The Bridge Church

Holy Contemplation

An Invitation to Contemplation

I arrive at my favourite cafe. It's 7am Tuesday — my pastoral version of a Monday morning — and I'm playing catch up on deadlines. I'm about to jump right in when I think: '*Nick, give a few minutes to God first, even though it sounds hard*'. For whatever reason I don't follow my reading plan, I open up to Psalm 63 (which, FYI, is a top 3 Psalm worth your time). I just finish reading as the wait person asks whether I want to order breakfast because there's a new summer menu.

I don't usually order breakfast but while I wait for my Peach Cobbler Granola, I glance back down at Psalm 63 and read: "*I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods; with singing lips my mouth will praise you.*" (Psalm 63:5)

To level with you, after 16+ years of faith, when I'm reading Scripture, my mind still struggles to be fully present and pay attention to God. But even I couldn't miss the prompting providence of God here. I resolved to let every bite of breakfast fill my soul as much as my stomach.

Does the thought of Peach Cobbler Granola entice you? Maybe not. Yet God knows it entices me. This breakfast became more than just breakfast. For God slowly, subtly and sweetly, led me into **contemplation.**

Contemplation isn't truly about 'the monks and monasteries' that come to mind. Biblically, contemplation describes that elusive *something* that is so often missing in our spiritual life, the very goal of all our 'doings' — **communion with our God of love.**

Before we venture deeper into contemplation, we first need to confront our current context.

The Spirituality Gap

Many of us instinctively know that there is more to Christian spirituality than the bubble-and-squeak we cook up with the leftover ingredients of our busy lives. But what are we missing?

Like a 19-year-old who urgently texts their mum for the 'spag bol recipe' to cook dinner for their flatmates, we get the general vibe of how-to-cook, we have mum's list of ingredients and instructions, but at the end of the meal, we're wondering why our 'spag bol' doesn't taste anything like what mum used to make.

Evangelical Christianity has preserved '*mum's-recipe-for-the-Christian life*'. We've got our ingredients (Bible reading, prayer, church, giving etc) and our instructions (a quiet time studying a passage and praying our prayers, expository preaching, small-group-bible-study, serving, giving). Yet, for many it still doesn't taste right…

My analogy falls down, because the 19-year-old knew what his mum's recipe was supposed to taste like. Many evangelical Christians aren't quite sure what they're seeking. *Am I trying to learn something? Feel something? Change something? Apply something? Meet God in some sort of way?*

In the confusion many gravitate to *spiritual-fast-food*. More content, more ministries, more

conferences, more preachers, more apps. Sure, it tastes good and sustains us day-by-day, but inevitably we fall into spiritual unhealth.

Painfully, all of this just reinforces a spirit of consumerism that runs counter to the truths we believe in Christ. We do Christian-things with a worldly-heart. Spirituality is assessed by how we feel, increasing knowledge, or doing-good and not-doing-bad. No wonder many are deflated, desensitised, and puffed up with pride.

It doesn't need to be this way. We need to retrieve what every theological expression of the Great Tradition holds within their spirituality in some shape or form (including evangelicalism). We need to retrieve the biblical-theological-spiritual-practical-Godward idea of **contemplative spirituality**.

A Contemplative Spirituality

Let's start with a definition of Christian contemplation to get us started.

Christian contemplation is

1. *the intentional turning of one's whole self to the present presence of God,*
2. *through the activities of the Holy Spirit,*
3. *within our abiding union with Christ in Love.*

The first point can be found within the positive human-God relationships spread through Scripture. But the clearest picture is formed through the various threads that consistently run through the Psalms (especially given its role in guiding our spiritual life!), forming a spirituality that:

1. Expresses itself holistically with body, mind, soul and spirit.
2. Personally seeks & interacts with the God who is relationally present.
3. Often finds transformation in the very process of communing with God.
4. Seeks faithful expression within the whole breadth of human emotion and experience.
5. Interacts with the distinct parts of oneself to awaken and attend to the present reality of God.

The second point is theologically drawn from all sorts of places, but is especially explicated concerning contemplation in 2 Corinthians 3:18, '*And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*'

Contemplating God as an activity of the self is the unique place in which we are **transformed.** The end goal of 'His image' ultimately speaks to the end goal of our whole Christian life! (Romans 8:28)

The glory and transformation of Moses in Exodus paints a beautiful picture of Christian contemplation. But even better than beholding the fiery thunderous Presence upon Mt Sinai, is having the Holy Spirit come and fill your very being so you can behold God in a fuller and freer and truer way than Moses could have dreamed.

Here's the gospel in action: The Lord helps us behold the Lord so that we might become like the Lord. Our participation? **Contemplate him.**

The third point, like the second, is drawn from the huge theological reality of being 'in Christ'. But the most important picture is a Divine Metaphor from Jesus himself in John 15 where He speaks about the oneness that has been forged between us.

Christ is the branch, and we are the vine. Where does Christ end and the believer begin? We don't relate to God like he's up there in the clouds. We relate to God in the intimate relational, spiritual, mystical union that defines our entire existence!

Why is this important for contemplation? Within this picture of oneness, Jesus offers his vision for what a Christian life of fruitfulness requires. '*Abide in me, as I also abide in you… As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now abide in my love.*'

The sheer glory and beauty of this truth is incalculable, but John 15 draws us into the mystical place of experiencing and resting within our union with Christ. Abide could equally be translated with *remain*, *dwell*, or *make your home*. The heart of Christian spirituality is not trying harder, doing more, or being better. It is actively resting and believing and enjoying and experiencing and meditating and beholding with our mind, heart, soul and spirit, the truest reality – Christ in me, full of Love.

Following are two contemplative practices of Scripture and Prayer that are (1) a means of intentionally communing with God, and (2) stoking the contemplative flame within.

Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina (translated sacred or divine reading) is a contemplative approach to reading Scripture that seeks to listen to God within the Spirit's illuminating light in a four-fold movement that ultimately culminates in the place of contemplation. It's not intended to be neat and tidy, simply use it as a framework to help you commune with God.

1. Read (*lectio*).

We start by reading the text start-to-finish several times. Here is where we make sense of the historical and contextual details of the text. Most importantly we start moving towards the next step by looking over the text, asking 'h*ow does this text centre upon Christ and the fullness of the gospel?*'

2. Meditate (*meditatio*).

Next, we shift from asking questions of the text to asking questions of ourselves by listening for the illuminating light of the Spirit.

- *What words, phrases or sentences is He drawing your attention to?*
- *What thoughts or beliefs or circumstances or questions or problems or sin is He addressing within you?*
- *What truth is He pressing upon your heart?*

3. Pray (*oratio*).

In this space filled with His light, we turn our whole self toward God and pray through this Word He

has pressed upon us. We press deeper into His Presence. Remember that prayer is not monologuing at God, but two-sided communion – He is dwelling within you. Listen, feel and discern more than you speak.

4. Contemplate (*contemplatio*)

Now we lean into silence. We enjoy this presence-enriched place of contemplation. Hans Boersma simply describes this as '*silent resting in God's love'*. Strahan Coleman speaks of gazing in love upon the God who is gazing with Love upon you. Simply abide, remain, or dwell with God's love.

This is hard to articulate, but important advice: **God's presence is not the feeling of God's presence.** Whether you're distracted, emotionless, distant, or the complete opposite? God is with you. So regardless of your feelings? Simply be with God.

Contemplative Prayer

Contemplative prayer is simply a kind of praying that seeks to capture all that we have covered above. The goal - to 'be still and know that He is God' (Psalm 46:10). There are so many approaches to contemplative prayer, but here is a framework formed from my own practice that may help you start.

1. Enter **silence**, quieting mind and body.

- Breathe deeply and slowly, quietly turning any stress or busyness over to God.
- Remind yourself of key Scriptures that help you receive His peace (John 14:1, Psalm 23:1, Psalm 46:10, Lamentations 3:24)

2. **Come** as you are into his care.

- Slowly pray through each part of 1 Peter 5:6-7 intentionally (1) humbling yourself, (2) trusting His timing, (3) handing specific anxieties into His care.

3. **Gaze** upon God in love, who is already gazing upon you in love.

- Speak to God as you come to a place of resting in His love. Express your love, dependence on and desire for God. If you are feeling spiritually dry or distant, express your desire to desire God.
- Leave behind needing to come up with the right words or pray the right prayer. Simply seek to be present with God and remain attentive to His presence and His love.

4. **Return** to waiting on and resting in God.

- When you get distracted, gently return your attention to God with a simple heartfelt prayer.

It can be anything: ‘Lord here I am’, ‘The Lord is my shepherd’, ‘Lord you are here with me’, ‘Thank you Jesus’, or even simply ‘Jesus’.

- Repeat the same words as a gentle means of returning your attention to God.

So, to pull a few thoughts together in conclusion - Christian contemplation involves:

- A way of life that increasingly comes to define how we move through the world.
- Seeking and longing to experientially behold the presence of God.
- Learning to gaze in love upon our God of Love with heart, mind, soul and spirit.
- Actively interpreting our life and identity by the truth of Christ in me, knowing that ‘it is finished’.