

## Action and Contemplation in an Age of Apathy.

Notes for Teach-In for CCA on 4<sup>th</sup> July 2020

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Third in series of three where I am attempting to bring the Christian tradition and ways of reading scripture into dialogue with the age we are in.

Today's teach-in is the hardest of the three because there is so much to cover, so I am opening some doors, but not able to go too far in...

### ***What is contemplation?***

**Contemplation** - a word for prayer in Christian tradition, perhaps being used because prayer has been diminished and watered down in meaning. Thomas Merton was using it in 1950s and 60s and picked up by many others, (Thomas Keating, John Main, Richard Rohr, Cynthia Bourgeault, Martin Laird, David Foster etc. etc.). Contemplation speaks to the deeper, inner journey of transformation we need to go on that is essential and should be core to Christian teaching.

Another word for contemplation in early days of desert mothers and father was *apatheia*... sounds like apathy, root meaning: *pathos* - emotion; *a* - without, not. Stoic term re-purposed in monasticism and Eastern Orthodoxy as a desirable state of freedom from 'passions'. More on this later.

So today we could say we are looking at 'good apathy' and 'bad apathy'.

'Bad apathy' as state of disengagement and detachment that leads to inaction.

'Good apathy' as process of inner liberation leading to right action. *Apatheia* in sense of *orthopathy* - right feeling or emotion, a term I heard Jurgen Moltmann use in relationship to *orthodoxy* and *orthopraxis*. Action is connected to emotion, feelings, gut level, why emotion is so important in relationship to action.

*What is the relation of [contemplation] to action? Simply this. He who attempts to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening his own self-understanding, freedom, integrity, and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others. He will communicate to them nothing but the contagion of his own obsessions, his aggressiveness, his ego-centered ambitions, his delusions about ends and means, his doctrinaire prejudices and ideas. There is nothing more tragic in the modern world than the misuse of power and action.* — Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* 1971, Second Edition 1998. Towards end of 8<sup>th</sup> Chapter 'Is the World A Problem' (no page numbers on google books)

Why we need to be contemplatives - we are not going to sustain this journey of action in relationship to crisis of our times out of 'unredeemed' or 'unprocessed' emotions or instincts. We need liberty and freedom from 'flesh', old mindsets and patterns that shape our doing. Relates to passage in Romans 12 we looked at last week about 'our minds being renewed', so that we act out of a different spirit to the one that is causing the problem.

## ***What do I mean by Age of Apathy?***

Apathy is the complacency endemic in our culture, the deadly feeling or mood music in the background, a feeling of half-heartedness, powerlessness, hopelessness, helplessness. We are looking at the reality of psychological depression not just economic depression. What lies behind this apathy? Is it connected to high levels of anxiety, that leads to people shutting down, numbing, denial and various forms of escapism?

Two quotes I found researching Age of Apathy

1. Philip Seargeant in piece he wrote for XR - Telling the story of Climate Crisis.  
<https://writersrebel.com/read-telling-the-story/>

‘The problem is with the politics; with persuading those in power, those with the ability to actually do something about the situation, that the science is real and needs to be taken seriously. **At this stage in our history it’s not a deficit of knowledge which threatens the species, but a surfeit of apathy and intransigence.** Which is why political action, and particularly political protest, is so central to the fight against climate crisis’.

2. Umair, writing piece in April 2019

Is the World’s Next Big Problem That We’re Too Depressed and Traumatized to Fix All the Others?  
<https://eand.co/the-age-of-apathy-f0e35dac62dc>

An economist, who after suffering from depression himself, set up Eudaimonia & Co, moving from an *economic* paradigm to a *eudaimonic* paradigm that places life and well-being in centre of how we organise ourselves. [*Eudaimonia* - ancient Greek word for happiness, well-being or blessedness.]

He describes our age as being on the spectrum between depressed and traumatised.

‘Hence, a tidal wave of apathy, passivity, listlessness sweeping the globe. A certain half-heartedness. Sure, we care — but not enough to really make a difference. Sure, we’ll say the right thing. But we’ll go right on voting for our own self-destruction.’

‘Trapped between depression and trauma, the world is also only capable of acting on the spectrum that lies between apathy and self-sabotage. It can’t take positive action, it seems. It can’t break the chains that bind it to powerlessness and helplessness. The chains of worthlessness’.

‘If you take the point that the roots of depression is the belief that one is worthless — the real belief, reinforced, conditioned, drilled into a person, until it is the fundamental aspect of their identity — what else might confirm it?... The kinds of status competition we see today. But that only says that we are trying to take away each other’s inherent worth, not endow it, confirm it, give it to each other. Is it any wonder, again, we’re so depressed? We’re playing a narcissistic game — and hoping that we win happiness, meaning, and purpose. But those only come from the **true self** doing, building, making, saying, teaching, knowing things of integrity, of defiance, of grace and nobility and gentle, fierce courage’.

Interesting how he uses the term 'true self' - where we get our core identity and worth from is so important, where the gospel speaks powerfully of our inherent worth before God. Only place to root ourselves.

**To act truly we need to act from true self, as Christians we understand that as the self rooted in Christ.**

Contemplation is another word for learning to live from self set free in Christ, true self.

Contemplation sounds all nice and peaceful, conjures up images of some one sitting serenely in a beautiful place, but that does not really capture what this process is about.

Contemplation as a process is not about nice, calm feelings, not about comfort, it is about the challenge of facing the truth of ourselves, which we can only do when we are held in love of God, because we need love and grace to face the truth. It is about being serious and compassionate about the sin that distorts our lives, the ways in which we are wrongly orientated. We need to take shame out of the equation. We are all in same situation. Coming to the end of the independent, autonomous, defended false/small self is not a comfortable journey. Submit ourselves to God's gracious working. Can't do this ourselves - only by grace, by the Holy Spirit.

### **Apatheia and the Passions**

Series of talks given by Rowan Williams to Benedictine community at Mucknell Abbey, April 2018 <https://mucknellabbey.org.uk/apatheia-and-the-passions-talks-by-rowan-williams/>

Freedom from the passions - described by Evagrius as the **eight thoughts** that later became the seven deadly sins. **Apatheia** - desert fathers and mothers regarded the life of freedom from passion as the **resurrection life**. Eight thoughts/passions of the soul - pride, distorted desire (lust); anger; greed towards things (gluttony); avarice - control; envy or vanity; acedia - sloth, lassitude or apathy and despair, (the one that dropped off the list).

These thoughts or passions are what prevent us from sharing in the divine life, joy, God's abundant bliss. Our capacity for contemplation referred to by Greek word **Nous**, sometimes translated as mind, but more accurately our instinct for seeing and loving what is real and true, our capacity for turning towards God. Capacity for seeing, **our inner lens or eye**. Human beings move between angelic and diabolical ways of seeing. Angelic zen like clarity means seeing things as they are. Diabolic seeing - Rowan Williams calls this 'seeing the world as a supermarket', something to possess, what it can do for me (orientation to self). Less than human. Whole system of learned responses and reactions to changing world we are in, survival strategies. Passions refer to that level of instinctive, reactive, coping mechanisms. The situation we are all in, the human habit of being at mercy of our instincts, passed on from generation to generation, anxiety, defensiveness, acquisitiveness.

The Insight of the fathers was that we can't just get rid of this nature, like weeds in soul we are in danger of pulling out harvest with weeds, can't just pull out everything at once, rather

what is needed is to educate our passions, to know ourselves, become spiritually intelligent. Move from reacting to acting. Intelligent, creative human existence.

Breaking our patterns of reaction, inner re-wiring of our instincts, is the liberating work of Christ, setting us free to act in freedom. To be truly human is a capacity for clarity and spaciousness. Freedom from passion is a clarity of seeing. 'Blessed are the poor in heart they shall see God'.

Rowan Williams contrasts the eight thoughts or passions with the eight beatitudes in Matthew's gospel.

**Beatitudes** - these postures are not possible outside of a certain kind of transformation in prayer that takes us beyond our everyday self. They are the result of engaging in the contemplative journey.

Blessed are those who are poor in spirit - vulnerability of those who know their need of God counteracts pride.

Blessed are those who mourn - sorrowing of those who care counteracts acedia

Acedia - a kind of apathy, losing heart, wrong kind of detachment, hardening of heart, cynicism, whatever attitude, not noticing your own hurt and others, self-indulgent, anaesthetised, insensitive.

Being free from 'passion' not about being free from suffering and pain. Those who mourn are those who feel and care, who can be vulnerable.

Set free for **Compassion** - to feel with.

### ***Verses on prayer:***

#### **Philippians 4:4-6**

Rejoice (*chairete*) in the Lord at all times, again I will say rejoice. Let your gentle (*epieikes*) [spirit] be known to all. The Lord (*kurios*) is near.

Be anxious (*merimna*) for nothing, but in everything by prayer (*proseuchē*) and supplication with thanksgiving (*eucharistias*) let your requests be made know to God.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension will guard your hearts and your minds (*noemata*) in Christ Jesus.

**Chairo** to rejoice, be glad: To experience God's grace (favour) be conscious (glad) for his grace. Etymological connection with *xaris* (grace) and *xara* (joy) all share same root, core meaning.

**Epieikes**: (ep-ee-i-kace) seemly, equitable, yielding, gentle in sense of truly fair - justice beyond ordinary justice, builds on the real intent (purpose) of what is really at stake and hence is true equity that fulfils the spirit (not just the letter) of the law.

**Kurios** from Kuros authority

**Merimna** - care, anxiety, merizo divide - a part separated from the whole, worry (anxiety) dividing and fracturing a person's being into parts. 'The worries of the world' Mark 4:19. 'All your anxiety on Him' 1 Peter 5:7

**Noeo** (noy-eh-o) to perceive, think (nous) mind. 'Do you still not perceive or understand?' Mark 8:17

## **Romans 12:12**

Rejoicing (*chairontes*) in hope, patient/perservering (*upomenontes*) in suffering/tribulation, devoted (*proskarterountes*) to prayer (*proseúxomai*)

**Upomenontes** to stay behind, to wait, to endure.

**Proskarterountes**: to attend constantly

**Proseúxomai** pros-yoo'-khom-ahee)

(from *prós*, "towards, exchange" and *euxomai*, "to wish, pray") – properly, to exchange wishes; *pray* – literally, to *interact with* the Lord by switching human *wishes* (ideas) for *His wishes*

### **Contemplation in Philippians 4:4-6 .**

Note how the word for rejoice and joy has same roots as word for grace. We re-root ourselves in grace and thanksgiving, in God's abundant love.

Note importance for dealing with anxiety: word for anxiety carries a sense of split and divided self, not whole. Prayer needed so our action does not come from place of being split and divided, but rather place of wholeness.

Word for prayer, which also occurs in Romans 12:12, not just about requests but an exchange of our desires for God's desires, the inner transformation and re-education of our desires.

Verse 6, the peace of God - takes us to level of contemplation - God's action - beyond our thinking and comprehension, beyond words and rational mind. God protecting and guarding the heart and mind at deeper level.

**Jesus the contemplative.** Teaching on prayer in Matthew 6:6

*If you want to pray, enter your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.*

**Enter your inner room** means entering the spiritual level of our being, the level of intuition and spiritual will that is not immediately evident to ordinary consciousness.

**Closing the door** involves shutting out and turning off the interior conversation we normally have with ourselves all day long, as we judge, evaluate and react to people and events entering and leaving our lives.

**Praying in secret to the Father** means praying beyond words, we consent to God's presence and action within us by relating to God in interior silence.

(from *Open Mind, Open Heart* by Thomas Keating, 2006, 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition)

Contemplation as an ongoing journey from the insecure, scattered, fragmented, divided self into the secure, rooted, gathered self, from division into wholeness. A journey of integration and healing so that action can flow from the true source and wellspring of life.

Journey that requires we go beyond every day surface mind and thinking, into silence and stillness.

Difficult journey which we avoid, because we are afraid to meet ourselves.

We are called into the desert to meet the demons within.

Need communities of practice to support this journey.

Action and contemplation are intertwined, not a case of one without the other.

Action pushes us into contemplation, and contemplation into action.

But in our age action is easier for us than contemplation.

We don't wait until we are completely free from all our internal demons before we act, but we recognise the vital importance of the process of inner liberation in seeking the outer liberation of our world.