



Into the Silent Land

A Lenten Resource based on the book by Martin Laird, O.S.A.

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Welcome to week two of our Lenten journey of contemplation for 2021

This week, we are looking at the first chapter after the introduction, which is titled 'Parting the Veil.' You are invited to read the excerpts, ponder and perhaps journal with the reflection questions, and try the practice.

The first of our gatherings to share with one another about this material will be a shared brunch this Sunday after our morning service, at the Vicarage. Let me know if you are able to host one of these gatherings at your house in the coming weeks.

There is also the opportunity to meet and practice Centering Prayer – a form of silent meditation – in a short contemplative service in the parish office at St John's at 8.30am every 2nd and 4th Sunday of the month, from this Sunday 28/02.

Remember to put our retreat day into your diaries: Saturday March 27 at the church.

Also remember – pray as you can, not as you can't. If you only manage one period of silence this week, don't beat yourself up. Just try and make it two the following week, and increase from there.

**Excerpts from *Into the Silent Land*,
Chapter 1: 'Parting the Veil – The Illusion of Separation
from God'**

A young prisoner cuts himself with a sharp knife to dull emotional pain. 'As long as I can remember,' he says, "I have had this hurt inside. I can't get away from it, and sometimes I cut or burn myself so that the pain will be in a different place and on the outside." Acknowledging this to himself, he decided to approach the Prison Phoenix Trust, whose aim is to address the spiritual needs of prisoners by teaching them how to pray, how to turn their prison cells into monastic cells.

After learning how to meditate and practicing it twice a day for several weeks, the young prisoner speaks movingly of what he has learnt. "I just want you to know that after only four weeks of meditating half an hour in the morning and at night, the pain is not so bad, and for the first time in my life, I can see a tiny spark of something within myself that I can like." Another prisoner discovers he is becoming more human and realizes in the process, "All beings, no matter how reactionary, fearful, dangerous or lost, can open themselves to the sacred within and become free. I have become free even in prison. Prison is the perfect monastery."

...Through their experience of interior stillness these prisoners unwittingly have joined a chorus of saints and sages who proclaim by their lives that this God we seek has already found us, already looks out of our own eyes, is already, as St. Augustine famously put it, "closer to me than I am to myself." "O Beauty ever ancient, ever new," he continues, "you were within and I was outside myself."

...The great Carmelite doctor of the Church, St. John of the Cross, says, "The soul's center is God." God is the ground of the human being. Various Christian traditions may argue over...ways of understanding this, but there is clear and authoritative testimony based on living the Christian mysteries that if we are going to speak of what a human being is, we have not said enough until we speak of God. If we are to discover for ourselves who we truly are — that inmost self that is known before it is formed, ever hidden with Christ in God (Ps 139:13; Jer 1:5; Col 3:3) — the discovery is going to [include the] mystery of God, though we may feel more and more inclined to say less and less about God.

...Paul, the author of the oldest New Testament writings we have...writes, "I have been Crucified with Christ and yet I am alive; yet it is no longer I, but Christ living in me" (Gal 2:19). Paul looks within and sees not Paul but Christ. Are Paul and Christ two separate things? They are two separate things from the perspective of creation, yes, but from the perspective of the transformation of awareness, no. When Paul looks within and sees Christ, I do not suggest he sees Christ as an object of awareness. Paul speaks of something more direct and immediate, which pertains to the ground of awareness and not to the objects of awareness. The awareness itself is somehow about the presence of Christ in Paul. "I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me."

...Whatever there is about human identity that can be objectively known, measured, predicted, observed, whether by the Myers-Briggs, the Enneagram, the tax man, or the omniscient squint of your most insightful aunt, there is a foundational core of what we might as well call identity that remains hidden from scrutiny's grip and somehow utterly caught up in God, "in whom we live and move and have our being" in whom our very self is immersed.

...One need not have journeyed too far into this silent land to realize that the so-called psychological self, our personality...is a cognitive construct pasted up out of thoughts and feelings. A rather elaborate job has been done of it, and it is singularly useful. But our deepest identity, in which thoughts and feelings appear like patterns of weather on Mount Zion (Ps 125), remains forever immersed in the silence of God.

...Because God is the ground of our being, the relationship between creature and Creator is such that, by sheer grace, separation is not possible. God does not know how to be absent. The fact that most of us experience throughout most of our lives a sense of absence or distance from God is the great illusion that we are caught up in; it is the human condition. The sense of separation from God is real, but the meeting of stillness reveals that this perceived separation does not have the last word. This illusion of separation is generated by the mind and is sustained by the riveting of our attention to the interior soap opera, the constant chatter of the cocktail party going on in our heads. For most of us this is what normal is, and we are good at coming up with ways of coping with this perceived separation (our consumer-driven entertainment culture takes care of much of it). But some of us are not so good at coping, and so we drink ourselves into oblivion or cut or burn ourselves "so that the pain will be in a different place and on the outside."

The grace of salvation, the grace of Christian wholeness that flowers in silence, dispels this illusion of separation. For when the mind is brought to stillness, and all our strategies of acquisition have dropped, a deeper truth presents itself: we are and have always been one with God and we are all one in God (Jn 17:21). The marvelous world of thoughts, sensation, emotions, and inspiration, the spectacular world of creation around us, are all patterns of stunning weather on the holy mountain of God. But we are not the weather. We are the mountain.

...For a lifetime we have taken this weather—our thoughts and feelings—to be ourselves, taken ourselves to be this video to which the attention is riveted. Stillness reveals that we are the silent, vast awareness in which the video is playing. To glimpse this fundamental truth is to be liberated, to be set free from the fowler's snare (Ps 123:7).

When our life in God washes onto the shores of perception we see no image or shape, no holy pictures or statues, nothing for thinking mind's comprehending grip. We know undeniably, like the back of our hand, the silent resounding of a great and flowing vastness that is the core of all. Words cannot express it (2 Cor 12:4). No tongue has sullied it. Such is the impenetrable silence in which we are immersed. Yet this silence cleanses the mind and unbinds the tongue. "I will sing, I will sing your praise. Awake my soul. Awake lyre and harp. I will awake the dawn" (Ps 56:7-8).

Questions for reflection

- + What feels new, and what feels familiar, in the reading above?
- + Is there a word or sentence that particularly caught your attention?
Underline it and ponder what calls to you about that word or sentence.
- + How do you resonate with the idea that you are not your thoughts and feelings – that these are just ‘weather’ surrounding the holy mountain of the self that is hidden in God?
- + What has been your experience of feeling and believing that you are separate from God? How do you respond to the idea that ‘separation is not possible. God does not know how to be absent?’
- + Martin Laird used several quotations from scripture and other spiritual writings in the chapter above. Is there one that you would like to tuck away in your memory and ponder some more?

You may wish to keep a notebook and journal your responses to these questions and your ‘field notes’ from your practice of silence as the weeks of Lent pass.

Invitation to practice

You might find it helpful to make a place in your home where you can sit regularly in silence. In or near this place, perhaps place a candle, an icon, or a symbol on a small table, or shelf top. Let this be something that recalls you to your intention set aside time and space for your practice of silence, and that you find inviting.

If you are new to the practice of contemplation, for this second week, the invitation as for last week is to sit – in a chair, on a prayer-stool, on the ground if you're flexible – and just 'be', uninterrupted, in silence, for 10 minutes each day with your eyes closed.

This week, the invitation is to introduce a word or phrase to your silence, that you either repeat gently and slowly along with your breath, or that you just bring to mind when you notice that you are caught up in thinking and distractions. Let the word or phrase remind you that the thoughts and feelings you experience in silence are instances of 'weather' that can pass by, leaving your mountain-self quietly unmoved. Perhaps, you may find that one of the scripture texts from this week's reading offers a word or phrase to use in this way. (e.g. 'Christ lives in me', 'hidden in God', 'awake') Don't think about or analyse the phrase itself. Simply say it in your mind as a focal point to recall you to silence when your mind gets noisy.

You may want to explore methods of time-keeping, such as setting a timer, putting a watch where you can see it when you open your eyes briefly, or using a meditation app like 'insight timer' on your smartphone.

If you already have a committed practice of silence, feel free simply to keep following that, and perhaps try a few adaptations based on the suggestions above. See if this Lent you can work toward increasing the time or number of your 'sits', building to 20 minutes (or even half an hour), twice a day.