation is right at the heart of the human journey. It is what we all do whether we go into the desert or not. This is an

opportunity for any of us - without us necessarily having to go to the west coast of Scotland or the Egyptian desert. I could say much more about the struggle: at its heart it is, I think, a struggle to lose something. Rather like the Ring of Power. Frodo goes literally to the ends of the earth not to find something but to lose something.

What is really happening here? Well, it seems that when you are in a beautiful and apparently empty place, on your own, the place itself has a far greater impact on your consciousness than when you are with other people. The sting of loneliness has sensitised you, and you look out on an immensity of sea or snow or sand and are struck HARD by its immensity. But also, you are struck by something quite new: its presence.

THE CALM AFTER THE STORM:

And Satan left him, and the angels came and ministered to him.

Of course these stages don't always happen in one linear process. You go back and forth. But if you just notice the demons but try not to play with them or even engage too closely with them, eventually they will run away and leave you in peace. And the peace will be all the deeper because you have disciplined yourself to stick with it.

This is what the Desert Fathers knew as the prayer of the Heart. A much deeper inner place. This would be like Elijah when he had stood at the mouth of his cave and felt the earthquake and the fire: but it was **the Sound of Sheer Silence** through which the Lord spoke.

At each of these stages there is also the opportunity for a new sense of oneness: The limitless mountains, the stars, are within as well as beyond. There is no division. The limitless is tiny, and right here, undivided. Again and again we hear of people on this journey who are literally absorbed within the immensity. As outside, so inside. I heard the Sufi Master, Pir Vilhayat Khan, says something like: you will be able to grasp the furthest star in your hand. Or the 13th Century Zen Master, Dogen Zenji, said at the moment of his enlightenment: **I realised clearly that MIND is nothing other than rivers and mountains, forests and rivers, sun and sky and the whole wide earth.**

And when I look out from my own window of my hermitage, and see the mountain across the loch, I can often realise the powerful sense of oneness –

there is no Giles, just the mountain, clothed in mist or snow or shining with soft highland rain.

EMPTINESS

But it must not stop there. The whole point of the desert is that it is an empty place. That is why it is a desert. If it was full of clutter it would not be a desert. So it is an ideal place to experience emptiness. Quote *The Sacred Desert* page 46.

It is the Still Small Voice – the pure, soundless wind of the desert that has no taste or sound and comes from nowhere and is going nowhere. It is the wind described by T.E. Lawrence in the opening pages of the *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. It is a movement and yet carried with it a silence that is profound beyond all earthly silence, neither perceptible nor conceptual. “It is not soul or mind, nor does it possess imagination, conviction, speech or understanding”. (*Pseudo Dionysius, the Mystical Theology*) The Yahweh of Elijah’s theophany both is and is not, a natural phenomenon of the wilderness and utterly “other”.

The Sacred Desert, David Jasper (Blackwell Pub.)

Paradox: silence thunders out like a symphony.

All of this is a negation: it brings us to the place where you cannot say what God is. You cannot even say he exists. It is more honest and accurate to deny his existence than it is to say anything however beautiful. And yet you are standing in his very presence.

ORDINARY

And so that is the point to bring us back to where we are now – from which we have of course never been away. But we need to ground all this grandiose sounding stuff about oneness and emptiness, in the ordinary. The desert is totally ordinary, and it should remain so. That is why a hermit should try to live in a simple way. One of the things I find most therapeutic was to have to do things like washing up, washing clothes, cleaning the house, lighting fires, dealing with the mice. A hermit who was sheltered from such things would quickly disappear up his own emptiness. Or perhaps he should disappear, but would be prevented from doing so by all the clutter he had brought with him from the world.

This is a much more important point than just being about keeping it simple. It is a point of equal importance with the two other principles I have mentioned: No division, and emptiness. It is what by Buddhists is called suchness: or JUST THIS. IT CANNOT BE EMPHASISED TOO STRONGLY.

- Immensity – no distance
- Emptiness
- Just this.

One way of stating the purpose of the spiritual life would be **to make us into ordinary people, only more so**. We need to become more available to each other, less cluttered with our own tendency towards busyness and misery, less attached to superficial or complicated things. And for me the experience of the desert is a major assistance along this way. I do not think very many people should try to live in the desert *all* the time. Even St Anthony emerged after twenty years of hardship stronger and fitter and more available to help others. The solitary way is not a way you come to because you hate people. A hermit welcomes people, all the more so because he is **not** constantly being overwhelmed by them.

But it is urgent that we discover our own place of solitude, our own sanctuary: some safe place in our psyche where we cannot be infected with the suffocating busyness of modern living, where we can resist even for a few minutes each day the assaults of the worthy and righteous demands of a needy society. Each of us needs to look within and see how we can create or allow this special space, different for each of us, unique for each of us, probably nothing to do with a physical hermitage, but truly a sanctuary in which we can face ourselves, and recognise the sacred within us.