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Jesus – our model of creativity

(1 John 1 v 1-4 & 1 John 4 v 7-12)

Solitude and silence

I wrote this paper in silence, and I have to admit, it did take me a day or so to adjust to the lack of distraction, and to be comfortable, finally, in the stillness. It also took that time to slow my mind down and to stop the mental 'to-do' list from rolling through my thinking. I had no Wi-Fi, limited distractions and few responsibilities for just four days. It was about -25°C outside, but very, very beautiful where we were staying, in northern Vermont. The snow sparkled in the low winter sunshine. The rest of my family were happily skiing, and once they had left the house each morning after an excited breakfast, I had the days for retreat. I have set this time aside deliberately each year to take a step back from everything; just a few days to focus on the Lord, to re-focus myself, my outlook, to gently sift through my priorities and my attitudes, all in the light of scripture. I had my Bible, a commentary, paper and pens, solitude and silence.

We all need our respites. Jesus himself was 'led by the Spirit into the wilderness' (Matthew 4 v 1), 'went out to a desolate place' (Mark 1 v 35; Luke 4 v 42) and 'went up on the mountain by himself to pray ... alone' (Matthew 14 v 23). We all know that life is busy; the demands on our time, energy, attention, on our mental and physical resources are many and constant. We might find ourselves frequently saying or thinking 'I must get away; I need a break'. But merely 'getting away' isn't enough, and there is certainly nothing distinctively Christian about taking a few days out to 'recharge our batteries'. But for those of us who are in Christ, we want to come back better, not only rested, but more ready to love, to serve, and to sacrifice. We are seeking new clarity, resolve and initiative; we hope to be inspired to redouble our efforts, by faith, in our callings in the home, in our relationships, at work, and as part of the body of Christ.

One benefit of time spent in silence is to search our own souls, and to be actually asking the Holy Spirit to prompt that searching, asking what we might be missing, neglecting, or overlooking in the normal busyness of life. Where do we need to re-focus? Areas in our lives that might be bothering us can be allowed to surface and there is the time, for once, to examine them before the Lord, our Bibles open. Because it is God's voice that we most need to hear. This rare silence is not just a time for our own thoughts to be examined, but more importantly, it creates space without distraction for us to hear God speak in His Word, through His Word, with greater clarity. Silence is a necessary spiritual discipline, deliberately setting aside distractions and obligations, and realigning ourselves in the Word, with the Word.

Centred in Christ

The theme of this year's conference is 'Creativity and medical treatment'. Yet as physicians, as human beings, we cannot begin to be a part of any creative healing, any Christ-centred approach to any field of medicine or any kind of service, unless we are ourselves centred in Christ, 'so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith – that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God' (Ephesians 3 v 17 – 19). This must be our position in Christ before we can begin to serve anyone, in any area. A time of retreat, time deliberately and intentionally set aside to be with the Word, in the Word, creates a context for receiving from God and responding in prayer.

The Chinese church leader, Watchman Nee, made a very interesting observation on the principle of creation: 'God worked for six days, and rested on the seventh. God was very busy, then, task completed, He ceased to work. The seventh day was the Sabbath, God's rest. And Adam? Created on the sixth day, he had no part in the previous five days. So God's seventh day was Adam's first. God worked for six days and then enjoys the seventh day of rest, Sabbath rest. But Adam began his life with the Sabbath – God works before he can rest; man must first enter God's rest, then alone can he work.'

Some thoughts on 1 John

In John's first letter, our Bible passages for today, we immediately feel the urgency to experience what John has himself experienced. He launches into an intense apostolic proclamation of the gospel with none of the usual preliminary greetings. We feel straight away John's need to share what he has so tangibly known, and we can enjoy in these first four verses the wonderful unfolding purposes of God from eternity to eternity. We are reminded of the opening of John's gospel – 'In the beginning was the Word...' and as there, in this letter, John is suggesting more than just the beginning of the Christian era, but also the beginning of all things, harking back to Genesis 1 v 1, 'In the beginning, God...'. From the beginning (v 1) to the completeness of joy (v 4) – the joy of the believer both now and in eternity. We as believers can only know this joy if we set aside the time to allow ourselves to be touched by the Word. John speaks vividly of his experience, his testimony of having 'heard', having 'seen with his eyes', having 'looked upon'. The Greek verb used here for 'see' has the intensity of looking in such a way as to deeply understand the meaning and significance of what is before us. Similarly, the verb John used here for 'touched' is not talking about the briefest, most fleeting contact; the picture the Greek verb paints is of someone in darkness feeling their way carefully forward in order to know where they are. John's testimony of the Word of Life here is our testimony as Christians too, and it is good to take the time to remind ourselves of it, both on a daily basis, and in creating deliberate space in the pattern of our year.

Moving into verse 3, John wants to 'proclaim' his testimony as an eyewitness, and it is this personal experience with the Lord that John wants us to know about. The gospel, the good news of salvation in Christ, John is proclaiming with apostolic authority. And this has a purpose, both immediate and ultimate: fellowship with the Father and with His son, Jesus Christ, and this leads us to ultimate eternal joy. Any true Christian fellowship with each other is dependent on our fellowship with the Father and with His son Jesus Christ.

In the verses we read from chapter 4, John writes of the essential nature of God's love, in Christ and in us. The key phrase is the reflexive 'love one another', occurring three times: as exhortation (v 7 'let us love one another'); as a statement of duty (v 11 'we also ought to love one another') and as a hypothesis (v 12 'if we love one another...'). 'What John is at pains to demonstrate is the grounds of this imperative obligation' (Stott). Why is this reciprocal love the duty of Christians? Because God is love (v 8); because God has revealed himself to us in Christ and in Christ's self-sacrificing love (v 9); because God has loved us in Christ (v 10); and because God continues to love both in and through us (v 11 & 12). 'The historical manifestation of God's love in Christ not only assures us of His love for us, but lays upon us the obligation

to love one another' (Stott). When we come before the cross of Christ and have seen (and accepted) His immeasurable and unmerited love, it changes us; we cannot remain selfish and self-centred. The self-sacrifice of the cross leads us to self-sacrifice in our own lives, thus verse 11 – 'Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another'. God's love *for* His people is perfected when it is reproduced *in* us, *among* us. 'If we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us' (v 12).

The wider themes of the whole of the first letter of John affirm the core of Christianity: either we exhibit the sound doctrine, obedience and love that characterise Christians, or we are not Christians. (I encourage you to take a moment to read 1 John 4 v 13 – 21.) But as those who profess to know Christ – and one of the leitmotivs of this morning's second passage is that we 'know God' – how can we know what we believe, how can we walk in obedience, how can we experience the riches of God's love in order to live it *unless* we set aside time, deliberately, to draw deeply on God's limitless resources?

A time for retreat

Let me tell you a little of my personal experience in the 'retreat' I had in February this year.

I had the privilege of four days, not totally alone, but a 'working day' alone. We were not at home, so the normal distractions and obligations (telephones, people dropping by) were removed. But I did have to make sure that supper was on the table for several hungry skiers! I took the whole letter of 1 John and although I maintained my usual habit of Bible readings as soon as I woke up, I began each 'retreat day' with reading the whole letter, slowly, pausing to pray through a word, a phrase or a verse that particularly spoke to me or prompted me to turn my thoughts into prayer. If my attention wandered, I simply started a section again.

It's hard, especially at first, to keep one's attention focused. I am used to distraction; I am used to being interrupted. Multi-tasking might be highly valued and even lauded in our culture but actually, when it comes to taking a retreat, it's a nuisance, and it takes some time to adjust, to focus, to tame my thoughts in order to concentrate on the verses before me. But I am learning to be patient with myself; it is not straightforward going from busyness to contemplation. This is exactly where in the past I may have given up; it was just too hard to slow down – or else one feels such a sense of urgency to use these rare, precious few days, and being by nature 'achievement orientated' (my husband calls me a 'driven woman'!) to allow myself to simply 'be' in the Word takes some practice, patience, and possibly a more gentle attitude.

I often go for a walk as I find walking a very good way of sorting out my thoughts, and a good time for allowing a word or a verse to gently percolate. I have paper and pen; and this year, I used some of the time to write the draft of this paper. The process of putting these reflections together was a valuable part of my retreat.

I have a commentary because I find it useful; I enjoy looking at the wider and deeper meaning of words in the original language. Personally I find commentaries helpful devotionally, but I don't think they are necessary for the purpose of a retreat.

I maintained silence, solitude. I find it calms me, slows me down, allowing the day to take on its own structure and rhythm, and above all it helps me to listen, to *really* listen to what God is saying in His Word. I constantly returned to the verses that I chose for the retreat, as a whole or in sections. I constantly asked God to show me what He wanted to show me through the verses. I constantly prayed that I would be open to His prompting, through His Word, and that scripture would speak into the various issues I was wrestling with.

So, for me, the three essentials are scripture, silence and solitude.

To conclude

Today, reading this paper together, we are in Germany; it is towards the end of the summer. But in February when I wrote this, the lightest of breezes was gently blowing some newly-fallen snow from the branches of leafless winter trees in the northern United States. It caused me to think of the lightest touch of the Holy Spirit during those few days of quiet retreat, but which, in the normal course of a normal busy day, I probably wouldn't have noticed. I titled this paper 'Jesus - our model of creativity'. Of course there are so many ways in which Jesus modelled every aspect of life in all its fullness to us, but one key one was His modelling of taking time for retreat. 'Whoever says he abides in Him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked' (1 John 2 v 6). We need intentional time with the Father, deliberate set-aside time to know God abiding in us, to re-set our minds, to refill our hearts, to recalibrate our perspective, time to refocus on 'that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and have touched with our hands concerning the word of life' (1 John 1 v 1). I encourage you all to set time aside in your busy lives to participate in this joy.

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Bibliography

- All Bible quotes are from the ESV 2001 translation.
- Watchman Nee 'Sit, Walk, Stand'. C.L.C. Publications, 2009.
- John R. W. Stott 'The Letters of John'. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, IVP, 2009.