

Reflections on Learning Christ, in Christ and through Christ, in (some parts of) the Twentieth Century – (through) A personal journey.

We read in the gospels that Jesus “grew in stature and wisdom”. He learned just as we do. Just as we learn in order to become who we are, so He learned to become aware of his significance and the significance to Israel of who He is. His union with humanity meant he shared our experience. But mostly I think that what he learned is how the scriptures were about Him and His vocation as the Eternal Divine Logos, the Messiah, the redeemer of creation God’s Presence with us, for us and in us.

Yet Jesus learned in very human ways what it was to be the Suffering Servant foretold in Scripture. Adopting all experiences to redeem experience itself. Redeeming, by entering into human life, suffering and death. In order to do so he had to:

- learn Aramaic and Hebrew at the lap of his mother,
- how to pray as Jews prayed and to recite the psalms,
- learn to read the scriptures in the synagogue, also a little Greek,
- and how to mull things over and connect the dots of a history that was Divinely intimate to his Human experience, and ours as His siblings.

So it appears to me that the synoptic gospels are in some respect a story of how Jesus was constantly learning his Divine Vocation through human faculties, his experience, the scriptures and the community of faith and the use of his imagination. There are specific occasions that we all know.

- His encounter with the elders of the temple
- His baptism “This is my son....
- His temptations in the desert revealing to him the depth and darkness of the human heart
- His opening the scrolls to that place in Isaiah “The spirit of the Lord is upon me...I am sent...”
- The miracles by which we learn and he inverts the power and awful predicament of sin
- The Transfiguration and revelation of His original and Divine Light attested to by the trans-historical appearance of Moses and Elijah.
- And then the very difficult lesson of obedience in the Passion

The entire process of learning for teaching, receiving for giving, unveiling for revealing his Divine Self through his human self, is wonderfully portrayed in the experience of the meeting and walking with the two on their way to Emmaus in which he opens their eyes to the scriptures in the journey that ends at the table. There he once again takes bread, says the blessing breaks the bread and gives it to them. This story sums up for me the entire synoptic gospel message, and reveals to me the cognitive learning in Christian vocation.

The inner mystical learning, is taken up for me in the Gospel of John and the writings of St. Paul and St Peter. But also in the many mystics. Each in their own way pondering and revealing both the

nature of God in Jesus but also something of our relationship. More profoundly than the usually presented story of Sin and Redemption (plan B), is that of ongoing Creation and Union with God (plan A) in which the Incarnation of Christ is always fore-ordained and completes what God “makes”, namely our full creation and divinization (theosis) to which we ascent, namely, our ongoing making by joining ourselves to Him ¹. Incarnation of Christ as God-man (and all the sundry elements of Redemption) therefore are together the pinnacle act of Creation. The story of God and humanity joined in Christ, who is the Archetype (Logos) sums up the entire Scriptures of the Old Testament in one historical episode of relationship. This understanding continues the way that the first Christians, who had no Gospels (and subsequent mystics) understood scripture. In the OT it is not only God who reveals Himself but also the human condition that is revealed. The revelation of one happens in the same conversation that reveals the other. The story of God is not separate from the story of His making Humanity. And so ... Christ. But also the sheer implausibility of a purely secular take on reality.

I grew up in a mostly secular family, not wealthy but middle-Class comfortable, reflecting the scientific, materialist, reductionist and mechanistic values of the European Enlightenment, the ideology of the day. I say that I was *mostly* secular, because I also had a mother who was deeply religious. I also had within me a yearning *for what*, I did not Know. I learned in a small way to seek the peace of the coastal bush and nature where I would go everyday after school just to be, and to feel deeply my connection with Spirit, sensing that something deep within me was responding to something as deep in the reality of the Cosmos.

And so I also reflected something of what the world is going through. A contradiction of the inner life and the outer. On the outside, a secular expectation that as we grew in science and autonomy, religion would disappear as we became more sophisticated. What a lie and a deception.

Yet because of secular predominance we follow the way of the upside down world which is no longer a world of “faith seeking understanding” (as Anselm puts it), but a world with much knowledge and little understanding, yearns for encounter and faith. And this I think is a good way of understanding the story of Spiritual thirst that represents the Western World of the Twentieth Century and which I later understood and learned through my post-graduate studies, to call “Post-secularism”.

Anyway at that time in my early Twenties, I was very fortunate to have met a Dominican Sister who gave me books on the Spiritual life, St Teresa of Jesus, St. John of the Cross, Bro. Lawrence, The English mystics of the 14thC, The cloud of Unknowing, Thomas Merton, John Main and Thomas Keating and so on, it was only some years later that I was introduced to Fr Bede. Let us never underestimate the service we provide in lending books to the young.

Anyway it was through the mystical teachers that I was lead to the church of Rome. Thanks to the Mystics, I had a way of prayer based on Teresa’s prayer of Quite and which I easily understood as close to Centering Prayer. Through a Priest friend and Spiritual Director, I had also learned to pray with the Bible, a simple introduction to Lectio Divina and the role of the imagination in helping my encounter with Christ, although I was still very much ignorant of Byzantine Christianity and the

¹ In Genesis 1, the story shows God creating all things by act of declaration, “let there be..” and “He saw they were good” etc. Not so Humanity, no declaration here. Instead “Let us make...” denoting a continual process of making, in which the declaration of “let it be” is left up to Man. Indicating a choice to participate or not.

religious practices of Asia minor and the Syriac Church, which in India is known as the Church of St. Thomas.

Nevertheless this exploration of the Western tradition is not the pattern of world spirituality in the West and California.

Some (not comprehensive) historical context:

The late 19th and early 20th C saw the rise of the Theosophical Movement in England and especially the Boston Area in the US. It is very much through them that Vivekenanda came to the First World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, founding the Vedanta Society in New York and beginning his teaching in America. At the time American and UK intellectual life was receiving a Spiritual renewal, and this is seen in the Work of William James, Evelyn Underhill, CS Lewis and the Oxford Movement John Newman, Tolkein, but also G.K. Chesterton and later T.S. Elliot etc.

Nevertheless, it was much later during the 1960's that the arrival of the Hippy movement and the use of LSD amongst Stanford Professors, Timothy Leary, Ram Das, and the Psychedelic experiences of Aldous Huxley, that an experimental "New Age", drove a thirst for "altered states of Consciousness" and began to expand. This co-incided with a Tsunami wave of Gurus and Buddhist teachers coming to the West. Too many names to mention but to say that the Peace Movement brought together some very great powerful people of mystical traditions. Tich Nat Han, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King Jnr, Thomas Merton and Br. David Stendl-Ratz to name a few.

The explosion of Asian Spirituality on Western Soils is a matter of history. So much so that Mindfulness and meditation are now basic to the industrialised nations of the west. This of course spurred Catholic Contemplatives to dig into their own tradition and begin to teach ways of prayer. A number of other occurrences have added energy to the contemplative experience, various protestant revivals, Vatican II, the charismatic movement, Pope St. John Paul II's renewal and the new monasticism or Christian intentional community movement, etc.

It seems that due to world spiritual events the American model sought to express itself laterally and in inter-faith ecumenism as its first step, more lately to experience a significant rediscovery of more ancient Christian Spirituality from the Eastern Orthodox tradition. It seems we are in an age of conversion to other traditions than our own or none. I wonder if this is a way of sidestepping the more onerous task of integration, not to mention ecumenical reconcilliation?

However just as the story of the 20th C "East comes West" phenomenon, as we all know it, was a Movement of West goes East amongst a minority of very powerful people, who were also in search of something they felt missing in their own spiritual lives. This too opened a flood gate, India became George Harrison country. I suppose my journey though very much more humble and far less impressive has followed this path. A de-centering from the Western way of Conducting itself and its theology to a more Eastern tone. This brings with it a sense of tension also.

However, being in South Africa I was only vaguely aware of world happenings. We were working through our own heresies and turmoil, here. From Apartheid to an un-reflected Liberation thinking that is highly materialist and utopian and which has sometimes gripped the church with Marxian analysis, had to be negotiated in my life, as someone cast on the wrong side of history, to come to a deeper understanding of a theology and Spirituality of freedom in Christ.

This I must admit is an ongoing and renewing thing for me. For a long time my inner experience and what I saw as the teaching of Western Churches, seemed at odds. It was like I was wearing

spirituality like a hat. And underneath it, a purely religiously-coloured secularism continued to exist. One did not fit the other.

Again I think this is very much the case with the Western tenor over the passed 60 years or so, where there has been sadly little integration. Thus is the uncomfortable fit of Asian clothes on Western cowboys. All the talk of non-duality will not bring us to the Unitive experience the concept entails. Things started to fit more easily for me when I began to understand the Christian East in which I found a far more liberating theology of Creation. It acted as a link between the Apophatic traditions of East and West and the Judeo-Christian Biblical story. It opened my eyes to these as creative, curative and medicinal. As the east reminds us the cures to our condition is in the way of the Heart, prescribed in tradition.

For as I have gone East for inspiration via the near-East of Cappadocia, it has reminded me that our spiritual paths are often best by tensions and seemingly contradictory directions. Until that is we come to be firmly established in the heart. By which I mean partaking in something like a primordial receptivity that is available to all, but is the vocation of a Cosmic Christian who explores the depth and breadth of life in Christ. For me, Christ in the Cosmic sense, as the Creative and unifying principle self-imprinted into creation, is the greatest subject to be learned and taught. Christ who is the Ultimate philanthropist, Source and doctor of Being.

I think this is the identifiable movement of Spirit for our time: a greater Christ Consciousness which absorbs all opposites into Himself, that is the work of redemption and theosis but also a more confident renunciation of Secularism. The process cannot skip over questions and doubts about the nature of learning and the nature of consciousness itself. Many of the traditional writers understood this. And many have reflected on the question “Who am I?” in both the mysticism of Western and Eastern expression. The experience is sure to remain superficial without a great deal of purification.

In 2019 through a bereavement and very great sickness, I lost all my worldly possessions, car, house and business. I was without any support whatsoever. At the darkest hour, Grace happened, I was suddenly blessed by an overwhelming sense of Gratitude that lifted me away from my normal consciousness. Suddenly everything was beautiful, all things radiated the energy of pure unsentimental love. All my concerns and self commentary disappeared and I was in total Bliss and clarity. The experience lasted for nearly 4 days. But it gradually faded and I was left with having to face the realities of suffering again, poverty, surgery and pain.

Yet I was able to see them through utterly different eyes. I understood then, by a mere grace-filled glimpse, what it was that St.Paul meant when he states “I no longer live but Christ lives in me”.

So, in relatively late age (60) I find myself serving a type of novitiate again, one of integration. It is a new way of incarnating the Heart of Creator in Creation, or Word into Life and life into transcendence.

So in a way my path:

- was first about learning about the false consciousness of my secular culture and experiencing that it didn't offer what my deeper yearning desired
- Then, theological studies but nevertheless a shallow understanding that required a long gradual movement Eastwards with detours and stop-overs, attempts at Religious life and monasteries.

- Then, away from materialist and technological security into the uncertainty of the heart. An experience of loss and confusion and of frailty, to be re-grounded in God

It seems that the personal heart, The Heart of Tradition, the Mystical Heart in union with the world's heart and beyond that, the Cosmic Heart of Christ, find some alignment, some meeting, but always through tension and struggle for me. Each direction or redirection of the mind, will and imagination in some way reflecting the un-wrapping of Western Secular Materialism Modernism and Post-modernism from mind and heart to a more meaningful Holism of experience, expression and living.

The History of the World in the Twentieth Century is not of course merely a spiritually happy story, nor has it been for any individual person. It has seen barbarism, the death of empires and the rising of new totalitarianism and in them the story of martyrs and saints. And more lately the mass psychology that has accepted a culture of technological social media and virtual reality that drives us insane. We have also seen under the Covid Pandemic, a type of mass hypnosis and a lack of rationality, a type of herd mentality amongst politicians who seem to be in competition with each other as to who can cause the greatest harm to their people.

Something like these trends also come to be reflected in the ethical and moral life of the individual too. We are often our worst enemies if we trust our sense of control, we need to abandon that. There are plenty of reasons for more than a few *mea culpas*. It seems to me, that there is no progress in the heart without suffering a great deal of pain and anxiety. However just as I think the spiritual movements of the world are reflected in more individual lives, just as evangelicals come to learn to be contemplatives, apologists come to be mystics, and so on, it is that minority experience of the sincere and struggling apprentice, that has kept us from going completely and utterly mad. Discovering who we are and what this requires of the contemplative Soul, is very much again the lesson of our day and perhaps numerous days of past or to come..

In this, my story is the Worlds story perhaps? It is a discovery of the Heart and the Divine Heart of Hearts in which we find rest, recuperation and integration to go on. Becoming Christ to the World is no easy thing. So much of the mind and our thinking has to be abandoned about who we thought we were. So much humility has to be learned. I have learned just how much of a beginner I am. Yet I also know that this beginning is significant, in a way I cannot ever fathom.

I have spoken and shared things that I know or can somehow understand. However the Immensity of Christ doesn't finish there. Ultimately Christ is The Mystery that binds together every other mystery, or everything in His Mystery. For as I in my knowable identity receive Christ the Mystery, so I am lost again in Mystery. I say Amen, let it be, because in Christ, Truth, Way and Life, we are called to a Transfiguration, we must embody the Transcendent and this perhaps is the most difficult challenge that confronts an age of addiction.

In many ways, I wonder if the question of today's spirituality, is not so much how to become more contemplative but how to become more divinely Human?