

less you will want to pray and the more impossible it will seem to make time. The other thing is that if you make time for prayer in a regular disciplined way, there will be a great spin-off because prayer will start to overflow into the rest of your life so that you will find yourself praying at the bus stop, driving the car, or while watching television. In the same way that thoughts of the beloved will crowd into the lover's consciousness, so thoughts of God will come easily in and out of the mind of the person who is faithful in prayer.

Discipline in prayer and in one's way of living leads in time to real freedom of spirit so that one learns to adapt quite unconsciously to one's own and other people's needs. Ignatius is quite clear on this, telling his disciples that, if the demands of charity take them away from their time of prayer, they are not the less acceptable to God. The apostolic life is like a journey in the desert – you may have to travel for quite a while on what is in the camel's hump – but when the time of rest at the oasis comes, one drinks long and deep at the well to recharge the batteries and prepare for the next journey. Like many apostolic people, I have found that there is a very special sweetness in prayer after a period of apostolic activity for one moves from preaching or whatever into deep stillness and consolation. It is not a question of work *or* prayer but of a life in which the two are inexorably welded together, prayer giving one power to serve and generous foot-washing leading to sweetness at rest in the presence of God. It is in this way that St Paul's amazing admonition to pray always can literally be obeyed, and there comes a time when one dares to say with him, 'I live now, not I but Christ lives in me' (Gal. 2:20).

Discipleship as Listening

Eli said to Samuel: 'Go and lie down, and if someone calls say, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening."' So Samuel went and lay down in his place. (1 Sam. 3:9)

The key to discipleship is listening and if we are to take seriously the call to follow Christ we must listen to what he is asking of us. Men and women in religious life commonly take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and those of us who are not thus committed are tempted to breathe a sigh of relief and thank our lucky stars that we are not tied down. If we reflect upon it, however, there is a sense in which all Christians are bound with Hosea's leading reins of love:

I led them with reins of kindness,
with leading strings of love.

Hos. 11:4

Christ demands quite clearly of all of us that we share our wealth with our brothers, that we be chaste of heart and that we listen to his voice. Again and again in the gospels he calls us to listen: 'I am the way, the truth and the life'; 'I am the Bread of Life'; 'He who hears me hears the Father'; 'Come to me all you who are heavily laden and I will give you rest.'

How then can we be so obtuse as to think that it is only the professed religious who are bound by vows of obedience – for the word obedience comes from the root *audire* – to hear, and obedience in its essence is listening. How then should lay Christians listen to the word of God and in particular, how should those of us involved in caring cash out our 'obedience'? I would suggest six areas of life in which we must be particularly sensitive, tuned in to hear what God is asking of us. The first of these (and I do not set them in any order of importance) is scripture. There are many people for whom daily

reading of the Bible is as natural as having breakfast or cleaning their teeth, but for others less well-disciplined it is a struggle to be faithful. One of the great bonuses of the monastic life for me was the daily exposure of the 'Wild Word of God', that word which both warms the heart and pierces it, slipping as St Paul says into the secret places of the heart, between the joints of the marrow.

There are many different ways of reading the Bible. You can read a whole gospel through at a sitting or get stuck in wonder over a paragraph or a single phrase. The old monks in their *Lectio Divina* read slowly, pondering, chewing and ruminating on small passages so that they could extract from them the power contained in the poetry. I personally find it absurdly difficult to be disciplined about daily scripture reading but find that fidelity to saying even part of the Divine Office provides me with at least some exposure.

The second of my channels of the word of God is what I would loosely call the church – by which I mean not just the Catholic Church but all those churchmen and women of different denominations and different faiths whose judgement I respect. The people to whom I pay the closest attention are those who are clearly men and women both of prayer and of justice. I would walk a long way and listen with great care to prophetic figures like Helder Camara, or South Africa's Archbishop Desmond Tutu. These and many in our own country are the disciples whom God has put to the test, tried in the furnace of suffering and humiliation. I believe we ignore them at our peril.

But it is not just the churchmen who have a monopoly on the word of God. There are other men and women, often unbelievers, who speak with authority about truth and justice. We must be alert, poised like Elijah at the mouth of his cave to catch the Word, and not be fooled into disregarding it because it comes from the mouth of someone whose religion, political stance or cultural background is alien to our own.

We must listen also, to the signs of the times, to the voice of the poor, to revolutions, to the movements of government, of social change in our society. We are in and of this world and we will only discover its truthful core and tender heart if we are open and loving to it.

Those of us who are carers must listen in particular to the 'little ones' who have been given to us to cherish. Children,

the handicapped, the sick and the dying often have a directness and simplicity which gives them an access to the truth which is denied to the more complex of us; we do well to attend to our 'clients' for it is out of the mouths of babes and sucklings that the most devastating of truths sometimes come.

And lastly, of course, we must listen to the word of God in our hearts. Prayer is a two-way process, a communication with the unseen God in which we not only speak but are 'spoken' to in ways which are at once simple and utterly mysterious. I would like to reflect upon a particular way of listening, that which is known as making a 'retreat'.

The word retreat often elicits a considerable amount of respect in those who have never done it: they are surprised and rather moved that someone should go off on their own to pray. They imagine too that it will be a cosy experience, a merciful respite from the hurly-burly of the 'real world', a rest, from which one will come back renewed and invigorated. In my experience however spiritual retreats are very different from that which my friends and workmates imagine. I see a retreat as a pilgrimage up the mountain, a trek into the desert, a rather daring and therefore frightening challenge to the living God to come half-way to meet me. It is, for me, a standing naked on the mountain top, a deliberate exposure to the word of God so that I may hear what he has to say to me. It is the way that I personally cash out my need and longing to be 'obedient', to cleave to the will of the Father.

There are in this country a number of different ways in which one can go 'on retreat'. I would not like to say that one way is better than another: it is a matter of what is available when you are free and what suits you best. Many people find that a 'preached' retreat suits their needs. They go to a monastery or retreat centre and, with a group of like-minded people, listen two or three times a day to a preacher who will talk upon a particular theme. In between talks they will walk, read, discuss or pray according to their inclination and needs. Such retreats may last three days or as long as a week and can be a source of much spiritual nourishment.

Another way is to go for a time to a monastic house and join as closely as possible in the liturgy and way of life of the community. Many monasteries have guest houses and some of them welcome retreatants into choir with the monks or nuns. Other communities prefer to protect their 'space' and

keep retreatants at arm's length, allowing them to be present at the liturgy but not to join in it. There is much joy and support to be gained from such monastic visits, for most outsiders find the sung office both beautiful and uplifting and it is so spaced as to happily fill an otherwise long day. There is, of course, usually the possibility of a few conversations with one of the monks or sisters so that the retreatant will receive advice about matters of the spirit. I have a deep love of the monastic liturgy and find exposure to the mystery of the monastic life always leaves me with the heightened sense of awe at the God who calls young men and women to make an apparent holocaust of their lives.

Another, rather harder way of seeking God is with the Jesuits. I say harder because the retreats are normally conducted in silence with extended daily periods of prayer and one to one 'spiritual direction'. The first time I made an Ignatian retreat I was in Chile, and was trying to work out whether God was calling me to be a nun. I left my home for a week and went to stay in an almost deserted retreat house on the outskirts of the city. The priest who was directing me came each day and we talked for an hour or so. The rest of the time I spoke to no one. I prayed about five hours a day, walked in the garden and read my Bible. That is all. I found the experience staggering. Never before had anyone taken my relationship with God so seriously and the priest's manner made me equally determined to listen.

I have made many similar retreats in the last few years, although rarely for more than a few days. Each time I find the experience quite hard because, after a very active life, three days of complete withdrawal from stimuli can be unsettling. I do not always sleep very well and sometimes I get very low. Why then do I do it? Sometimes I too ask myself, Why?! The answer is, of course, that in some way that I cannot quite identify, these retreats are the occasion of an encounter with God. Sometimes these encounters have been extremely painful for I have been forced to rethink areas of my life that I thought were settled. Mostly though, these days, my experience is of long periods of weariness and aridity, which are nevertheless satisfactory. The Lord is somehow present, even in the insomnia and the depression. There are too the moments of rare joy when one's heart swells, and in the deep stillness that follows one is quite sure

that the Lord was in this place: 'He wears the ungathered blossom of quiet; stiller he than a deep well at noon, or lovers met; than sleep or the heart after wrath. He is the silence following great words of peace' (Rupert Brooke).

These periods of formal retreat have become a regular part of my life and I would see them as integral to my particular style of discipleship. I am, of course, not alone in this for an increasing number of men and women involved in apostolic work take time out for deliberate 'listening' and discernment. This retreat from the 'marketplace' to the desert is for busy people an act of faith and of humility. It is a gesture which says I believe in God. I believe so deeply that I will leave the work to which I have given my life and go to a place apart and do nothing. I will write no letters, read no books, take no telephone calls. I will, for a time, let go the strings with which I manipulate my life and be still before God. This is not a holiday nor a few day's rest, but a manoeuvre which is deadly serious. I will lay down my load, clear my mind and say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'

And speak he does. Provided we really clear space in our lives and hearts, the Lord will speak. Not in so many words, of course, but through intuition, ideas and movements of the heart, expressed in our feelings, in our experience of love or distaste, anguish or conflict. The Lord makes himself known as he did to Elijah in the story in 1 Kings 19.

Elijah was on the run from Jezebel who was out to get him and he travelled far into the desert to hide. Exhausted, he sat down under a furze tree, and, wishing he were dead, said 'Lord, I've had enough. Take my life, I'm no better than my ancestors.' The Lord responded with that marvellous practicality of the divinity and sent him, not a sermon or an absolution but a tray of hot scones and a flask of coffee (well, water, really).

'Get up and eat,' he was told, 'or the journey will be too long for you.'

So he got up and ate and drank and went on for forty days and forty nights until he reached Horeb, the mountain of God. When he had arrived at his destination Elijah sat down in the cave to await the word of the Lord. Then he was told, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before Yahweh.' Then came the pyrotechnics, the storms, the wind, the earthquake, and then a fire. But, surprise, surprise, the Lord was not in

any of these. Then at last there came a gentle breeze and Elijah covered his face, for he recognised the voice of God.

The Elijah story makes clear that the Lord's voice is often so quiet that we must stand very still if we are to hear it. True, there may be the burning bush or the Damascus Road experiences, but these are usually once in a lifetime encounters; experiences of call or correction that leaves us in no doubt that we have been touched by God. For the rest of the time, if we are to listen seriously we must go a little way into the desert, turn off our transistor and listen.

And how to interpret these movements of the spirit? May we not read the message incorrectly, get carried away by religious fervour or emotion and make a crazy decision that we will come to regret later?

It is indeed possible to get things out of perspective or make unwise decisions when the heart is troubled and for this reason most people who feel called to a life of radical discipleship do well to seek advice from someone skilled in spiritual direction. Just as the handicapped, the troubled or the dying need someone to accompany them on their journey, so too do we need a skilled friend as we make our way towards God.

The practice of spiritual direction is an old one in the church and indeed in many of the Eastern religions. The disciple seeks out a *guru* or wise father and opens his heart to him, asking for correction, for help and for guidance. For some people all that is needed is a little advice in prayer from a person more experienced than themselves. Others however, whose lives are more complex and decision-making therefore more difficult, need a director with special skills to help them discern what the Lord is asking. The Jesuits, in particular, and those sisters whose spirituality is based upon the teachings of St Ignatius, have made a special study of the art of spiritual direction. These men and women receive training in psychology and counselling skills as well as in strictly spiritual matters, for the workings of the mind and spirit are inexorably intertwined. If we are to understand the causes of conflict in grown men and women we must have knowledge not just of the manner in which childhood events can influence, or changes in mood alter, the response to a given stimulus. Modern Ignatian spiritual direction is founded not just upon a life of prayer and knowledge of the scriptures, but upon an

understanding of the way men and women function. With such a guide we may embark upon a process of *discernment*, of working to clarify what the spirit is saying in our hearts.

This word *discernment* is a key one in Ignatian spirituality. In his Principle of Foundation, Ignatius writes:

Man is created to love, *serve* and praise God our Lord and by this means save his soul. All other things in the world are created for man to help him in the end for which he was created. From this it follows that we must use things so far as they help us attain this end and we must discard things in so far as they hinder us. (*Exercises of St Ignatius*)

If we believe that each of us is called by name to serve God in a special way and that each calling is individual, then it follows that we must discover, *discern*, what God is asking, not of Christians in general, but of *us* in particular. This seems to me to be fundamental to the spiritual life: we need to know what God is asking not of the Pope or of the Carmelite sister down the road, but for *us*, whether we be housewife, film star, nurse or medical director of a hospice for the dying.

Hilda of Whitby, a seventh-century nun who was the head of a double monastery (for men and women) and a spiritual adviser to kings and bishops, has a marvellous way of putting this call to individual service:

Trade with the gifts that God has given you. Bend your minds to holy learning that you may escape the fretting moth of littleness of mind which would wear out your souls. Brace your wills to action that they may not be the spoil of weak desires. Raise your heart and lips in song which gives courage to the soul. Being buffeted by trials, learn to laugh; being rebuked, give thanks, and having failed, determine to succeed.

If we take Ignatius' statement that we are created to serve God, and Hilda's advice to trade with the gifts that God has given us, we have two elements essential to discernment: for like the gospel story of the talents we are each given an individual gift with which to serve and we must work that gift, not bury it in the ground. Discernment is about the *interaction* between the Spirit of God moving in our hearts and the way we respond to that Spirit, the way we live our lives. It is about a way of living with the ears always open to the

Spirit, with the eyes like those of the servant girl in the psalm, always upon the hand of her mistress. Discernment is about obedience, about living one's life abandoned to God: it is, in essence, about freedom.

There are two main aspects of living discernment. The first is in major decision-making processes, life-changing events where one is choosing a state of life or a career. The second is a more subtle, ongoing affair, a way of living day by day, minute by minute in an ever increasing condition of sensitivity, of openness to the Spirit of God. Let us look first at a major discernment experience for it is here that we may understand it more clearly.

Let us say, for example, that a man or woman gets an offer of a different job. They find the offer exciting, interesting, and must decide whether or not to accept it. It is not just a question of promotion, of prestige, of money. The new post may be more responsible, more important, better paid, but that in itself is not enough. The person must decide: is this the best way *for me* to be using my gifts? Is this the best way I can serve God? What will happen to the people I now serve if I leave them? Can I be replaced? Will the new post bring me new ways of serving, expand my caring, bring me closer to God and his people? Or will it perhaps distance me from the people I am most gifted for? There are too the more human elements: will this job stretch me beyond my capacity so that I will be at risk of losing the more gentle, creative side of my nature? Will it distance me too far from the people who support me, for those I need and who need me? And what of my friends and family, of those I have been given to take care of? If I am married, will my spouse and children be happy and fulfilled in a new place, or will my gain be their loss?

There are so many things to be worked out in any major decision and if we wish to do it wisely, then it is good to pray, reflect and discuss with an impartial adviser. It is a question of balance, of reflection and of logical thinking done in the light of prayer. It is a question too of listening to the heart. How do I *feel* when I think about this proposed change? Do I feel calm, peaceful and right about it, or do I feel at some level disturbed, nagged by doubts? Discernment in its essence is not just about prayer, about asking God for guidance, but

about listening to the inner voice of conscience, and of emotion, of the heart.

This listening, learned in the more formal situation of retreat, may be carried out into daily life. Once I have become familiar with my inner voices I can recognise them more easily. As I drive my car or sit at home in the evening I can reflect gently upon the events of the day. Some things I did or said may leave me with that deep peaceful sense of having acted from my true centre. Others, however, leave a feeling of discord. That which, at the time I said it, seemed witty or clever, I may now realise was wounding and would have been better not said. Little by little, in this way we can learn from experience and perhaps become more gentle, more compassionate people. It is a balance between learning to accept our weakness of temperament and working to become more that which we are called to be. It is what the Benedictines call *Conversio Morem*: a change in manners. This is their only vow: to respond to the voice of the Spirit calling them to grow in the likeness of Christ. There seems no reason why it should not be ours.

Empty out your Teacup God

*The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.*

Lao Tsu
from *Tao Te Ching*

This last chapter is by way of being a 'credo'. It is an account of the God whom I meet in my life of 'sharing the darkness' and of how I personally have made sense of the world in which I live.

The Indian Jesuit psychologist Tony de Mello is quoted as saying 'Empty out your teacup God' – a marvellous, withering and twentieth-century way of telling us that our God is too small. A few years ago I would have thought that a professional carer's God-concept was his own private business: but the longer I work in the field of caring, the more important it seems that we do not get hung up on false Gods, however comforting. It matters for three reasons. Firstly, as I have tried to show, we will damage those we care for if we are purveyors of a theology in which illness is seen as a punishment for sins or physical healing is declared freely available to those with sufficient faith.

Secondly, we ourselves will come unstuck if we search for facile explanations of the mystery of suffering instead of bowing down in baffled awe before the one, holy, unknowable God.

Thirdly, as adult human beings, we have no business clinging to childhood beliefs when we should be letting go in faith to follow the truth. Our hearts are for filling, our minds are for blowing, and our idols for shattering into a thousand pieces. In her book *Holy the Firm*, Annie Dillard struggles to wrest a meaning from the tragic accident of a young girl burnt in a plane crash:

Today is Friday, November 20th. Julie Norwich is in the hospital, burned; we can get no word of her condition. People released from burn wards, I once read, have a very high suicide rate. They had not realised, before they were burnt, that life could include suffering or that they personally could be permitted such pain . . .

In Chapter 9, I quoted Annie Dillard's reaction to the story of Christ's encounter with the man born blind. The disciples, ever curious, asked Jesus why the man should have been thus afflicted. Was it, they said, his fault or his parents'? Jesus' reply, 'meagre, baffling, and infuriating', was that 'the works of God should be made manifest'. Dillard reacts in a fury:

The works of God made manifest? Do we really need more victims to remind us that we're all victims? Is this some sort of a parade for which a conquering army shines up its terrible guns and rolls them up and down the street for the people to see? Do we need blind men stumbling about, and little flame faced children, to remind us what God can – and will – do? (ibid.)

I find this angry questioning marvellous for it throws piety and pussyfooting to the wind and asks the questions we all long to ask. Why did God permit the earthquake in Guatemala or Mexico? Why must Derek die of cancer, when he is so young, so good, so loved by his wife and children? And what of the thirty-two year old girl whose body I saw last time I went to the undertakers – flown in from Germany where she'd taken her own life in a fit of depression? Why, why? Oh, God why? What the hell is going on here?

Again rises from the heart of suffering the ancient cry,
O God, why? O God, how long?
And the cry is met with silence.

Jim Cotter
Healing More or Less

I like, too, Annie Dillard's answers though I do not claim that they are true. How can I know, how can she? All I know is that they satisfy some of my intellectual yearnings for answers to impossible questions.

Do we need little flame faced children to remind us what God can – and will – do? Yes, in fact, we do. We do need