**The Gift of Being Still**

After my big operation last year, for quite some time, I found I couldn’t come to stillness in prayer. I tried to plod on but in the end realised my effort made no difference. I accepted with difficulty that I had to remain passive, rest and receive from others reaching out to me. There are many reasons why we may find it hard to reach that ‘stillness of soul’ that John of the Cross prayed for and we were reminded of last week. We can find it so hard to simply rest in God in our modern society with all the expectations, pressures, interruptions it brings, even in a church community!

Our bodies can be struggling and exhausted, but so can our minds, constantly bombarded and over stimulated. Benignus O’Rourke in *Finding Your Hidden Treasure* points out that sometimes it takes us a lot longer than we expect to rest in God, depending on how we are in ourselves , for instance whether harassed or anxious. He writes: ‘For most of us the time needed in our modern world is long, longer than we believe.’

Sometimes it’s just how weary we have become and how this is impacting our wellbeing and our prayer life. He shares about a time when he had gone away to Herefordshire for 24 hours and was hoping for a time of quiet and prayer. However, he found it impossible to focus and be still, because he was so exhausted in mind and body. When tempted to go to bed he felt drawn to just sit in the garden looking at all that surrounded him. Some time later he became aware of how different he felt – refreshed, with a heightened awareness of his surroundings, ‘each moment seemed filled with a presence.’ He continues: ‘As our mind becomes quiet, our inner eye is opened. We are in a new world.’

Our minds need as much refreshment and regeneration as our bodies. This is a good reason why we need to recognise the importance of observing sabbath rest. Sabbath however, doesn’t just happen, we have to choose to observe it as a regular practice, vital and necessary for health of body, mind and spirit. There are times when we need to simply put down things that fill our minds, distract us, keeping us perpetually on the move physically and mentally. We need to reject the dominant voices that keeps us ‘doing’, and recognise the need for empty space, doing nothing and entering into *kairos* time.

Mary Oliver in her poem *The Summer Day* speaks of being simultaneously ‘idle and blessed.’ While Annie Dillard speaks about becoming ‘emptied out and hollow’ so that we can ‘catch grace as a man fills up his cup under a waterfall.’ This call to slow time, being in the present moment, give space and opportunity to just be there, without effort, feather light, so that we experience sabbath rest, and stillness come to us as gift.

A few days ago, my mind so full, I couldn’t come to rest. The desire to be among trees and smell the leaves on the autumn air led us to take a picnic to Clumber Park, with its beautiful lake, heathland and trees. I found myself focusing on how the lake surface was covered with a number of expanding circles emerging from a central point. I gradually became still. The significance of this moment came home to me the following day, when I read the beginning of Wendell Berry’s poem:

I go among trees and sit still.

All my stirrings become quiet

around me like circles on water.

My tasks lie in their places

where I left them, asleep like cattle.

In such moments we are being given permission, even invited to let our tasks ‘lie in their places’, to create space that makes it possible for ‘our stirrings’ to become quiet, and coming to rest, our inner eye is opened.

**Leading into silence**

Feather light

weights lifted

one by one,

not added to,

weary minds and limbs

yield to rest

and perfect ease.

**Leading from silence**

If only our minds could be held steady they would be still for a while, and for that short moment we would glimpse the splendour of eternity.

Augustine of Hippo