

## **WONDER: CULTIVATING SPIRITUAL ATTENTIVENESS**

(Some reflections led by the Revd. Dr. Jonathan Inkpin & the Revd. Penny Jones 19/5/12)

### **Introduction – beyond Road Safety and Over-stimulation**

**(SLIDE 1)** Good morning every one. My name is Penny and this is my husband Jonathan. We are parish priests in Toowoomba and I enjoy offering some chaplaincy in the Glennie Junior school. It's great to be with you.

We're hoping in this half hour to share with you some thoughts we have about the need for spiritual attentiveness. What does it really mean to 'pay attention' and how can we foster the gift of attentiveness in students? In the last part of the presentation we hope to offer you a few moments of quiet reflection amid all the conference business: an opportunity to engage again with your own sense of wonder, which is so essential to healthy spirituality. In other words, if you like, we seek to add one more 'C' word to your wonderful series of 'C' words: to Courage, Challenge, Connection, Creation, Celebration, and Collaboration, let us, crucially, add Contemplation...

**(SLIDE 2)** ...but first a story. When we lived in England, I regularly used to speak at the assemblies of local junior schools, both secular and church schools. Usually there was a weekly theme. One week the theme was 'stranger danger' and I had to explain to the head teacher that actually this theme was, in a sense, 'against my religion', as the Bible repeatedly teaches us to welcome the stranger! For often the themes were more about rules for safe and co-operative living than about any real seeking after God. Now even in our church schools, I think this can sometimes be a danger. Take for example that very important topic of Road Safety. It is of course absolutely essential that young people are taught how to cross the road safely. However if we reduce our teaching about how to live in the world to sets of rules for keeping safe, we are failing to address some fundamental human needs and leaving too little space for the call of God to be heard.

**(SLIDE 3)** For we live in an over-stimulated culture, full of the clamour of different kinds of information, with television sets, iPods, computers and all sorts. This invites distraction and perhaps shields us from deep-seated fears. As this Leunig cartoon suggests, to wonder is to open ourselves to questioning that may be painful. 'I wonder why it is that the sea is warming?', 'I wonder what causes war and conflict in our world', 'I wonder why I feel uneasy?' No wonder then that many young people find it safer to immerse themselves in a sea of social media. Yet without wonder – without stopping to look attentively and feel deeply - our human capacity for compassion is impoverished and we remain spiritually famished.

### **Meditation from Jamberoo**

**(SLIDE 4)** There is much more to learn from Michael Leunig of course, not least about Wonder and cultivating Spiritual Attentiveness. Let us however begin our reflections together at Jamberoo, in the Southern Highlands, south of Sydney. The Benedictine Abbey there is a beautiful spot, blessed by the daily prayers and work of the Benedictine sisters as they keep the 1500 year-old Rule of St. Benedict, and offer hospitality to those who seek spiritual renewal. Again much more could be said about that.

**(SLIDE 5)** For our immediate purposes though, I would like you to picture the walk up the gently rising path from the guesthouses to the abbey itself. Close your eyes for a moment and imagine yourself walking that journey. Imagine yourself as a spiritual pilgrim, with each step letting go of the accumulated baggage of your life in this world

and allowing your body, mind and spirit rest from its normal exertions that you may simply 'be'. Imagine yourself feeling the peace of that place and the healing breath of nature around you.

**(SLIDE 6)** And now imagine yourself walking that same journey at night, when the Benedictine sisters begin to gather for Vigils, the first service of the day, at 4.30 am. Imagine stepping out in the darkness as an act of your own personal faith, treading each step as a prayer or blessing for yourself or others: surrounded by the night, engulfed in the darkling shades, accompanied only by the occasional nocturnal sound of bird or animal and the rustle of leaf and tree. In that darkness, even in your sleepiness, let yourself feel your conflicting emotions (perhaps of tiredness, worry, vulnerability, even a little fear) and, with each completed step, give thanks for the trust you have renewed and see with eyes of your heart the grace and treasures you are rediscovering within. And now, as you come to the end of the path, you come to a place where a well-known symbol of your own religious tradition stands (at Jamberoo Abbey this is a leaf-covered high wooden cross but it might be many things). As you reach this point, light streams in again once more. Let us give thanks again, and, now, let us open our physical eyes.

**(SLIDE 7)** Thank you. In making that short journey together, in the company of the Benedictine sisters and all those who contemplate, we have done one of the most important things of all to develop wonder and attentiveness in our modern world. For we want to suggest that that type of journey is not just one which guests at Jamberoo Abbey make, or which others can make at other places. Rather, such a night-time path is a fertile metaphor for us all: as, in the many places of our lives, we seek to nurture wonder and spiritual attentiveness in the modern world. It is, we believe, only in embracing the darkness within and beyond ourselves that we can grow in spiritual attentiveness, stepping out in what the ecumenical monastic community of Taizé calls the 'pilgrimage of trust'.

### **Light, darkness, spiritual attention and *Mister God, this is Anna***

**(SLIDE 8)** For much has of course been said in our religious traditions about light: as a path, expression and symbol of the divine or ineffable. Yet facing up to, and journeying through, darkness has always been vital: whether that be the darkness of suffering, pain, separation, fear or death. In the modern world, we would suggest, this has become both more necessary and also more difficult. For in our times, we are flooded with light as well as noise. We, especially those of us who live in cities and towns, are saturated with created light, and with noise, its handmaid. Why, even when in so-called 'sleep' mode, TVs and computers and modems still twinkle with lights. Even in the dead of night, light, and often noise, streams forth from electronic gadgets, streetlamps and emergency exit signs. It is almost as if the modern world is afraid of encountering, never mind embracing, the darkness of life. No wonder we have so much attention deficit disorder. Is this then also a major reason for our profound *spiritual* attention deficit disorder do you think?

**(SLIDE 9)** In Sydney Hopkins' marvellous little book *Mister God, This is Anna*, with the wisdom of childlike faith, the five and half year old eponymous guru puts it like this:

'The sun is nice', said Anna, 'but it lights up things so much that you can't see very far.' I agreed that sometimes the sun was so dazzling that on occasion one was quite blinded. That wasn't what she meant.

'Your soul doesn't go far in the daylight 'cos it stops where you can see... The night time is much better. It stretches your soul right out to the stars.'<sup>1</sup>

Anna is right, isn't she? As a former north east of England colleague of ours has commented:

there is a real temptation to dwell on the surface of things, 'to stop where you can see', especially if the surface appearance is beautiful. So how can we learn to see further and deeper? How can the eyes of our heart be enlightened, as St.Paul put it (Ephesians 1.18)?<sup>2</sup>

### **Beyond Disney**

**(SLIDE 10)** Now religious thinkers are not of course alone in such a diagnosis of our contemporary condition. Feeling the heat of the light, artists of many descriptions also protest about the withering of soul. Back in 1996 for example, the alternative rock band The Beautiful South offered a different apocalyptic ending to the human story in their aptly named album 'Blue is the Colour'. In the song 'One God', they protested the limitations of the idols and worship of the modern world:

### **(SLIDE 11)**

Like the toupee on a fading fame  
The final whistle in a losing game  
Thick lipstick on a five year old girl  
It makes you think it's a plastic world  
A plastic world and we're all plastic too  
Just a couple of different faces in a dead man's queue  
The world is turning Disney and there's nothing you can do  
You're trying to walk like giants, but you're wearing Pluto's shoes  
The world won't end in darkness  
It'll end in family fun  
With Coca-cola clouds behind a Big Mac sun.<sup>3</sup>

**(SLIDE 12)** Therefore, with due acknowledgement of the joy brought to children of all ages by the Disney and McDonald corporations, how then do we nurture *deep* wonder and cultivate spiritual attentiveness? Only, we might suggest, by embracing the darkness within and without, by walking together on the night-time path. To do so however, requires a different frame of mind, a change of attitude for which we are little prepared. It requires recovering the contemplative heart of the Christian Faith, and thereby helping others find meaning and purpose within it.

### **From distraction to discovering our 'true ground'**

**(SLIDE 13)** So *can* we do more than settle for a pleasant Disney-fied world and over-exposure to the light of today's Sun gods? Is true wonder and spiritual attentiveness possible, for us and our children, in the broad daylight of reason and today's neon world? The American writer Henry David Thoreau certainly observed

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<sup>1</sup> Fynn, *Mr.God, This is Anna*, 1979 p.152

<sup>2</sup> Robert Cooper, 'Seeing beneath the surface' in David Adam, *Island of Light* (London, SPCK, 2001)

<sup>3</sup> The Beautiful South, 'One God' in *Blue is the Colour* (Island Records, 1996)

tellingly over a hundred years ago:

When our life ceases to be inward and private, conversation degenerates into mere gossip. We rarely meet anyone who can tell us any news which they have not read in a newspaper (or, we might say, on TV or the internet) or been told by a neighbour, and for the most part, the only difference between us and our fellow is that they have read the newspaper (or seen the TV, or internet), or been out to tea, and we have not. In proportion as our inward life fails, we go more constantly and desperately to the Post Office (or the TV and internet). You may depend upon it, that the poor fellow who walks away with the greatest number of letters (or emails or Facebook messages), proud of their extensive correspondence, has not heard from themselves this long while.<sup>4</sup>

**(SLIDE 14)** Christianity teaches that stepping into darkness is crucial to let go of illusion and empty the false self. For, although the world is not in itself evil, it can easily bring us into a state of alienation. As the great Christian mystic Thomas Merton expressed it:

‘the way to find the real ‘world’ is not merely to measure and observe what is outside us, but to discover our own inner ground.’<sup>5</sup>

**(SLIDE 15)** How well are we going then with spiritual attentiveness, in our lives and in our schools? For the truth is, as one of my favourite spiritual sayings has it: ‘*show me to what you attend and I will show you who you are*’.

### **Some insights from Simone Weil**

**(SLIDE 16)** As you may be aware, the great early twentieth century philosopher, social activist and Christian mystic Simone Weil invited a rather different way of viewing our school curricula. For she wrote a seminal essay, entitled *Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God*.

**(SLIDE 17)** In her essay, she began with the presupposition that study is first and foremost an aid to growth in prayer. How different from our more usual idea that we must study and then, maybe, prayer will help us along a bit! She stated that the key to a Christian conception of studies is the realisation that prayer consists of attention. For by learning to attend to our study, we may develop our capacity for attention in prayer. The intrinsic interest of the study itself is secondary.

**(SLIDE 18)** For Weil, and for us as teachers and chaplains committed to raising students for whom Christian faith is primary, individual subjects (be they English, science or whatever) have value only in so far as they ‘develop that faculty of attention, which directed towards God is the very substance of prayer.’

**(SLIDE 19)** With humour, Weil pointed out that we often confuse attention with intense muscular effort: that frown of concentration which generally produces nothing more than tiredness and a bad headache, and which you can see in the face of the young man on the slide, and on the faces of many schoolchildren when asked to ‘attend’.

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<sup>4</sup> quoted in Melvyn Matthews, *Both Alike to Thee: The Retrieval of the Mystical Way*, London, SPCK, 200, p.2

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973, p.154

**(SLIDE 20)** Rather, Simone Weil says, 'Intelligence can only be led by desire': the desire for God that is. For it is desire which produces pleasure and joy in our work. It is, she says 'the part played by joy in our studies that makes of them a preparation for the spiritual life'. It is very easy to lose sight of this insight. Staff and students alike can become overly focussed on the need for good grades, tangible outcomes and the acquisition of the obviously 'useful'. When this happens in a student, the movement of the Spirit which sparks desire for the work is crowded out. No matter the subject, said Simone Weil, it has the potential to lead the student to God. This is very important. For if we confine the presence or action of God to a few minutes in Chapel each week, we are missing countless opportunities of harnessing the students' capacity for wonder.

**(SLIDE 21)** Look for example at how Weil considered the solution to a geometry problem: not simply as an exercise in mathematics worthy of a tick, but as 'the pure image of the very truth that once in a human voice declared 'I am Truth'. When the study is viewed in this way she said, 'every school exercise is like a sacrament'. Isn't that a captivating realisation?! Every school exercise, every experiment, every struggle with translation, every essay, is an opportunity for a student to hone their attentiveness and their capacity for encounter with the Divine.

**(SLIDE 22)** Moreover, Weil was quick to point out that this is not just of benefit to the student. When we learn to pay close attention to school work, we learn also to pay close attention to other people and this enables us to care for others. We are much better able to really listen to the answer to the question 'What are you going through?' because we have learnt in other places truly to attend. When we encounter situations of profound human suffering and fear, our capacity to care is likely to be in direct proportion to the level of attentiveness we have cultivated.

### **Ancient wisdom for today?**

**(SLIDE 23)** Jesus own teaching took place in a context of fear and uncertainty as the Jewish people struggled with Roman oppression. They must often have wondered 'why God is allowing us to suffer like this?' In the face of this, Jesus taught them to attend. Not to give undue space to anxiety but rather to enter fully and deeply into the present moment. 'Consider the lilies of the field', he said.

### **Meditation on Wonder and Spiritual Attentiveness in Image and Music**

Let us therefore just rest for a moment and reflect on where we may find wonder and cultivate spiritual attentiveness in our lives and the world we share with others...

**(SLIDES 24-48)**

### **Stop - Look - Listen -Live**

**(SLIDE 49)** So, maybe the lessons of Road Safety are the ones we need to learn after all?!

**(SLIDE 50)** Stop, Look, Listen! - these are the essentials of contemplative life, of wonder and spiritual attentiveness.

**(SLIDE 51)** Perhaps these contemplative lessons may be a key to every school in enabling everyone to find the 'fullness of life' which Jesus wishes for us? Amen.