



The Church of England
in Essex and East London

Diocese of Chelmsford

Encountering God in Silence and Solitude

Sunday 2nd August 2026 – Trinity 9

Matthew 14.13–21

The Revd Canon Sebastian Harries – Canon Precentor

'Let me seek, then, the gift of silence, and poverty, and solitude, where everything I touch is turned into prayer: where the sky is my prayer, the birds are my prayer, the wind in the trees is my prayer, for God is in all.'

Thomas Merton - *Thoughts in Solitude*

Silent prayer, also known as contemplative prayer or Christian meditation, is an integral part of our Christian tradition, but it has often been lost, forgotten or sidelined over the years. We're very good at being active as Christians, but the contemplative life is often ignored. Yet the contemplative life is at the heart of our Gospel reading for this week: The central event is clearly the feeding of the five thousand, but this miracle, where Jesus nourishes his followers and the crowds, is bookended by two incredibly significant moments, moments which often go unnoticed but are crucial to an understanding of what enabled Jesus' ministry, and an understanding of how we might live our lives as followers of Christ. Why? Because we see Jesus needing to withdraw and pray in silence and solitude, to be in that place where he can commune with his father, where he can rest in that deep relationship he has with his Father, knowing that the Father is the one who sustains, nurtures, and nourishes us.

In these times of solitude and silent prayer we see Jesus at his most human: The Gospel passage opens with these words: *'When Jesus heard about the death of John the Baptist, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself.'* It reveals that feeding of the five thousand came at a time when Jesus was facing sorrow and bereavement: He needed time alone with God to grieve, time to allow God to nurse his wounds as he came to terms with the death of his cousin. It also shows us that Jesus fed of the five thousand not out of a place of power or human strength, but out of this place of human vulnerability and at time when he was coming to terms with the pain in sorrow in this own life. But because of this time spent in solitude, silence and spiritual replenishment, Jesus was then able to assist others when they called upon him and allow God's work to be done.

Immediately after the feeding of the five thousand (the verse just after the lectionary reading finishes), our Gospel reveals that *'Jesus went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone'*. The demands of ministry upon Jesus are very evident, and, as is the case with all human beings, he needed times or refreshment to recover from with the stresses and strains of life and simply immerse himself in the presence of God.

Jesus praying in solitude occurs in numerous other instances in the Gospels, such as Mark 1.35 when Jesus goes out early in the morning to pray alone, or in Luke 6.12, where Jesus goes up the mountain to pray in solitude before he calls the disciples. In many ways, Jesus 40 days in the wilderness, the time where Jesus begins his ministry, can be seen as an entire time of silent, or solitary, prayer. Perhaps it was these 40 days of prayer that enabled Jesus following years of active ministry.

If silence and solitude were essential to Jesus' prayer life, then perhaps we might do well to see them as essential to our prayer lives as Christians, and the life of the Church as a whole. Do we have enough silence in our prayer and worship? Do we encourage one another to find times of silence and solitude, and if not, what might we do to enable this? Silence and solitude are certainly not the antithesis of actions and deeds and good works: action and contemplation go hand in hand, and the

life of any Christian is to find that balance of the two in order to live our lives fully as God would have us, knowing that God is indeed in all. This is summed up well in the words of our former Archbishop, Rowan Williams who said:

“Contemplation is very far from being just one kind of thing that Christians do: it is the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics, the key to the essence of a renewed humanity that is capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom—freedom from self-oriented, acquisitive habits and the distorted understanding that comes from them. To put it boldly, contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit. To learn contemplative practice is to learn what we need so as to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly. It is a deeply revolutionary matter.”