

“The bell seemed to be telling where I belonged – as if it were calling me home.”

Thomas Merton

What do you do when you are tired? Or confused? Overwhelmed or simply dissatisfied, disillusioned or burned out? There is a tiredness which a few early nights will remedy, and at times like this we become very grateful for the blessing of sleep. But there is another kind of tiredness or confusion, a deep down exhaustion, a feeling of emptiness, of having given all that we have to give. It's the story of the empty jug. Often this kind of fatigue manifests as the feeling that we are 'at the end of our tether', as confusion, and lack of direction and motivation. Symptoms also include moodiness, feeling 'down', restlessness and often the inability to concentrate. Exhaustion like this also leads to the inability to sleep. These are the classic signs of burnout. What might we do when we feel like this? And what might this be telling us about our spiritual life? And about our home?

Bernard of Clairvaux tells us that “in the spiritual life each one must drink from his or her own well”. But if that well runs dry we certainly see and feel the effects! A significant part of growing in wisdom in our spiritual journey is learning to listen to ourselves. We need to be attentive to the signs of a rapidly emptying well and do something about it. Above all it is a call to remember where home is. Thomas Merton, the great spiritual writer and contemplative monk of the last century, writes beautifully of such an experience, and of being called back by the monastery bell:

“Please help me. What am I going to do? I can't go on like this. You can see that! Look at the state I am in. What ought I to do? Show me the way'. As if I needed more information or some kind of sign! Suddenly, as soon as I had made that prayer, I became aware of the wood, the trees, the dark hills, the wet night in my imagination, I started to hear the great bell of Gethsemani ringing in the night. The bell seemed to be telling where I belonged – as if it were calling me home” (Thomas Merton, *A Merton Reader*).

It is all too easy to wander away. Our sense of joy in each day can disappear under excessive work or worry or routine – and we need to be brought back again. Relationships can become dulled and the beauty of them can so easily be replaced with a familiarity that takes the other for granted. And our sense of God and delight in God can lose its edge if we are not mindful of it. The bell of Gethsemani abbey where Merton lived calls the monks to prayer seven times a day and is a 'voice' which speaks of what really matters, what they need to be reminded of as they go about their daily work in the monastery. Like the woods and trees, the hills and the rain, the bell of Gethsemani was for Merton a stable presence, the voice of God speaking to him in his confusion and turmoil, calling him back into awareness of the One who is always with us.

How refreshing Merton's words are! Nothing extraordinary, no complex solution, just a return to what will fill his well and enable him to drink deeply from it.

I love Merton's use of the expression, "calling me home". There is something so profoundly still and calming about his description of the Gethsemani bell reminding him where he belonged, and thus calling him home. The places where we belong are places that nurture us and feed us. They are where we can truly be ourselves; they are the places we instinctively think of when all is not well, when we are uncomfortable, lonely, afraid. In times of distress our first thought is often that we want to go home. Home is our anchor in life. Our home is also deeply part of our identity and our self-understanding. It is where we process what has happened to us and where we reflect on life. It is in our home that we often make important decisions. From our home we are able to go out into the world, to relate to others, to make our contribution to the world, to follow our dreams. At the end of the day we return there. That is the regular rhythm of our lives. After time away, no matter how wonderful that has been, we look forward to going home. I always enjoy the excitement in the boarding school at the end of each term as the girls wait for that last week and talk with anticipation and longing about going home. I remember one of the boarder mothers saying to me on the last day of the year, as she arrived to take her daughter home, that that was the best day of the year for her! Home is essential to who we are and how we live. And it's the same in our spiritual lives. What might we know about this home?

There is a place where we belong, a place that is home for us, and that place is God. As Saint Augustine so famously said: "You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You". Like Merton, we too need to be brought back regularly to God, to where we belong. We all need a Gethsemani bell to remind us and call us back. This need to return regularly to God is one which has long been recognized in our Judaeo-Christian spiritual tradition. In the Book of Psalms we find the psalmist exclaiming, "O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you: my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water" (Psalm 63). I am sure we have all felt like that. When we consider the dry and rugged terrain of what is modern-day Israel, the land out of which these psalms emerged, we get a sense of just how vital and life-giving water is. And just so, God is for us. The psalm continues: "So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips when I think of you on my bed and meditate on you in the watches of the night; for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy".

This home in God, in Truth, is not always comfortable. There is a difference between being comfortable and being authentically 'at home' and in fact, we can say with certainty that if it does become too comfortable we have wandered out of it! In John's Gospel (John 6:60-69), we

see many of the people who had been following Jesus turn away from him. John tells us they could not accept Jesus' teaching and they complained about it. Well, what had he been teaching them? He had been talking to them about the bread of life. He had reminded them of their own Jewish story, the story of the bread from heaven, the manna on which they had been fed during their forty year wilderness wandering, the food that had sustained them, given them life, and which they recognized had been given to them by God. And then he went on to make the connection between the manna in the desert and himself. Just as God had provided for the Hebrew people then, fed them and sustained them, so, Jesus was pointing out, does God continue to do that: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven", he said. "Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh". This reference to flesh and blood and the eating of it was absolutely abhorrent to the Jewish ear. They were offended by it. But what Jesus was talking about was his whole person. And he was telling them that he himself was life in its fullness, the life of God lived in radical love, and this is what he was offering them. He was inviting them to open their eyes, to recognize this. He was offering them a home. And that home is genuine life. As those people turned and walked away, Jesus asked the twelve whether they too would leave him and Peter uttered those wonderful words: "Lord, where would we go? You have the message of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God".

What Peter was saying was that he had found his home!

But this home is not always a place of ease and comfort. We do not live in it on our own terms. And Peter shows us this too. That message of eternal life that he recognized was his place of belonging also offered challenges. Peter didn't always respond to these challenges as I imagine he would have liked to – his fear, his knee-jerk reaction of self-preservation, got in the way. He denied knowing Jesus when it got tough and his own life might have been on the line. Two of the most moving words in all of Scripture come with Peter's realization of his frailty: "Peter wept" (Luke 22:62).

Like Merton hearing the Gethsemani bell and recognizing that it was calling him out of his confusion, fatigue, and indeed out of his ego, back to a deep and radical centredness in God, we too are constantly invited to re-assess and re-align ourselves. The question Jesus asked his closest companions, is asked of us too: "Do you also wish to go away"? Like Peter we may well say, "Where else would we go"? But just as Peter came to realize, that is only the first step. When we make the choice to stay we really do commit ourselves to being disturbed, shaken out of our complacency and more often than not pushed out of our comfort zone. This home we are offered is not always a comfortable place! It requires a radical commitment. Whenever we tend to domesticate the Gospel and turn it into a good news that we can cope with, that fits into *our* framework, then Jesus most surely poses that question "Will you leave me too?"

Do we trivialize the sustenance we are offered in this home, do we make it less than it is, smaller? Thomas Merton was once asked by a journalist what he considered to be the leading spiritual disease of our time. Of all the things he might have suggested (lack of prayer, lack of community, poor morals, lack of concern for justice and the poor) he answered instead with one word: "Efficiency". Why? "Because", he says, "from the monastery to the Pentagon the plant has to run ... and there is little time nor energy left to do anything else". Merton's insight has something powerful to teach us. The plant has to run! How efficiently are we buying into the systems, the values, the economic and social structures, the compliance, hard-heartedness, self-interest, pragmatism and so on, that keep the world turning? How fully do we make that our home? And, how many such homes do we have?

Let's turn for a moment to the story of the desert wandering of the Hebrew people. They left their home, Egypt, and ventured into the unknown. Even though Egypt had been a place of slavery, once they left they bemoaned the loss of the 'fleshpots of Egypt', in other words the comforts and certainties they had enjoyed there, the predictability of life and the fact that not too much was asked of them. Perhaps their oppression had become a familiar thing too, wrapping around them in its prickliness, defining them and providing some sort of odd comfort. At the very least it was what they knew and it was therefore 'safe'. But out there in the wilderness, away from home, it was a different matter! They complained about being hungry and thirsty and they wondered when this would end. And out there, God led them to understand that they were being offered another home. This home was founded on trust - trust that God would provide - and was symbolized by the manna with which they were fed each day. Moses had a hard time leading those people! He had to exhort them constantly not to harden their hearts, reminding them that God was indeed with them.

There is much in this story for us to ponder. We too can all too easily allow our vision to shrink and before long we may find ourselves settling for something small. This 'something small' will be whatever seems to offer us immediate gratification and some sort of sustenance. We can feel at home with this because it is predictable and manageable and satisfies our shrunken vision. You might recall the 2015 issue around the Ashley Madison cheating website. Their slogan is, 'Life is short. Have an affair'. What a diminished home they are offering! As a response to life's mystery and invitation, 'Have an affair' is a pitiful response. It is interesting and saddening that in all the reporting of this issue we don't find the media commenting on this aspect of the scandal! Have we become so accustomed to settling for less? Have the 'homes' our world accepts become so diminished and ultimately so life-denying?

But God's invitation to us is always to leave those homes. Jesus' vision was radical two thousand years ago and his invitation to those he met asked of them nothing less than a radical acceptance. To the one who wanted to bury a dead relative first, he said no, come now! Those

who put their hand to the plough and look back, he said, are not worthy of the kingdom of God! He invited the rich young man who seemed to be a decent, good-living young man, to sell everything he had, give the money to the poor and follow him! A half-hearted response will not do, Jesus was saying.

How can we ever be as radical as Jesus was? Can we ever find our home in God as fully as he did? Do we have the capacity to respond wholeheartedly and so find our home in the Truth Jesus offers? And, where do we find the peace and comfort that are also part of being at home?

Yes, we can respond wholeheartedly and we can be radical. If we take one step at a time. If we are faithful in the little, ordinary things of each day. If we respond to what each day brings with the word of God, as St Paul says, in our heart and on our lips (Romans 10:8). When we awaken each day with a deep gratitude for the dawn, the sunrise, for the cup of tea we cradle in our hands, for the people who smile at us and greet us, recognizing all as gift, seeing the Giver behind these gifts, then we are at home. When we, like Peter, weep when we settle for mediocrity and a small world, getting up again, re-aligning our vision, saying no to the temptations that lure us into smallness and meanness, then we are at home. When we stop bemoaning the loss of our little securities and allow God's vision to shape us, then we are at home. When we proclaim a radical Truth about humanity, about our responsibilities, about justice, about breaking down barriers and dismantling walls, then we are at home. We will not always be well received. It will not always be a comfortable place to be. But we will find peace there and we will know a contentment that surpasses the fleeting affirmations we may receive when we settle, along with the crowd, for anything less than this home.

*“Love Verity,
Seek knowledge,
not for themselves but for the end
they bring to you which is God;
then you will be happy and able
to profit yourselves and others”
Mary Ward*

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