

Williams, Rowan. *Silence and Honey Cakes: The Wisdom of the desert*. Oxford: Lion Publishing, 2003.

## THE NEED FOR COMMUNITY

Read: I Corinthians 12:12-27

One thing that comes out very clearly from any reading of the great monastic writers of the fourth and fifth centuries is the impossibility of thinking about contemplation or meditation or 'spiritual life' in abstraction from the actual business of living in the Body of Christ, living in concrete community. The life of intimacy with God in contemplation is both the fruit and the course of a renewed style of living together. 22

a relationship with eternal truth and love simply doesn't happen unless we mend our relations with Tom, Dick and Harriet. The actual substance of our relationship with eternal truth and love is bound up with how we manage the proximity of these human neighbours. 22,23

to find my own life is a task I cannot undertake without the neighbour; life itself is what I find in solidarity, and not only in a sense of togetherness (talking about solidarity can easily turn into no more than this) but in that willingness to put 'on hold' the perspective I want to own and cling to and possess, so that the announcing of the gospel may happen through my presence and my words. 32

What is to be learned in the desert is clearly not some individual technique for communing with the divine, but the business of becoming a means of reconciliation and healing for the neighbour. You 'flee' to the desert not to escape neighbours but to grasp more fully what the neighbour is – the way to life for you, to the degree that you put yourself at their disposal in connecting them with God. 38

1. What is the connection between the spiritual life and "the actual business of living in the Body of Christ?"
2. In what way is "The life of intimacy with God in contemplation...both the fruit and the course of a renewed style of living together"?
3. How might our attitude towards Church change if we took this idea seriously?
4. How might my neighbour help me "To find my own life"?
5. What "perspectives" might I need to put "'on hold'" "so that the announcing of the gospel may happen through my presence and my words"?

## TEMPTATION

Read: Matthew 4:1-11; I Corinthians 10:6-13

No one knows for sure how hard temptation might bear on another. 44

A temptation that might seem trivial to you could be crushing to another; an obsession that haunts you day and night may be incomprehensible to someone else. 44

1. How does the understanding of the possible seriousness of temptation for another person help me in relationship to them?
2. What do I need to do in order to be more sensitive to the temptations that others may be suffering?

## FAILURE

Read: 2 Corinthians 11:30; 12:6-10

My own awareness of my failure and weakness is indispensable to my communicating the gospel to my neighbour. 24, 25

by the quiet personal exposure of failure in such a way as to prompt the same truthfulness in someone else: the neighbour is won, or converted. 27, 28

The plain acknowledgment of your solidarity in need and failure opens a door: it shows that it is possible to live in the truth and to go forward in hope. It is in such a moment that God gives himself through you, and you become by God's gift a means of connecting another with God. 31

1. How might "My own awareness of my failure and weakness" benefit my ability to communicate the gospel to my neighbour?
2. What might be some of the factors which might keep my neighbour from receiving hearing the gospel through me?

The church is a community that exists because something has happened which makes the entire process of self-justification irrelevant. God's truth and God's mercy have appeared in concrete form in Jesus and, in his death and resurrection, have worked the transformation that only God can perform and told us what only God can tell us: that he has already dealt with the dreaded consequences of our failure, so that we need not labour anxiously to save ourselves and put ourselves right with God. 33

Sin...is shattered by the act of God in Christ; that act creates the community of Christ's Body in which we live, ultimately, only through each other. 37

1. How does what God has done in Jesus Christ make "the entire process of self-justification irrelevant"?
2. What are "the dreaded consequences of our failure"?
3. How does the fact that these "consequences" have been dealt with change my relationship to myself, to other people, to God?

One of the great temptations of religious living is the urge to intrude between God and other people. We love to think that we know more of God than others; we find it comfortable and comforting to try and control the access of others to God. 25

1. In what ways do I experience in myself "the urge to intrude between God and other people"?
2. How have I experienced an other person intruding themselves between God and me?
3. What does this feel like for the person being intruded upon/ for the intruder?

### JUDGMENT

Read: Matthew 7:1-5; Romans 14:1-12

'death' to the neighbour might mean: it is to renounce the power of judgment over someone else - a task hard enough indeed to merit being described as death. 24

1. What makes it so difficult "to renounce the power of judgment over someone else?"
2. What would be the impact upon a community if its members committed themselves to renouncing "the power of judgment over" one another?

### ILLUSION AND REALITY

Read: Luke 4:1-13

Unreality has a huge advantage over reality in some ways, since it is not obliged to obey any laws of cause and effect. But there's the catch – you are involved in those laws. 85

Sometimes, when Christian writers have tried to explain what it meant for Satan to revolt against God and fall from heaven, they have suggested that Satan preferred the idea of an unreal world of which he was in charge to a real world in which all glory was due to God; it is not a bad definition of the essence of evil. 89, 90

All the temptations of Jesus seem to be about resorting to magic instead of working with the fabric of the real world. 90

Satan wants Jesus to join him in the world where cause and effect don't matter, the world of magic; Jesus refuses, determined to stay in the desert with its hunger and boredom, to stay in the human world with its conflict and risk. He refuses to compel and manipulate people into faith because it can only be the act of a *person*, and persons do not live in the magic world. 90

1. What causes people to choose to live in illusion rather than reality?
2. What are the consequences of living in illusion rather than reality?
3. What will cause a person to begin to desire to change from living in illusion to living in reality?

To stay in the cell is most fundamentally to stay in touch with the reality of who I am as a limited creature, as someone who is not in control of everything, whether inner or outer, as an *unfinished* being in the hands of the maker. 86

1. What is the fundamental reality I am likely to discover about myself if I stay put in one place long enough?
2. How is this awareness healthy for me?

## IDENTITY

Read: Romans 8:12-17; Galatians 3:26-4:7

running away *to* yourself, to the identity you are not allowed to recognize or nurture or grow so long as you are stuck in the habits of anxious comparison, status-seeking and chatter. 79

1. What are the "habits" that keep us from encountering our true identity?
2. What are we trying to achieve by keeping these habits in our lives? Does this work?

3. How might we more effectively discover our true identity?

the person has such solid reality, such distinctive and reliable identity, that it will do what is consistent with being *that* person. 55

1. Describe a person you have met who has such a sense of “solid reality, such distinctive and reliable identity” that they will only ever do what “is consistent with being *that* person.”

2. How might we become such a person?

3. What might we do to encourage one another to develop such a grounded, strong, and secure sense of identity?

### CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CHURCH

Read: Matthew 8:23-26; 10:27-31; 28:5-10; Romans 8:15; I John 4:18;  
I Corinthians 12:12-25; Romans 12:3-8

The desert community tells the church, then and now, that its job is to be a fearless community, and it shows us some of the habits we need to develop in order to become fearless – habits of self-awareness and attention to each other, grounded in the pervasive awareness of God that comes from constant exposure to God in Bible reading and prayer. 34, 35

1. What would a “fearless” church look like?

2. How might a church become “fearless”?

we can think of what the church would be like if it were indeed a community not only where each saw his or her vocation as primarily to put the neighbour in touch with God, but where it was possible to engage each other in this kind of quest for the truth of oneself, without fear, without the expectation of being despised or condemned for not having a standard or acceptable spiritual life. 51

1. What would the church be like if it were a community where we each saw our function as helping one another be “in touch with God”?

2. What would the church be like if we saw our role as aiding one another in the “quest for the truth” of ourselves?

3. What would the church be like if it was a place in which it was possible to seek “without fear, without the expectation of being despised and condemned for not having a standard or acceptable life”?

4. Do we have “a standard or acceptable” version of the spiritual life? Describe it. Where did it come from? What would happen if we surrendered our expectations that everyone should conform to this standard?

The church is meant to be supremely a community of persons...a place for distinctive vocations to be discovered in such a way that they are a source of mutual enrichment and delight, not threat. It is a place where real human difference is nourished. I don't just mean the obvious fact that the church has to be a place of welcome for all races and cultures, but that it must know how to work with the grain of different personal gifts and histories. 58

1. What would a community be like that was not “a community of persons”?

2. Why are we threatened by “distinctive vocations”? What happens to community when we give in to this sense of being threatened?

3. How can we encourage “distinctive vocations” “in such a way that they are a source of mutual enrichment”?

4. How do we “work with the grain of different personal gifts and histories”?

(the church) is a place where holiness takes time and where the prose of daily faithfulness and yes, sometimes, daily boredom, has to be faced and blessed, not shunned or concealed. 91

The church celebrates fidelity...It lives by the regular round of worship – the daily prayer of believers, the constant celebration of the Eucharist, meeting the same potentially difficult or dull people time after time, because they are the soil of growth. It insists that we go on reading the same book and reciting the same creeds, not, we hope and pray, so as to limit and control, but to make sure that we promise to go on listening to what we believe is an inexhaustible story, a pattern of words and images given by God that we shall never come to the end of. 92

1. What will be the impact upon the church if we take seriously the idea that “holiness takes time”?

2. How does the church celebrate fidelity? In what forms do we celebrate fidelity? Are there ways in which we might celebrate fidelity more fully?

3. What does the church's celebration of fidelity demonstrate to the world?

## SELF-AWARENESS AS PERSON

the essentially corporate character to monastic self-discovery is something we have seen to be fundamental to the therapy they exercise. Our life is with the neighbour. And if everybody else were indeed taken away, we would not actually have a clue about who we 'really' were. 46

1. How does the presence of my neighbour help me to know who I 'really' am?
2. What happens to my life if I am isolated from all neighbours?

'person' is always the mysterious uniqueness that defies any definition. What makes me myself is ultimately something for which there are no words. There simply is this singularity, that place no one else can occupy. But only in relationship can you see this. So the realm of the personal is that realm in which what I am, unique, mysterious and distinctive, comes into relation with what is unique, mysterious and distinctive in you. Each of us then makes the other yet more unique and mysterious and distinctive in the process of encounter. 101

At the Day of Judgment, as we are often reminded, the question will not be about why we failed to be someone else; I shall not be asked why I wasn't Martin Luther King or Mother Teresa, but why I wasn't Rowan Williams. The journey is always one that leads into more not less uniqueness; all to do once again with the call to be persons, not individuals. 95

For every person there is one way in which they can show God, and only they can do it like that. 102

1. How can I discover the unique personhood that I am?
2. What would a community look like in which the distinctive person of each human being is received and honoured?
3. How can the church support each person's journey "into more not less uniqueness"?
4. If we believed that "For every person there is one way in which they can show God, and only they can do it like that" how would we view our role in each other's lives?

## SILENCE

Read: Psalm 4:4, 62:1; Zephaniah 1:7; Zechariah 2:13; Habakkuk 2:20; Isaiah 47:5

Silence somehow reaches to the root of our human problem. 45

without silence, we shan't get any closer to knowing who we are before God. 45

1. How might silence help us to reach "to the root of our human problem"?
2. What is it about "our human problem" that makes silence so difficult?
3. How might silence help me get closer to know who I am "before God"?

Again and again, the desert teachers point out where speech can lead us astray. 45

there is always the damage that can be done by speech, by the giving and receiving of doubtfully truthful perspectives, the half-hidden power-games of our talking – including our talking (and writing) about spiritual matters. Speech that is not centred upon the processes we have been examining – the painful confrontation of inner confusion, the painstaking making space for each other before God – is part of that system which...makes us do stupid things, the world which does not know itself for what it is. 67

1. How can speech "lead us astray"?
2. What might I do to help prevent my speech from leading me astray?
3. How have we used speech as part of "the half-hidden power-games"?
4. What causes speech that "is part of that system which...makes us do stupid things"?

There is a silence that is poisonous and evil – when someone is being silenced by someone else; a silence that is resentful, because it is the bottling up of feelings that I can't trust myself to express and can't trust anyone else to listen to; then there is the silence that is attentive, focused, coming out of peace not anger, coming from fullness not woundedness. 107,108

1. Describe your experience of "a silence that is poisonous and evil" and the impact of this silence upon the community.

2. What happens to a community that is afflicted by “a silence that is resentful”?
3. What are the causes of these silences in a community?
4. Describe a time when you have experienced “the silence that is attentive, focused, coming out of peace not anger, coming from fullness not woundedness.” How does it feel to be on the receiving end of this “silence”?
5. What would help us to be silent in this positive way more often?

Silence is letting what there is be what it is. 111

1. Why might “letting what there is be what it is” be a good thing?
2. What are the alternatives to “letting what there is be what it is”?
3. How does this definition of silence illuminate your understanding of the place silence might play in the spiritual life?

## LISTENING

Ecclesiastes 5:1; Isaiah 41:1; Zephaniah 3:2

If God has made all things by the Word, then each person and thing exists because God *is speaking* to it and in it. If we are to respond adequately, truthfully, we must listen for the word God speaks to and through each element of the creation; hence the importance of listening in expectant silence. 72

we must listen intently for the rhythm of divine life in what may at first seem to be unintelligible and gradually learn how to echo it and make sounds in union with it. 73

1. What gets in the way of real listening in our lives and communities?
2. What happens in a community in which no one listens to anyone else?
3. What are the implications for the church if in fact “God *is speaking*” to and in each person and thing that exists?
4. How do we “listen for the word God speaks to and through each element of the creation”?

Love is not a feeling of good will towards the neighbour, but the active search for that word – so that I can hear what God has to say to them and give to me through them and also so that I can speak to what is real in them, not what suits or interests me and my agenda. 73

1. What is the connection between love and listening?
2. How would our relationships change if we viewed each person as a person to whom God wishes to speak and through whom God wishes to speak?
3. How would my approach to others change if I only desired to “speak to what is real in them” rather than “what suits or interests me and my agenda”?