

## **Contemplation and the Reign of God**

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*Contemplation is the inner journey of Carmelites, arising out of the free initiative of God, who touches and transforms us, leading us towards unity in love with him, raising us up so that we may enjoy his gratuitous love and live in his loving presence. (Ratio n. 33)*

The *Ratio* of the Carmelite Order published in the year 2000 puts contemplation at the heart of the Carmelite charism. The consequence of this position presents us with a beautiful truth about the Carmelite vocation. We are called simply to be in love with God and to allow that love to permeate every part and action of our lives. Contemplation becomes the glue that holds our life together; we cannot be people of prayer without a contemplative heart, and we cannot seek and find God in the midst of others unless we have a contemplative welcome for one another. We cannot serve unless we realise our dependence on the gratuitous love of God. We are seekers of the Face of God in all times and in all places and God will continually surprise us with his presence.

So, what is contemplation? As usual I find the best place to go to find an answer to this question is to scripture. The relationship that Jesus embraces with his Father, 'Abba', is one of intense intimacy and passion. When asked by the disciples how to pray, Jesus begins radically - call God your Father. Jesus invites his followers into a personal relationship with the source of life. This is the lived experience of Jesus' prayer. He is in continuous dialogue with his Father. Jesus seeks out those moments of communion, he prays before every decisive action or word. The time he spends in Gethsemane continues the ongoing dialogue between Father and Son. The very texture of Jesus' life and ministry is for the Christian a textbook for contemplation. For Jesus' life is lived relationship, the very stuff of contemplation. The ministry of Jesus is one of proclamation. From the very beginning of his ministry in Galilee, Jesus proclaims a new way of being human, a new way of relationship. This new way is the reality of the Kingdom or Reign of God. This is not an invention of Jesus; the Reign of God has had its place in the understanding of the Hebrew people. The psalms speak of God's majesty. 'The Lord is King with majesty enrobed' (Psalm 93); "Say among the nations: 'The Lord Reigns'" (Psalm 96). Jesus proclaims the Reign of God as beginning here and now. 'The coming of the Kingdom of God does not admit of observation and there will be no one to say, "Look here! Look there!" For you must know, the Kingdom of God is among you.' (Luke 17:21).

Jesus gives us indications as to what the Reign of God is. We can see the Kingdom at work in the words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth. The Kingdom is at work in creation like a mustard seed, a tiny almost insignificant object, that when sown and nurtured grows into a huge bush providing shade and welcome. It is like the yeast added by the baker to a mix of flour and water, it's like a fisherman casting out his nets into a barren sea and bringing in his nets full to bursting. It's like a wedding feast with an abundance of wine and joy. Jesus presents us with beautiful images of togetherness and feasting, not just in the form of stories but demonstrated by his encounters with sinners and outcasts. The Reign of God is for all, none are excluded and all are welcome. The Reign of God is simply God's generosity of love.

If we take this reality seriously we realise that we are dealing with the very fabric of life. We are people who are meant for relationship. It is explicit in the design of our bodies and the desires of our hearts. The Kingdom message of Jesus is not one of isolated faith but of a radically new relationship with God; deeply personal and intimate that has its consequences in our relationships with others. The Reign of God is that reality that comes into being when women and men relate to each other and to God in the way that Jesus related to God and humanity. This is liberating for us all. This is the Good News. God is in love with us.

To be contemplative is to live the Kingdom. It is the human response to the love that God lavishes upon us. As contemplatives we are called to have eyes that see and ears that hear. We are to be in relationship with the world and its peoples. Contemplation is not a withdrawal from the world's realities but a dialogue with them. Joan Chichester reminds us that a truly spiritual person knows that spirituality is concerned with those who know how to live a full life and not an empty one. Contemplation is not escapism; it is the language of encounter. It is about the coming to consciousness of all that is sacred in our lives.

For our contemplation to be honest we have to be aware of our world. The lives we now lead are crowded with choices. People make constant demands on our time. Our poverty is seldom material but we always seem to be asking for more time. Awareness puts us into contact with our immediate world. Awareness does not ask for more time, it simply asks for insight to what is set before us. It mines every relationship, every event and moment. The true contemplative is able to say that God is in what is standing right in front of me. It takes a lifetime to come to this awareness and, as I said at the beginning, God will always surprise us in his presence.

"We live and breathe, grow and develop in the womb of God. And yet we seek God elsewhere - in defined places, in special ways, on mountaintops and in caves, on specific days and with special ceremonies. But the life that is full of light knows that God is not over there. God is here." (Sr. Joan Chichester, OSB)

Carmelites are called to be people of prayer, and the prayer that we live is always a call to conversion and new life. God's presence is always an invitation to develop our relationship with him and consequently deepen our own self-knowledge. Contemplation is never a static state but a gentle quest for total union with God. It begins in the here and now, in our present circumstances. A couple of years ago I received the following prayer. The invitation is simple: leave aside your own agenda and let God lead you into relationship with him.

*Disturb us, O Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves;  
When our dreams have come true because we dreamed too little;  
When we have arrived in safety because we sailed too close to the shore.*

*Stir us, O Lord, to dare more boldly  
To venture seas where storms shall show your Mastery,  
Where losing sight of land we shall find the stars.*

*In the name of Him  
Who pushed back the horizons of our hopes  
And invited the brave to follow Him. Amen*