

Study Leave Report

Topic: Who is God for me, now? What is prayer for me, now? And How do I find spiritual refreshment?

Week 1: I had organised to meet with Dr. David Crawley, who is a Senior Lecturer at the School of Theology, Mission and Ministry, at Laidlaw College, to discuss personal spirituality, and approaches to prayer, and to receive readings, and you-tube references, associated to my theme.

I met with Dr. David Crawley, at Laidlaw College. I met with him twice and out of these meetings I was made aware that, I was struggling spiritually, in my ministry at Greyfriars, and that my physical and spiritual condition, highlighted the need for spiritual refreshment, and re-evaluation of my calling, to ministry in general. My discussions with my supervisor Rev. Alf Taylor, affirmed the need, for an extended period of study leave, because I was spiritually, 'running on empty'. Also, this was my second ever study leave, in the 20 years of being in ordained ministry.

After my discussions with Dr. Crawley and Rev. Taylor, I met with Rachel McKay (a member of Greyfriars Presbyterian Church) who was a member of the Spiritual Growth Ministries, and Rachel helped me organise, the spiritual retreats that I enrolled in. These first 3 weeks, on hindsight, would be crucial to my study leave, because they became the 'eye-opener' to being aware of and understanding the hurt, the pain, and the low self-esteem I was experiencing. As I discovered, God's hand was in the planning, of the 2nd and 3rd week, of my study leave. My time with Rev. Jeff Whittaker proved to be so important, in unearthing the deep-seated pain, and personal struggles, that I was experiencing.

Weeks 2 & 3: Individually guided 5day retreat with Rev. Jeff Whittaker, (Epsom Baptist Minister). I was also enrolled in a 2day retreat at Mercy Spirituality Centre, Epsom, with Pip Nicholls, on trusting our own deepest experience.

The 5day retreat ended up being a 6day retreat, which clashed with the 2day retreat in Epsom, and so I opted out of the Mercy Centre Retreat, with Pip Nicholls.

The retreat began, with Jeff helping us to look at, 2 styles of studying scripture. There were 7 enrolled on this retreat. The 1st style was, the 'Lectio Divina' which encouraged participants, to listen out for particular words or phrases from a Bible passage, and then meditate on the connections with your life, followed by a response of prayer, and then resting in God. That meant, giving

space and time, simply to be with God, and accepting the invitation, “be still, and know, that I am God.”

Then there was the Ignatian prayer, which was usually used, with Gospel readings. You began with prayer, and then you read the passage, and then you entered into the story yourself, followed by allowing the story to unfold, in your imagination, and become a part of the scenes, in that passage. At the end, there would be time of reflection and prayer. I chose the Lectio Divina style, for my first week of study.

During this week, I focused on these passages from the Bible: Matt. 3:11-21; Mk 6:45-52; Ps. 42:1-8; Numb. 20:1-13; 1 Cor. 3:1-9; Ps. 65:1-13.

Matt. 3:11-21 was about Jesus rebuking the storm. It spoke of fear and amazement. It spoke of calmness and obedience. For me, this was so appropriate to begin my study leave. My life was in turmoil, because of my physical condition and because of my spiritual emptiness. The story echoed what was happening in my life. This was a case, not of the calm before the storm, but the storm before the calm. I became aware, that my personal storm was, something that I had to ride through, before I could experience the calm, in my life.

Mark 6:45-52. This passage talked about Jesus walking on the water. My initial thought, was that my super hero, was coming to save me. I felt a sense of relief, that my Saviour braved the storm, to walk alongside of me. Then I thought of Jesus, going away to a hill, to pray. This indicated, that prayer was absolutely essential. If Jesus is to be our role model, then prayer time, and getting away to a quiet place, is a must for all. This thought would become, quite significant in the latter stages, of my study leave. It's not that I wasn't praying, at the beginning of each day, but it was more like, a one-way conversation, between the Lord and I.

Verse 48 says, “He saw that his disciples, were straining at the oars, because they were rowing against the wind.” It reminded me, that for many of us, God watches over us, as we struggle in our walk in life, because we're not going God's way, but our own. And then when he walks beside us, we don't seem to recognize him, because we only see us. But once we recognize him, the path and the journey becomes, bearable, maybe even likeable. I questioned why it sometimes took me so long, to recognize the path I was treading, and that it wasn't healthy. Was my pride so strong, that it clouded my sight, to see Jesus, or to even recognize him? There's a saying that goes, “God helps those, who help themselves.” That's only partly true. What's missing, are the two words at the end, “to Him.” It should read, “God helps those, who help themselves, to him.” Why couldn't I help myself, to more of Him?

Ps. 42:1-8 Again, this psalm highlighted, how ideal the readings were, as an indication, of how I was living my life. It's a prayer, of a man in exile. It

described similarities, to what I too, was experiencing. It talked of being sad and troubled, tears, and seeking God. The psalm expressed what I was feeling: "My heart breaks, when I remember the past; why am I so sad? Why am I so troubled? Here in exile, my heart is breaking; chaos roars at me, like a flood." And then came the words of encouragement, "I will put my hope in God, and once again, I will praise him, my Saviour and my God."

Ps. 65:1-13. The words, "People everywhere will come to you, on account of their sins. Our faults defeat us, but you forgive them," became significant for me, at this stage of the retreat. I needed to offload the hurt that I was carrying, and I too needed forgiveness. I needed to repent, and experience the breaking down of the barriers, that I alone had erected. I praised God, because slowly but surely, they were coming down. V. 5 had an impact on me, "you answer us, by giving us victory, and you do wonderful things, to save us." I began to realise, that in releasing my burdens, I was inviting God, to do the awesome deeds, in helping me to become victorious, over my personal situation. If God could calm the roar of the seas, and the noise of the waves, and the uproar of the peoples, then God could answer my prayers, with awesome deeds. This was my God, who was walking with me, through my storm.

At the end of this first retreat, I realised, that if I felt good about myself, I could forgive. I felt that if I was guilt released, I could also forgive. I realised that I needed God's peace, in accepting myself, so that I could forgive, to feel good about forgiving. I came to realise, that this was just the introduction, and that I needed more time, to look deep within, and find what I needed to do, to totally release the burdens, I was carrying.

The most challenging part of this first week's reflection, was reliving the past; rehashing the pain; recognizing the impact that this had had, on my wife and family. Thankfully, I began to sense God's peace, and calm, and as the week unfolded, God's peace became very real for me. I wanted to remember everything that had been shared. I never wanted to forget, how God revealed, that I could forgive, and that I could be set free. I came to realise that I was learning to forgive myself, and to forgive others.

I also learnt, that my health, had an impact on my spirituality. Being very obese meant, that I had destroyed the temple of the Spirit. I had abused my body and therefore, was unable to perform my Godly responsibilities that, He had placed upon me. It affected my self-esteem, and challenged my confidence-- was it depleted, or simply disappeared. It also caused me to question, whether the negative situations, had gotten the better of me. I sensed that, although I was experiencing God's peace, there was still much negativity surrounding my thinking, and it was having an impact on my relationships, with my wife and children.

I did some research on forgiveness, and found that, it is not a proper English word. You don't add 'ness' to a verb, to make a noun. Instead, you add it to an adjective, to turn it into a noun, like goodness, badness, and niceness.

The true word is, either 'forgiveness' or 'forgivingness'. Only when you have experienced forgiveness, can you truly express forgivingness (Kenneth Cragg). It's not about getting your own back. It's about, getting your life back. The following are, target points, of things that I learnt, from this research.

- Human forgiveness is required, as preparation for receiving God's forgiveness
- Forgiving, is beyond the power, of my human effort, alone.
- Forgiving, is more of a journey, than a destination.
- Forgiving, is setting a person free, and discovering, that person is, me!
- The healthful place, to begin forgiving, is with Jesus, not with the hurt. There is found, both power and perspective.
- Forgiveness takes courage. It's about relinquishing power, because you have to drop your 'case'.
- Forgiveness is choosing another way – the way of peace, health, and eventually, happiness.

After the first retreat, I began reading from the "Streams of Living Water." I was interested in the 'contemplative stream'. It was more than, just a life of prayer. It was life of intimacy with God. It was learning silence, solitude, and walking with God, day by day. It was about learning to be in a relationship with God, and listening out for his voice. It taught me, that salvation is being caught up in the life, that Jesus was living on earth. But he wasn't just living that life in church. Church was not the primary location.

Today, we are responsible for the world, which we have created. So what were we created for? To be responsible, for the earth! Where was I, in terms of my responsibility to the community? Where am I supposed to be, as a disciple? The answer is, where ever I am. I needed God's character in my life, in order to work well with his power. I learnt, that God's Spirit does not pay attention to, denominational lines, or to church traditions. His Spirit is with us when we cross the church threshold, and enter the created human world.

To do this, I needed to be at one with God. I needed to forgive myself-to be forgiven, and then be excited and energised, about stepping out into the arms of the community. From my reading on "Contemplation as a tool of healing" by Liz Malusching, I also learnt, that we need to stop our busyness, and return to our source: who is, God. When we do this, we transcend our mind, going beyond it, to God's mind. Healing happens, in this place of deep contemplation, where that sense of separateness dissolves, and we expand into oneness, with our source.

In the first week of September, I began the silent retreat with Rev. Andrew Dunn. My first assignment was, to look for signs of God's grace, in nature, and

then in scripture. I spent hours, writing and reading, from Ephesians 2:1-14. One of the signs I thought of, as God's grace in nature, was in the trees.

As God's grace is given freely, I thought of the branches and the leaves, freely replenishing the old air, into fresh air. Even in winter, during the time of "death", where the branches broke, because the birds were too heavy, as they perched on them, there were other branches that became stronger, through the winter. Although the rain was cold, it continued to feed the soil, and the roots of the trees. I couldn't remember, when was the last time, I sat still, and actively observed the awesomeness of God's creation. The silence was deafening, at first. But after a few hours, the few cars that passed by, sounded so loud, that it too was deafening.

I became more astounded at the creation of God, and disappointed, that for so long, creation had passed me by, because of my busyness. Eph. 2:8-10 says, "For it is by God's grace, that you had been saved through faith. It is not the result, of your own efforts, but God's gifts, so that no one can boast about it. God has made us what we are, and in our union with Christ Jesus, he has created us, for a life of good deeds, which he has already prepared for us to do."

Grace is an undeserved blessing, which comes from God's kindness. God decided in advance, to adopt us into his family (God's grace), by bringing us, to himself, through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure. If we trust in Christ's atoning sacrifice for our sins, it reassures God – it brings God great pleasure, knowing that because we have trusted in him, it has taken us, into God himself. This is what causes God, to be overwhelmed with us. So how does God respond to this, one may ask? God blesses and embraces his children, and they become heirs, to all the promises God has made, to his people.

With Rev. Andrew Dunn I came to know of God's two books. At the heart of every retreat, are God's two books – the written 'Word in Scripture', and the 'God's handcrafted word of creation'. Both, play their parts in, our journeying, learning, contemplating, and deepening in relationship with God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It's often on retreat, with its space and time, that the book of creation, comes into play more vividly, than in the busy and pressured times. There has been a fresh burst of research, into this notion of two books, with some startling discoveries, unearthed in past writings, and thought by Christian writers, preachers, and teachers. Here are a few examples:

Psalm 19: The heavens declare the glory of God, the firmament his handiwork. (King David 1,000 BC).

John's Gospel has one of the earliest: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . All things came into being, through Him, and without Him, not one thing came into being. In Him was life, the light of all people." (John1: 1-4).

Origen (2nd – 3rd century): The parallel between, nature and Scripture is, so complete. They both lead to the same conclusions.

St Augustine (4th – 5th century): Some people, in order to discover God, read books. But there is a great book: the very appearance of created things. Look above you! Look below you! Read it. God, whom you want to discover, never wrote that book with ink. Instead, he set before your eyes, the things he had made. Can you ask for a louder voice than that?

Charles Spurgeon 19th century: Strange it is, that some who love God, are yet afraid to study the God-declaring Book of Nature. (In his commentary on Psalm 19:1)

Martin Luther, a great lover of the written Scriptures: God writes the gospel, not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers, and clouds and stars.

There are many others, who have also featured, in this understanding, of God's two books.

I went on to learn about contemplation. Contemplation is, the awareness of God, known and loved, at the core of one's being (cloud of unknowing.penguin.1961.36). Contemplative prayer, is when one is open to God, receptive, listening, reflective, loving and being loved, wordless, being in God's presence, and responding.

The contemplative heart is, an open heart, where our hearts are opened to God. We learn to read, how God is impinging our hearts. It's like the flower, opened to the sun – receiving. We live in God's presence, in a felt way, not just through ideas, or truth, or theology. It can be gentle, or intense. Yahweh is, the living One: Jesus is the Risen One. Jesus was a very contemplative man. He lived in the presence of Abba, his own dear father, and this nourished him for his life and work, and enabled him to critique accurately, his world, religion, people, and their motives. He prayed regularly, in the presence of Abba, often all night long. And he invites his disciples, then and now, to "learn of me." (Matthew 11: 28-30).

John, the apostle, sees the Christian life as "abiding" in Jesus. He sees God, as 'agape love', in whom we live, and who we reflect, in the world (1 John 4). "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" are experiential, and active infusions of God's life into ours: Day by day, and hour by hour. (2Cor.13: 13).

On the 24th of September, I attended another silent retreat with Andrew Dunn. This time, the topic was on prayer. To pray is, to walk in the full light of God, and to simply say, without holding back, "I am human, and you are God." I discovered, that prayer is, a declaration of dependence, upon God. It invites me, to bring my whole life, into God's presence, for cleansing and restoration. Self-exposure is, never easy, but when it is done, one learns, that underneath the

layers of grime, lies a damaged work of art, that God longs to repair. Somehow, we can only trust, but not understand, presenting to God, the intimate details, of our lives, but concluding, that it gives God, pleasure. We humans, represent the only species on earth with whom, God can hold a conversation. Only we can articulate praise, or lament. Only we can form words, in response to miracles, and the tragedies of life. We dare not devalue, this our unique role in the cosmos, to give words to existence, words addressed to our Creator. God eagerly bends an ear, towards those words.

It's intriguing, that my image of God, more than anything else, determines my degree of honesty, in prayer. The most important purpose, of prayer may be, to let our true selves, be loved by God. In Psalm 103, God does not treat us, as our sins deserve, or repay us, according to our inequities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those, who fear him; so far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions, from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion, on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.

In essence, we are to make time for prayer, and reflection. We are to focus on the spiritual, instead of relying on the material parts of our lives. We have to slow down, simplify things, bring silence into our lives, tell the truth, shed our masks, and soften our approach to God. If I had to answer the question, "Why pray?" in one sentence, it would be, "because Jesus did." He bridged the chasm, between God and human beings. While on earth, he became vulnerable, as we are; rejected as we are; tested as we are. In every case, his response was prayer. Jesus valued prayer enough, to spend many hours praying.

Here's a wonderful quote from Abraham Joshua Heschel: "Contact with God, is not our achievement. It's a gift, coming down to us from on high, like a meteor, rather than, rising up, like a rocket." Before the words of prayer, come to the lips, the mind must believe, in God's willingness, to draw near to us, and in our ability, to clear the path for his approach. Such belief is, the idea that leads us, towards prayer."

I am aware, that I have far exceeded the number of words given to me to write this report, and it is truly far from completed. However, this is just a small indication showing how badly I needed this study leave, and how much I was running on "empty". In saying that, I do sincerely thank the Presbytery, and especially the Council of Greyfriars Eden-Epsom, for allowing me the time to take the study leave, but particularly the extra time I felt I needed.

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