

Session 3: 'A Most Busy Rest': Walter Hilton

- We don't know when he was born but he died in 1395. Lived for a while as a hermit, then he joined the Augustinian community at Thurgarton Priory in Nottingham.
- He writes as a spiritual director, but his concern is with the whole of the spiritual life and not just contemplative prayer. He wrote several books (including '*Epistle to a Devout Man*' '*Song of Angels*, and *The Mixed Life*) but *The Scale of Perfection* (or *Ladder of Perfection*) is his major work.
- There are some similarities with *The Cloud* but there is more explicit emphasis on Jesus and the Holy Spirit in Hilton's works and he frequently quotes Scripture directly – almost on every page!
- Knowledgeable re the Scriptures, but pastoral touch and an endearing humility

Change and Transformation: Reformation in faith and reformation in feeling: Hilton says we are first reformed in faith when we receive God's grace and seek to respond to it (corresponds in some ways to justification). Reformation in feeling happens when we become who we are (corresponds with sanctification.) This is a long process. Not completed in this life.

Image of sin and image of Christ

Hilton believes passionately that 'man is the image of God' (Scale 2 ch1) but that we are flawed creatures, that we also have within us an 'image of sin' (Scale 1 ch54) cf Rom 7v24-5. We need to be purged of this image of sin and re-made in the image of Christ. This transformation into the image of Christ is a lifelong process.

Sin is essentially 'a false disordered love for yourself.' (Scale 1 ch55). What's wrong with us is not just a few things on the surface, a few wrong behaviours we can easily fix, but much more deeply ingrained in us. He uses the image of a 'contaminated well.' (Scale 1 ch55). Shrewd in his understanding of human nature and masterly in his treatment of the 7 deadly sins (Scale 1 ch55-77). He sees pride as the principal sin; all other sin comes from this root. *Humility is therefore essential for any spiritual growth.*

Stress on humility and desire for God

'To start with you will need three things on which, as on a firm foundation, you will set all your work. These three are humility, sure faith and a whole intention towards God.' (Scale 1 ch16). He speaks of 2 kinds of humility (Scale 2 ch37): humility which comes from seeing one's own wretchedness (imperfect humility) and humility which comes from a contemplation of God's greatness (perfect humility). Real humility comes not from naval gazing at ourselves but gazing at God, looking to Christ, and seeing ourselves in that light. Not working up in ourselves a theatrically humble attitude or putting ourselves down in every way we can, but seeing without excuses and pretences, facing the truth: 'What is humility but truthfulness?' (Scale 2, ch20).

Desire for Jesus

Hilton focuses on Jesus. Desire for God and desire for Jesus 'is all one'. We should 'always desire Jesus more and more, so that you may find Him more fully' - always *more* to discover. The heart of prayer and transformed life is a longing for Jesus.

God's grace and our efforts

'It seems clear, then, that neither grace alone without full support from the soul, nor a soul's individual efforts unsupported by grace, can bring it to reformation in feeling – a reformation grounded in perfect love and charity.' (Scale 2 ch20) **Nevertheless** all growth ultimately comes from God: 'We do nothing but submit to him and assent to him, for that is the most that we do: that we willingly assent to his gracious working in us. And yet that will is not from ourselves but

of his making, so that in my opinion he does in us all that is well done; and still we do not see it.' (Scale 2 ch34). Our efforts are to make ourselves available to his grace, and assent to his grace working in us.

Our efforts involve humility and love: Pilgrim Image

Uses a powerful pilgrim image in Scale 2 ch21. 'Now since you are on the sure way, if you want to speed on your travels and make a good journey each day, you should hold these two things often in your mind – humility and love. 'Humility says, I am nothing; I have nothing. Love says, I desire only one thing, and that is Jesus.' (Scale 2 ch21) (*Read p 156/157*)

Spiritual exercises and prayer

To move forward on the spiritual journey, be reformed in faith and feeling, we need to be open to change our spiritual exercises and methods of prayer: 'as long as that task most strengthens your heart and your will for the love of Jesus...it is good to use it', but if it becomes stale he advises to adopt another spiritual practice. He describes vocal prayer, meditation on Scripture and contemplative prayer. *Good to review our spiritual practices/prayers: do they deepen our love for Jesus.*

Meditation on Scripture

A preparation for contemplation – and conversely, contemplation helps us understand scripture more deeply.

'..Holy scripture is vital food, and nourishment full of delight. It tastes very sweet when it is well chewed by spiritual understanding, because in it is hidden the spirit of life...' (Scale 2 ch43) .

This is the traditional exercise of *lectio divina*: read, meditate, pray, contemplate.

We understand scripture through the Holy Spirit: 'The mystery of holy scripture is closed under key, sealed with a signet of Jesus' finger, which is the Holy Spirit. Therefore, without his love and his leave nobody can come in.' (Scale 2 ch43)

Spiritual experiences and the gift of the Holy Spirit

Hilton warns against setting too much store on experiences (as in *The Cloud*.) Refs to experiences of feeling heat (Scale 1 ch10) which may be a reaction to Richard Rolle's writing. Advises not to 'allow your heart to rest or find all its delight in any such feelings of comfort or sweetness' (Scale 1 ch12) Instead – '...ask from God nothing but this gift of love, which is the Holy Spirit. For of all the gifts that our Lord gives, none is so good or so profitable, so valuable or so excellent as this; for there is no gift of God that is both the giver and the gift, except this gift of love; and therefore it is the best and most worthy of honour.' (Scale 2 ch 36). This gift, the gift of Godself, is what we seek in contemplation.

Through contemplation we 'perceive a little of the mysteries of the Blessed Trinity' and have a 'longing to see the face of God' (Scale 2 c46)

Contemplation

Contemplation can't be separated from growing in faith and holiness, and meditating on scripture. During contemplation, the soul is stirred to a single-minded intention and focus on Jesus. (Like *The Cloud*). Gate to contemplation is 'a luminous darkness and a rich nothing' (Scale 2 ch 40) A desire to forget everything else and focus on God (like *The Cloud*) '...although it is dark from false light it is not all dark from the true light, since Jesus, who is both love and light, is in the darkness.' (Scale 2 ch24). So this is a 'darkness full of blessing, a rich nothingness which brings to the soul great spiritual freedom and tranquillity.' (Scale 2, ch27)

'A holy inactivity and a most busy rest' On the one hand we are not 'doing' anything in this prayer - we are simply being still in God's presence. A holy inactivity. (cf St John of the Cross who called contemplation a 'holy idleness'). But this 'idleness' 'inactivity' is not a waste of time where nothing is happening. It is paradoxically, 'a most busy rest'. We may be doing nothing, but God's grace is deeply at work in us. In this prayer, God is the one who is active rather than us ourselves. This demands faith: we need to believe that, to trust that God's grace is at work in us.

Contemplation is not about self-indulgence or escapism; it is about change and transformation. Are we prepared to make ourselves available to God's grace in such a way?

'A Most Busy Rest': Contemplation and Change **Walter Hilton**

For Discussion

1. Has anything particularly struck you, encouraged you, challenged you, or provoked you in this session?
2. Hilton talks about the importance of meditating on scripture and how this can lead us into quiet contemplative prayer. How does reflection on Scripture and prayer relate together in your experience? (If you have ever done *lectio divina* share your experience of this).
3. In his pilgrim image, Hilton says that to move forward in the Christian journey we need humility and love. How do you respond to his words:
'If you want to speed on your travels and make a good journey each day, you should hold these two things often in your mind – humility and love... Humility say, I am nothing; I have nothing. Love says, I desire only one thing, and that is Jesus.'
4. 'A holy inactivity and a most busy rest.' How do you respond to that phrase as a description of contemplation?

For Further Reflection

5. 'What is humility but truthfulness?'
Ask God to help you to see yourself truly in the light of his grace. If you dare, ask the Spirit to reveal to you where and in what ways there is pride, anger, lust, greed, covetousness, sloth and... in you, and ask for his forgiveness and transformation.
6. '..Holy scripture is vital food, and nourishment full of delight. It tastes very sweet when it is well chewed by spiritual understanding, because in it is hidden the spirit of life...'
Do a *lectio divina* exercise on Philippians 4 v4-7
7. 'A holy inactivity and a most busy rest.'
Try to spend some time in God's presence, 'doing nothing' but trusting that his Spirit is working in you. If your mind wanders bring it back gently with a word or phrase. Can you build into your life such regular times of silent prayer and see this as part of God's transforming work in your life?