

Maddie and I watched *My Octopus Teacher* on Netflix the other day. It's a documentary about a man who built a relationship with an octopus who lived in an underwater kelp forest near his home. The trust that developed between him and the octopus was extraordinary. She would reach out her tentacles and touch his hand and face, and nestle on his chest. He got to see her hunting, learning new skills, and also being pursued and injured by sharks, as well as her amazing methods of evading predators. He was also nearby when she mated, laid her eggs and died. He got to see and film things beyond any experience of nature that most of us will ever know.

However, this didn't happen by him just deciding one day that he'd go and look for an octopus to befriend. It happened because he had committed himself to some practices for his own health. He went swimming in the ocean every day, in all weathers, without a wetsuit. He dived with just a snorkel and flippers, gradually building up the time that he could stay underwater on a single breath. His aim was to have as little separation between himself and the underwater life – just one creature alongside the others. He didn't miss a single day over the course of a whole year – showing up, coming gradually closer, learning how to be among the rhythms of this underwater world, to see the tracks and traces of its life and understand what he was seeing.

Without this discipline, without this practice day in and day out, he would never have developed the lung capacity, the trust, and the vision to be able to witness the things he witnessed. The incredible gifts that were given to him were the fruit of faithful, skilled practice. He couldn't have just shown up now and then, and integrated the way he did with a strikingly alien intelligence and environment. I expect there were plenty of boring days where nothing happened, days of tiredness and bad weather – but the point is that when amazing things did occur, he was there and ready to receive them. And he couldn't have given that experience to someone else who hadn't done that work, even if he'd wanted to.

I think there are parallels between the underwater world of *My Octopus Teacher* and life in the Spirit, or a life lived in the kingdom of God. The spiritual life is also a life of practice, involving daily commitment to acting in new, and sometimes counter-intuitive or counter-cultural ways. As Neil shared with us the other week, this involves becoming so familiar with the Scriptures that we come to see *through* them to the world beyond, and becoming aware of the hidden, camouflaged work of the Holy Spirit in our own lives and in our communities.

All our earliest ancestors of the faith, from the New Testament writers to the church fathers to the desert monastics, saw the spiritual life as “askesis” – training. This language is rare nowadays, which troubles me. We would never expect to be able to run a marathon without doing any training runs, but somehow we expect to have spiritual strength and insight without developing the habits that come from spiritual practice and discipline. Likewise, we would never expect to throw together a team of people who’d never played rugby before, and go out and win a game against the All Blacks.

Why do we imagine that a church can live as Christ’s body and pray effectively in the face of spiritual oppression, without dedicating ourselves to the spiritual practices that form us in holiness, in Christian identity and character? Is it possible that we don’t consider the practice of discipleship as being as real, as challenging, or as important, as the other things we train for and commit ourselves to? Or perhaps we have wrongly been taught that Christ-likeness will come as naturally to us as just living our lives, just being ourselves?

This is what I believe Matthew is alerting us to with this parable of the wise and foolish virgins, or bridesmaids. There are things that we are meant to see and experience as friends of Jesus. Things we’re meant to notice and celebrate and participate in – life in the kingdom of heaven. But Jesus’ presence among us often feels delayed, or difficult to discern, and sleeping is natural while we wait. The real test is whether, when the bridegroom arrives and we are roused from our sleep to celebrate and bear witness...do we have enough oil to keep our lamps lit? Do we have enough training on board to be able to enter into what God is doing, when the Holy Spirit nudges us awake and says, go here – look there? Or are our spiritual senses unformed and weak?

Jesus’ language of “wise” and “foolish” in this parable picks up on his teaching earlier in Matthew’s gospel, where he says that the difference between the foolish person whose house is built on sand, and the wise person whose house is built on rock, is hearing *and acting on* his words. He warns his hearers, saying, “not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one *who does the will* of my Father in heaven” – which echoes the ending of today’s parable.

The thing is, “hearing” and “saying” *are not by themselves habit forming*. It’s like reading a book on nutrition and exercise and thinking you’ve made a positive change in your life. “Hearing” and “saying” don’t generate enough ‘oil’ of spiritual character to be ready to respond to Christ. What makes us ready and able to join in the Spirit’s work in the world is “*doing*.” Regular, habit-forming practices of living Jesus’ apostolic life day by day, drawing on the Spirit’s indwelling presence. We need a training regime that *forms* us for the kingdom. That is the oil in our lamps.

What are these practices? We start with anything that increases our love for God, and that enables us to love our neighbour as ourselves. So we begin with prayer, alone and together, and with meditating on God’s word to us in scripture, and with gathering around Jesus’ table to break bread – receiving the food we need for the exercise we’re called to. But we must dig further.

Taking just the Sermon on the Mount as a starting place, we are asked not to nurture our anger towards others but actively seek reconciliation. To see others as beloved children of God and not look at them with an eye for how we can use them, which is lust. To say ‘yes’ and ‘no’ honestly, being people of our word and following through on our promises. To pray for people we consider enemies and do good even to those people who have hurt us. To give generously, refusing to store up life’s goods for ourselves alone. Deliberately and daily to choose not to worry about how we will get all the things we need, learning to risk and trust that God will provide. To refuse to judge others, instead becoming aware of how we project our own faults onto other people. This is a lifetime pattern of growth in spiritual maturity.

Love also demands that we acknowledge where we’re getting it wrong and saying sorry. This means practicing confession, wrestling with our demons and receiving God’s healing in the wounded places of our hearts that make us mean and selfish without even realising. And offering as well as receiving forgiveness.

We don’t do these things to earn our way into heaven or to get God’s love. God’s love and grace and our acceptance are assured. We build these habits to reflect God’s love to others, and grow into Christ’s likeness.

We are in spiritually difficult times – many people around us are lost in despair and hopelessness. Let us wisely strengthen our spiritual muscles to meet the challenge of this moment, to sharpen our discernment, and receive the grace to join with God in healing God’s beloved world.