

10th of December 2017

Sermon: Kerry Jacobs and Stuart Phillpot

Isaiah 40 1-11 & Peter 3, 8-5

A Reflective Dialogue on a Spiritual Journey

Many spiritual writers and thinkers describe the notion of the Dark Night of the Soul within the spiritual journey. The best known of these is the Spanish writer St John of the Cross. However, in finding myself, in Clare Holland house - the dark night of the Soul was more than a concept - it was a spiritual and emotional reality.

I accept the concept that God may absent himself as part of the path of spiritual growth and development. However, what I was facing was a sense of utter powerlessness, abandonment and loss. I was simply incapable of doing anything and making sense of anything. Like the passage from Isaiah - I felt I was voice crying in the wilderness - alone, lost and ignored.

While others, such as my wife Sharon, seem more connected to a sense of emotional and psychological awareness, for me it has been my ability to work things out, my logic and intellect has served me so well. As a child I wanted to understand how God could exist forever and I have always had to "work things out" in my head about God, the world and myself. Therefore, being in a place logically and spiritually, where there was no capacity to work my way out of a problem and no scope to act if I could, was devastating and felt like a form of death. This confusion is rooted in link between fighting and the process of facing cancer. Somehow I could fight this - in my way, I could work it out - I could figure out a solution. And to fail is to fail myself, to fail God, my family and those who are praying for me. However, in my time at Clare Holland house - it became clear that the notion of fighting cancer was not just unhelpful - it was downright destructive.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that when Christ calls a man - he bids him to come and die. But what it is that dies is not a simple physical death - but a challenge to abandon our most central crutch, that which we have depended upon our whole life. That, which has been God to us. And in this dark night we have the opportunity to find a God who comes to us at our moment of greatest weakness - not clothed in power and majesty but in compassion that ministers to our sense of brokenness.

At this point I faced a reasonably simple choice between my intellect and my faith. In crying out to God for his presence, and preferably deliverance, I also found myself praying that God would take me, that I would not wake up in the morning. What was it to be true and authentic to my faith and God in this setting; to reach out to a God who loved me and who is the ground of my being? If God is calling me home then it is time to die and throughout history people with cancer have died. In a sense I had to learn to die - and through this learn to live in the sense that whatever life I am given is a gift. From this I can find a place where I can abandon the "having to know when I am going to die" and be present in the sense that whatever I am given in terms of life is a gift, and therefore in the hands of and at the will of God. This did not of itself eliminate the sense of loss, abandonment and powerlessness but in

the recognition that the dark night of the soul is part of the journey - and therefore, this too will pass.

Stu - what is your response to my dark night of the soul experience and what have you experienced that is similar

Stu's response

Kerry, I suspect that I, and many people who believe in God, have experienced what St. John of the Cross¹ called the dark night of the soul although we do not always call it that.

The message of St. John's poem is the joyful experience of being guided to God. However, the person undertaking this journey is challenged to surrender all the illusionary certainties of life: wealth; position; family; all sensory and sensitive elements of being are to be offered up and this creates a deep empty darkness which St John calls the dark night of the soul. The only light in this dark night is that which burns in the soul and it is this light that engages the soul in a mystical journey to union with God. The experience of the dark night of soul, St John suggests may mirror Christ journey, born of questionable birth, connected to the priestly elite, but not of them, hailed as the Messiah, Christ surrenders his earthly being and identity as he dies a condemned criminal, only to transcend this death three days later.

My first experience of this was a dream, a vision or an experience during a near death and a subsequent resuscitation, when I was 19 and spent several days in a coma. My only memory of that time has echoes of a spiritual dark journey. I remember that I was outside my self-looking, as the layers of my personality, that I acted out and presented to different people in different situations, were being peeled away, until all there was my inner being, an entity powerless and isolated in a deep and overpowering darkness in which a small solid form of light appeared and which provided nothing, but a surety of the darkness passing. My other identities were stripped away, and my central core and identity was a sense of self held in and by God. And with that I regained consciousness. This experience, while not necessarily spiritual, was to prove to be a formative experience in later life.

In my mature years when in conflict situations created by the politics and the human impact of the settlement this country, I found myself, battered and bruised spiritually, emotionally mentally and physically. I turned to God, only to find myself in a spiritual and mental darkness interrogating myself.

Whose side was I on, the settlers or the occupied? Had my efforts, been motivated by love or hubris? Had I given offence and provoked people rather than communicating a problem and encouraging others to participate in solving it? How Christian had I been? Had I followed the Law of Moses and Christ? The answers to these questions and many more of similar ilk, God did not answer.

Instead of giving me an answer, God took me back to this earlier experience of letting go of my sense of control, my identity and my ego. God challenged me with words in my mind and spirit to surrender my bitterness, reject my need for vengeance and to follow the path I

¹ Dark Night of the Soul (Spanish: La noche oscura del alma) is

was given. My responses to such challenges neither came quickly nor easily and I often indulged in the fog of despair,

However, in the darkness was always sense of an unseen but solid form of light. I did not have the strength to respond to the challenges of God's call to surrender ego. I needed to seek the grace to move towards this light in the context of the darkness. This move towards God's light, and therefore my true sense of self, has almost become a daily practice. For like all of us I regularly miss the mark in my daily life, regularly fail to love and regularly ignore God by relying on my own self.

Kerry's Commentary

Our experiences are mirrored in the readings. 2 Peter 3 8-15 illustrates that God's way is not our way – a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years is like a day. The danger of this passage is that it can so easily be read as what we are required to do – be living holy spotless, blameless and peaceful lives. However, the key point is that we can never do this off our own capacity. The challenge is to let go of our need to be in control and our constructed sense of self and be what it is that God has made us to be.

The need to let go of control is obvious in Isaiah 40. Comfort, comfort my people Jerusalem. Proclaim that her hard service has been completed and that her sins have been paid for. While peoples are like grass that withers, the word of our God endures for ever.

The offer and promise of God is comfort (but not necessarily healing). However, we can only experience that comfort when we let go of our need to have things under our control and on our terms. It is our true and most deep self that is nurtured, comforted and loved, not our false and constructed senses of self and therefore comfort is not always comfortable. We have a form of peace and love, but the pain does not go away. That is the journey of the dark night of the soul.

We see the nature of God's comfort most clearly in a promise and a gift. For no matter what, no matter how much the certainties and uncertainties of life prove illusionary, we are given comfort because Jesus is our councillor and companion. As it is written in Isaiah 9.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called (Immanuel), Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.

Therefore, no matter how dark the hour; Gods comfort comes, not as the answer to our questions but as a form of loving peace.