



*Silence is God's first language;  
everything else  
is a poor translation.  
In order to hear that language,  
we must learn to be still  
and to rest in God.*

*—Thomas Keating*

## **SEVENTH SUNDAY IN EASTER 24 May 2020**

### **Invitation to Prayer** — from Rainer Maria Rilke

I yearn to be held  
in the great hands of your heart—  
oh let them take me now.  
Into them I place these fragments, my life,  
and you, God—spend them however you want.

### **Gathering Prayer**

*Take a few moments to bring yourself fully to this space... hold gently the fragments of your life  
which you bring to worship...*

*Consciously lay aside, for now, the concerns and activities that are on your mind...*

*Acknowledge the original custodians of the land on which you live... give thanks for their  
ongoing care and pray that through Christ we might seek a common destiny together...*

Eternal Light—  
you who dispel the shadows that loom over the world—  
shine in my heart this day.  
Like the bud that with the sun's warmth  
unfurls into flower,  
coax me out of my fear and despair.  
Open me to your loving Spirit  
that I might live  
freely and with undying hope  
for you are with and for me always.  
Amen.

## Scripture Reading — Acts 1:6-14

*As you read the passage slowly, you might stop to ponder at the places indicated in the reading. Simply speak aloud, or silently if you wish, what arises in your imagination without judgement or commentary, allowing your thoughts and feelings to rest gently before you.*

So when they had come together, they asked Jesus, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

*Imagine you are one of the disciples. What do you say to the disciple next to you?*

When Jesus had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will

come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

*Imagine you are one of the disciples. What question(s) do you have for the men in white robes?*

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

*Imagine you are Mary. What is your prayer at this time?*

- Like the disciples in this reading, we are moving through an in-between time—life before the pandemic and what will be. How do you experience this time? Where are the tensions for you? the openings?
- The disciples return to Jerusalem and devote themselves to prayer as they wait on the Spirit. What might this look like in your life? in the church as it is emerging anew?
- What word do you hear for yourself this day?



## Reflections in Solitude

*You might choose to read the reflection followed by a time of silent meditation.*

### How to meditate—from the World Community for Christian Meditation

Sit with your back straight and your feet on the floor. Close your eyes lightly. Then interiorly, silently begin to recite a single word — a prayer word or mantra. We recommend the ancient Christian prayer-word “Maranatha.” Say it as four equal syllables: Ma – ra – na – tha.

Breathe normally and give your full attention to the word as you say it, silently, gently, faithfully and — above all — simply. Let go of all thoughts (even good thoughts), images, sensations and other words as they arise. Don’t fight your distractions: let them go by saying your word faithfully, gently and attentively, returning to it with intention when your attention wanders.

## Prayers of Intercession

*“Contemplation is a very dangerous activity.*

*Nothing stays the same once we have found the God within... We carry the world in our hearts: the oppression of all peoples, the suffering of our friends, the burdens of our enemies, the raping of the earth, the hunger of the starving, the joy of every laughing child.”*

*—Joan Chittister*

O God in whom we dwell, we meet you in our inner silence. Your radiant Spirit fills our being and reaches out in concern and love to the world around us. We yearn for a greater outpouring of your justice, compassion, peace and self-giving love.

So, hear us as we pray: *Come, Holy Spirit, kindle in us the fire of your love.*

We pray for the weariness and growing impatience with this in-between time. For some, it is growing more difficult to stay present to each day, to wait for what will be, to endure the challenges of ongoing solitude and distancing. More than petty inconvenience, we are starting to experience the wear and tear on our mental and spiritual health and on our relationships.

For peace and well-being, we pray: *Come, Holy Spirit, kindle in us the fire of your love.*

We pray for your Church around the world and all faiths that increase your realm of love and care. Remove the disharmony that exists between us and ease the worrisome anxiety about what tomorrow might bring. We pray especially for churches for whom this time may lead to the closure of their congregations, for those who are stretched and suffering, for those like St. Andrews who are engaged in Emergency Relief Services.

For mercy and strength, we pray: *Come, Holy Spirit, kindle in us the fire of your love.*

(cont.)

On this final week in the Easter Season, we look with anticipation to the celebration of Pentecost Day. Like the brilliant red leaves on the autumn trees, we pray that your Spirit might fill our world with beauty and plant within us seeds of peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, generosity and love.

Make us people after your own heart: *Come, Holy Spirit, kindle in us the fire of your love.*

### **Disciples' Prayer**

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial  
and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,  
now and forever. Amen.

### **Blessing**

We are not called to know all the answers or be perfect in all we do,  
we are called simply to move with the Spirit  
taking the next step in trust,  
doing what we can in each moment for the sake of love.

Let us go forth to pray and live in the way of Jesus.

The love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ and the communion of the Spirit be with us all.

## Reflections in Solitude — Week 9

Rev. Christine Gilbert and Rev. Dr Sean Gilbert for St. Andrews by the Sea Uniting Church

A week ago now, the General Secretary of South Australia Felicity Amery and Moderator Bronte Wilson invited Ministers to attend one of three Zoom gatherings to converse around the question: *What are we learning about the church at this time?*

My husband Sean, in his role as a member of the faculty at Uniting College, was asked to provide a brief theological reflection for the third and final gathering. I think Sean's reflection is valuable at any time, but after reading the lectionary passages for this Sunday, I felt his offering was especially fitting so I would like to share it with you.

Like the disciples in Acts, I hear many asking questions about the future of the church. Like them, our vision is often limited by what has been. Thus we hear the disciples ask, "Is this the time you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" A return to nationalism is all they can imagine. It is the epitome of what effectiveness and success in mission look like—a restoration of status and influence. I often hear many in the church grasping for something similar, even if the "look" of what we envision is new and innovative.

After the ascension of Jesus, the disciples return to the upper room to await inspiration and direction from the Spirit. While they wait, they do not spend time drawing up master plans or strategising. Instead, they devote themselves constantly to prayer and, as history reveals, true prayer always leads us towards self-giving love. In other words, not impressive achievements but the laying down of life for one's friends. (Jn 15:13)

Here is Sean's reflection...

What are we learning about the Church at this time?

In order to address the question posed, I want to address it initially towards myself. That is, what am I learning about myself at this time? My hope then being that the personal perspective might have a broader application and resonance.

When Covid-19 was named a pandemic and things started to change dramatically, I found myself waking up in the small hours of the morning in a cold state of dread. Frozen almost.

There were a number of cross-pressures at play that I am sure many of us know by experience, such as health concerns, anxiety around finance and a general sense of helplessness about my children's and grandchildren's immediate and long term well-being.

Thankfully amidst the interior pressure, I was reminded of Wendell Berry's celebrated poem, "The Peace of Wild Things" so that through it and other holy murmurings, I heard the distinct invitation to pray. Yet not just pray in a functional, instrumentalist way—"God, end this virus"—but as an immersion further into the deep peace of Christ (that passes all understanding) within the very midst of the "wild things."

It was kind of like,  
"Come aside and  
stay with me.  
Watch with me.  
Pray with and in  
me."



Well, as it happened (and so happens), this movement toward a deeper experience of prayer, coincided with my ordering and eventual re-reading of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship*. This being a more recent translation and a more accurate rendering of the title we may know as *The Cost of Discipleship*. And after I read the first chapter, "Costly Grace," I put the book down on my bedside table and whispered, "Holy ground."

In other words, there was more than just profound insights into the life of Christian discipleship here, there was a spiritual claim upon my life: *Sola Christus*, or "in and through Christ alone."

And not merely in a doctrinally correct sense but in a transformative, relational sense. So, in my case, this was yet another invitation to pray in the way and being of Christ which is always the encouragement to let go of fear, disbelief, dread even, and to fall headlong into God's embrace.

Bonhoeffer says it beautifully in the context of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount: "Genuine prayer is not a deed or an exercise, a pious attitude, it is the request of the child to the heart of the Father." Bonhoeffer knowing full well that Christian action pivots on this depth and quality of contemplation as to where the Spirit of Christ is actually leading.

Now, I am aware as I begin broadening this personal invitation out towards the life of the church that there exists a tension in all this. I know it in myself but I have also heard it from ministry students and colleagues in recent weeks. The crux of this tension being, "I do not have the time and energy to look in the contemplative prayer direction. I will when it is not so hectic, so difficult and complex out there."

Well, there is much to address practically and that commonly has meant something to do with computers and technology! After all, we need to keep our worship services going. We need to design new, slimline educational courses. We need to stay visible. We need to reach as many people as we can.

On many levels I get all that and I swim in the stream of it as best I can (though I nearly had a melt down before a livestream lecture the other night when I couldn't a PP to run in Zoom!). But I also wonder about what really matters at this time so far as the Christian Church is concerned. And what might be in need of shedding, reshaping, re-stating and indeed re-framing by virtue of our invited contemplation and prayer; a seemingly *passive stance* in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis but in actual fact, the wellspring of renewed imagination and action.



Charles Taylor, the Canadian philosopher who wrote *A Secular Age*, notes that the "immanent frame" in which we all live in the West (a bordered landscape of the purely material and functional world) is characterised by the language of "causal efficiency." Everything turns on it and by in large we in the church also turn on it. That is, if we plan and do it well enough, it will get done and be done efficiently. Thanks be to God—as if God had something to do with it in the first place!

Well, in the same open and courageous spirit of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, I trust that we are learning as a church that the language and gifting of prayer isn't simply about helping us get things done more proficiently in the time of crisis. Rather it is the expressive yearning of the child directed towards the compassionate heart of the Parent.

It is the deeper immersion into the beauty and fearlessness of Christ. It is both inner and outer transformations born of Spirit. It's the irreducible stuff of the Christian life or that which lasts unto eternity and which heals and enlivens others. And why, because in such contemplative practice, we not only look upon God, but there is time and space for God to gaze upon us, to call us by name and to restore within us the love and peace of the Holy Trinity, and that will always be the Church's greatest gift in its mission to the world.

### The Peace of Wild Things

by Wendell Berry

When despair for the world grows in me  
and I wake in the night at the least sound  
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,  
I go and lie down where the wood drake  
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.  
I come into the peace of wild things  
who do not tax their lives with forethought  
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.  
And I feel above me the day-blind stars  
waiting for their light. For a time  
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.