From Dis-Bodied Discipleship to Embodied Relationality: Experiential Formation in the Life of Prayer

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The Context

“Can you put me onto a website with daily thoughts for the day? I want to be able to reflect and begin with a prayer while I’m travelling.” This question, recently asked of me by a parishioner about to leave for an extended trip overseas, left me thoughtful. It spoke of a phenomenon that is not limited to New Zealand; it is one that we can all recognize as modern and which has become acceptable. Life is fast and demanding. Time is a luxury, and slow living, as in the culture of slow food, is something rather lost to many of us. Indeed, it has become an unquestioned given—even in the life of prayer, and of being formed in that life. Sites for a quick prayer, a paraphrased psalm to carry us through the day have become a kind of spiritual fix, downed like coffee, consumed on the run; the spiritual life is mediated by gurus in whom we put our trust without the dynamic of embodied living relationality, letting them tell us how to be spiritual, making up prayers for us so we in turn can use them to talk to God. If prayer is about intimate relationship in and with God, then this phenomenon raises questions about why we would be letting others write the script for our souls, and what has caused our own relationship with Christ to become so estranged.

In the New Zealand context this is compounded by lingering hangovers of colonialism. Although some of us are part of families that have been here for five or more generations, the idea that we in our own church discover sources from our own southern-centered wisdom heritage is often discounted, particularly in those of us from

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English roots. The belief that contextual theology can have its own voice here is often betrayed by referencing and legitimizing what is being aspired to in the writings and teachings from alien cultures. In terms of being formed in prayerfulness, of living the life and letting it radicalize us into transforming yeast in society, we still prefer to look to the (usually) offshore academic, to a current venerated guru, to the latest website, to anyone and anywhere, except to the humility of the Christ contextualized in us and around us. The issue that is faced by those of us who teach and nurture the inner life with those who seek it is not so much that others from our own upper echelons of the church and the academies, or from other countries and cultures have nothing to offer. They do, and there is no excuse for ignorance when it comes to faith. The issue has to do with a kind of faith-based elitism that causes us to look beyond what is right in front of us, overlooking the gospel truth that the inner life is one of intimate relationship with Christ. In the formation process this relationship is treated as a primary source. When in the course of learning participants begin to express experiences that our fathers and mothers in the tradition have discovered before us, then we turn to them. As far as possible we turn to them in their original writings, keeping with a congruent practice of working with primary sources to learn from them, as opposed to learning about them. When in the context of holy companioning, we are always working with the “primary source” that is the person present with us. The formational process attempts to work consistently at this level.

The Formational Process

From the perspective of the Benedictine solitary life, I find that as a teacher the call to stability in the Rule of Benedict has much to offer and to guide. Benedict does not hold in high regard those who run after other spiritual homes, or live their Christ relationship out in spiritual stopovers; his descriptions of these monks are uncompromising and constitute the entire content of the very first chapter of the Rule. It is very much a spiritual affliction which he knew in his day. We can also recognize the parallels in our own. It is a perilous distraction that turns us to seek and look to anything other than actually staying focused on our Christ relationship. When this relationship is usurped and mediated by others as a primary and habituated resource, prayer
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and its transformative outworking as a gospel imperative is compromised. It is a seduction that leads to quasi “spiritual practices” and a belief that knowledge or following a particularized wisdom will lead us into a successful spiritual Christian life. It creates dis-bodied discipleship and it misses the point. All authentic relationships are located in life experience, encompassing every level of body, soul, and mind. They rise and fall and rise again on a growing awareness of the very human experiences of sorrow and joy, the inflicting of hurt and the journey of remorse to renewal, of love that both wilts and flourishes in a cycle of very human seasons. It is in these that Christ meets us, and where we meet Christ. It is a relationship that calls us into intimate communion and which in turn calls us to find and enter into a similar communion with that presence in the other.

The formation process that enables this relationship to be nurtured and sustained recognizes Benedictine stability, along with its teaching on discipline and obedience for the sake of the life of the community, as essential. It is the process that is offered through the Spirituality Centre I lead, and it is concerned with understanding Benedictine stability in particular as being accessible even in the heart of daily life. As a primary principle it goes some way to addressing the kind of thinking that excommunicates those without much education from having a role in offering holy companioning. Experientially it is embraced primarily as faithfulness and commitment to the divine relationship, which in turn is realized through a trust that allows itself to be tested and tried.

A bishop once asked me what I would do if a “fundamentalist evangelical who believed in prayer as words being poured out” came on a course of being formed as a holy companion in the way of spiritual direction. In my reply I suggested that I would be wanting to come alongside that person in the same way that I would with someone who turned up convinced that silence was the highest form of prayer and spiritual expression, to lead them into a place of being able to let go their convictions through their own insight and developing consciousness of divine relationality. To grasp and hold tightly to creedal- and dogma-formed notions of being Christian is to risk eventually being captured by them rather than being freed for a dynamic spiritual life. To forgo knowing about the spiritual life begins a journey into trust and a relationship of intimacy that lies beyond creedal allegiances and dogmatic narrowing. This of course requires the structure and process
of the course to reflect that at every level, and for me as teacher not to be above the process either. The way that I have worked this out over the years has been to develop a pedagogical method that is an oral analytic/dynamic process borne out in demonstrable growth. It works in the one-on-one companioning context as well as when more than two or three gather for intentional formation and learning over the period of a course.

For instance, a young man comes to see me from time to time. He has a yearning for the spiritual life and a longing to grow into the heart of God. Invariably he arrives with a notebook and pen at hand. Before very long they are pulled out rapidly, with words such as “Wait, wait, can you just say that again?” Usually, I find it hard to recall what I have just said! But even if I can, I suggest to him that he trust God enough, to trust himself enough that what is resonating in him right now will remain with him. That this is prayer; conversation in Christ, the language of a divine relationship of most tender intimacy. Perhaps this is what St. Benedict was suggesting when he called his brothers to “listen with the ears of their hearts.” Another one who has asked to be companioned on the way is a university teacher. She too would come with a pad and pen and it has been a longer process for her to trust her hearing through the ears of her heart.

Oral process, whether in the context of a course or in the singularity of holy companioning, is a dynamic and immediate way of formation. In the courses I have taught over the years, there is no scheduled written work, no request to keep a journal, no marking. The emphasis is on working with what we are seeing and hearing, trusting our responses in the “moment.” The self-evaluation that results from this is far more profound than anything I might presume to evaluate. The other aspect of the oral dynamic method is a deepening level of honesty. Here nothing can be re-written, deleted, copied, or polished. The words from the heart reveal the heart. The sentence that halts before it is completed, the eyes that water as the words belie the content, cannot be erased, or declared unseen, or pass unnoticed. Being clever does not have a place here. Simple expression of inner truth takes on a more significant value. In this process the Christ relationship that is precious and intimate emerges gently, trust in Christ grows, and confidence that who they are in Christ is strengthened.

As we walk together, it becomes an embodied experience of the inner walk with Christ. The trust that develops in the group begins to
have congruence with a developing trust in the divine relationship. It becomes recognizable; it leads to humility in conversation, and a recognition of the Christ within and present in others. It develops the ability to work with what is right in front of us, not looking anywhere else. Trusting that the one who said, “Where you are, there I am also,” meant it.

In terms of the context with which this paper began, it is all counter-cultural. It is a way of being formed in the life of prayer that begins and ends in the intimacy of our relationship with Christ. No guru, no spiritual “great,” past or present, can effect that. It is true that the wisest amongst us, either in our own time or from our tradition, do inform and enhance our learning, but the primary formation and practice of prayer is concerned with this holy relationship in the present reality of our very human lives and experience. Insights can assist but they cannot replace. Practices will habituate the realities of our growing trustfulness but can only ever be outward signs of God’s grace at work in us. Wisdom is the deep and most profound well out of which we can draw. Yet even those wells of wisdom can only be drawn on if first we have dug down through the hard rock and darkness into the wells of our own life, where the sweet waters rise to form us in the image of the One who offers the water of eternal life.

The Emmanuel Prayer: A Formational Practice

If intimacy is the goal of the divine relationship, simplicity is its language of expression. My mother was often wont to say in the face of overt piety that “there is no use in being so heavenly minded that you are no earthly good.” Later, as I discovered some of the earliest traditions of our faith and the wisdom of the desert mothers and fathers, I came across a similar injunction given to the brothers of a community—that if they were to see another brother ascending to heaven they were to grab him by the ankle and pull him back. Keep it real. Keep ourselves real. Keep our feet on the ground. Keep it simple. In a context where pressures of family life, of work that demands as many hours as there are in a day, of study that demands pass marks of the highest level just to get to the next stage: in this context to be able to live prayerfully is a challenge. It was into this that I introduced the Emmanuel Prayer. I discovered this way of praying as I worked hard to overcome in myself aspects of praying that were less than honest,
more about me than God, and not attending to the art of listening. Over time it became a way of praying that became life-giving in my daily lived experience, in times of darkness and in times of inexpressible happiness. Demonstrably I found that my own life was both freer and more resilient—psychologically, theologically, and in pragmatic responsiveness to life around me. As I began to talk about it and then teach it, I called it “The Emmanuel Prayer.”

The Emmanuel Prayer is simple: “Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” So simple that it was missed by many when it was offered as the prayer to pray during an Advent retreat-in-daily-life I led at Napier Cathedral and St James Hastings in New Zealand in 2014. Yet those who persisted found it a discipline that deepened their formation. For those living beyond the cloister and community of the local church, with their accessibility to grace, to the Beloved in a moment in time, it became a way of sustainable and life-giving prayer. Some prayers allow us to enter into our “closet,” or lead us into meditative silence, or keep us focused in concentrated time. For the time-poor but intimately, divinely rich, the Emmanuel Prayer allows for “praying without ceasing.” In the world it is a discipline that carries over from the learning experiences of trust (as outlined above) to letting that trust be made present at each moment of spiritual consciousness and awareness of presenting human need.

This prayer is at the heart of our divine discourse, discovering an articulation that is often beyond words and allows for the divine dialogue to occur at the level of soul. It gives space for the ears of the heart to be opened, and forms us more fully into listening “pray-ers.” In teaching it has a formational focus particularly on prayer in the way of intercession, discipline, resistance, and the embodied practice of just living.

The Emmanuel Prayer is a prayer of intercession, requiring more faith than words, when the person/situation is named and then the prayer breathed in expectation. Theologically the expectation is aligned to the affirmation of Mary that in the act of saying yes to the presence of God in her life, blessings will occur, the acts of God will be made real. It builds community. As we pray for one another, our “companions on the way,” the companionship is deepened. The Emmanuel Prayer allows for respect, for it does not allow for a presumption of needs where they might not be known or prayer not have been asked for.
It is a prayer of discipline. The Benedictine life in a monastery or as lived by professed associates or solitaries has a rhythm founded on obedience and discipline that is part of the process toward gaining that perfect freedom in Christ that scripture promises. Our contemporary life does not easily sit with those concepts, and to follow a discipline even for a time can be a challenge. A friend contended it was a bit naive. I suggested that her contention was not with me but with God, in whom she struggled to believe. What would it be like, I wondered, if she admitted her struggle with unbelief in the context of the prayer, saying first, “I don’t believe” (keep it real)—and then saying/praying the prayer. Do it as a discipline, I suggested. In many ways resistance to disciplined obedience is a positioning of questioning faith. But overall this prayer is a way into embracing a discipline, not for its own sake but for those very real desires of the religious life to live in the promise of perfect freedom. In embracing this prayer as a discipline it increases our formation and deepens the intimacy of our divine relationship and the experience of the language of grace. It requires our attention.

And finally, the Emmanuel Prayer is a prayer of resistance. It enables us to resist temptation. Sometimes we are tempted to pray—yes, tempted to pray, particularly when we are faced with things that are beyond words, as in the terrible things happening in the world, or to people and places closest to us. This temptation can lead us to pray as if we do not really have faith that God has a handle on God’s world. It is a temptation that reveals itself when we find we are using lots of words, often repetitively, and not doing much listening. Here the Emmanuel Prayer offers us the discipline of brevity, of trust, and of growing in the art of holy listening. It presumes dialogue. It helps in the resistance of imagining that we can bend God’s will to our own needs. And in terms of needs and our own neediness overtaking intercessions for others, psychologically it allows for space to step back from self, a formational fostering of selflessness.

A prayer life that is concerned with living out a dynamic relationship with Christ is experienced as one of intimacy and trust. Prayer keeps the focus on the present, on the work of justice. The demonstrable reality of the practice of prayer is a very human life that is marked by the fruits of the Spirit. You can spot it round a table at a local café. It is noticeable in the pub; it draws attention in the workplace. Humility becomes a natural outworking of a soul living relationally in
the presence of the holy. It is not about perfection, for it is a presence that at once convicts us of a real (not imagined, abject, affected, or idealized) sense of unworthiness, yet at the same time also lifts up and affirms us as being good, as declared at our creation in the first chapter of Genesis, and as the receivers of the unconditional healing and restoring love of Christ. The humility that is at the heart of the nurturing of this life of prayer becomes the source of an authentic love for the other.

The soul that is daily leaning into the grace and trust of the intimate holy partner shares the divine distress, the desire for peace, and a love that recognizes the Christ in the other, working to make room for him among the hungry, the homeless, the poor, the unlovely, the refugee, and those who suffer violence. If there is any spiritual practice, this is it. If there is any truth in the belief that God answers prayer, it is in this. If there is any of us who declare we belong to Christ, this is where we are found. It is life kept real. It is that simple.