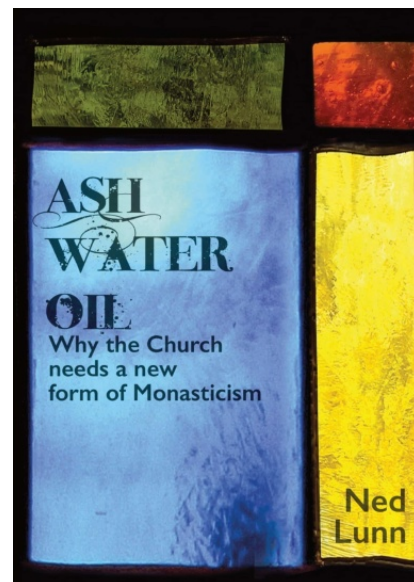


# Review: Ash Water Oil: Why the Church needs a new form of Monasticism

A common experience of being involved in church life is a *collision*, between vision and aspiration, and the hard reality of what church is actually like. It can come as some sort of crisis (e.g. being on the wrong end of hypocrisy or abuse) or simply a nagging sense that something is “off,” an “I don’t think we’re being who we’re called to be.”



I mention this, not because this is the primary topic of Ned Lunn’s, *Ash Water Oil*, but because those who have had that experience may find particular solace and even inspiration in its pages.

You see, the collision I speak of is not necessarily a bad thing. I often find it in the clash between the joyous *ecclesiological* reality of church (the Spirit-filled, Jesus-led, worshipful people of God seeking to make disciples of all nations) and the *ecclesiastical* reality (institutions filled with politics, anachronisms, and corruptible personalities). I find that the collision exists *within* myself more often than not.

It is a *creative* collision. It’s where we wrestle with God to lay hold of his blessing, clarify his promise, and pursue our shared vocation as real people in a real time and place. It is where we move past faith and church as mere expressions of the pleasure principle, and lay hold of what being a Jesus-shaped

community is all about.

For that creative task, *Ash Water Oil*, is an excellent resource. It is the work of an author who clearly loves the church, and he has used his significant intellect and passion to lay out a vision of what might be.

Lunn draws upon “monasticism” as his defining guide, in both its ancient and newer forms.

We are used to examining monasticism through the lens of avowed “poverty, chastity, and obedience.” We understand these words but they are somewhat inaccessible to the life of the ordinary church. Lunn’s distillate is much more helpful. He prefers the principles of “stability, conversion, and obedience.” This is what he explores, carrying them across the liturgical lessons of Ash Wednesday, Easter, and Pentecost (hence “Ash, Water, Oil”), and a matrix of trinitarian themes (“Creation, Redemption, Sanctification”) and practices (“Prayer, Study, Service”).

*What I want to propose... is a set of virtues to seek to inhabit... I wonder what would emerge if we acknowledged together, a sense that the New Monastic call is, like our brothers and sisters of the religious life, a commitment to ‘stability, conversion and obedience’. To explicitly seek to live a life rooted somewhere or with someone no matter what the spiritual weather is like, no matter what temptations afflict you. To respond to the call to stay and remain faithful. [i.e. ‘Stability’] Secondly, to continually engage in the work of personal change; to turn away, step by step, from the things of this world to the Kingdom of God; to intentionally become, in different circumstances and in different ways, more and more Christ-like, poor and dependent on God. [i.e. ‘Conversion’] And, thirdly, to desire to place yourself the decisions of something or someone else; to curb that deeply human temptation to be in control of ourselves and our decisions; to hold onto the power of our own lives.*

*[i.e. 'Obedience'] (Pages 12-13, [with my annotations])*

For Gill and I, this resonates at the creative collision point. When we think of ourselves and our church (both local and wide), it explains our frustration. We are so often fickle and fleeting, comfort-driven, and not *stable*; we are so often self-secure, sin-denying, and grace-defying, and *unconverted*; we are so often individualistic, consumeristic, and voyeuristic, and *disobedient* to the way of Christ and *unaccountable* to each other. The monastic path expresses a counter-cultural path, in the best sense of it. The Church *needs* a new form of monasticism.

At the beginning, in **creation**, the monastic way reminds us that we are but dust. It speaks to our fundamental identity.

*We are not, despite the depth in which we feel it, the main part in our story... Without Him above us we become drunk on our own achievements as a species. We begin to tell ourselves that we can do anything, be anything, form the world into our own dreams and fantasies; we are the main protagonists and will drive the story. To remind ourselves of our creation, of our createdness, is to place ourselves into the right role in the true story and the story begins with some earth. (Page 35)*

*We are called to embed ourselves solely in the reality of the love of God, revealed in the person of Jesus Christ and taught to us through the lives of the saints, which provokes us to see ourselves and others not as different in gender, sexuality, race or class but as equal under the authority of God. We are to receive our identity in Him and Him alone. In this way we no longer need to fear abandonment or rejection of others because our roots are entwined with the one who gives us life and brings us to our true self. (Page 59)*

The image of the monastic life speaks of a sense of

*devotedness*, of having one's entire self set apart for divine purposes. If there is an opposite descriptor, it is of the "secular" life. There is a creative collision when the church *secularises* even as we maintain a religious aesthetic. There is invariably a rub point focused on identity and autonomy. On whose terms do I live my life? On whose terms do we manifest our shared identity as church? Control collides with childlikeness. Self-definition collides with the numbering of the hairs of our head. Life as a self-made construct collides with life received as gift.

The way through it is to to rediscover our createdness. We need to know this truly religious path.

In **redemption** we remember we are Christ's. We belong to him now, and this is *life* to us.

*In his grace, He lifts us out of our world of transaction, karma and Fate, washes us and places us back in the garden of His delight. He can, if we allow Him, birth us anew through the water of baptism. He begins, from the moment we see the Father in His Son, Jesus, shaping the dirt and mud of our lives into new life. He recalibrates our journeys (page 98)*

*If we are called to continual conversion into the likeness of Christ, then we should follow Him into His rich life of kenosis and empty ourselves so that others may become rich by God's grace. Our conversion is an emptying of that which we possess and which possesses us. (page 104)*

I have come to say in recent years that my church growth strategy can be boiled down to one principle: those who seek to save their own life will lose it. The creative collision is real, particularly in my evangelical world, where we tend to default back to mechanistic approaches to strengthening and empowering our organisations at the expense of worship, mortification, and more mystical devotion. At one point Lunn confronts the narrative in which we "must secure our inner

identity", and make "our autonomy... a thing to be protected and sustained. The life of poverty and kenosis, however, demands that we follow Christ in dying to self in order that we can be raised with Him in new life" (page 105). It includes acquiescence to the "shared narrative" of Scripture that "gives shape to our interpretation of existence" and without which "we are forced to make up our own narrative and return to the masks that hide us from truly knowing ourselves." (page 127).

*Whilst we, as God's people, continue to focus on our own survival, perpetuating our own, albeit noble and good activities and arguments, we fail to witness to the power of grace... God does come and meet us where we are, but He comes to turn us around, to recalibrate us and for our whole lives to be changed. (Page 113).*

Finally in **sanctification**, we remember we are called to be *moved* towards him.

*A sacred community is one that is defined, not by an exoskeleton, a cast around a limb, but, rather, an endoskeleton; a form around which we gather. Sanctification, the redefinition of our being, occurs when we are in pure communion with the divine source of holiness and true life. (page 155)*

That imitation of Jesus, of course, is where we have creative collisions, it is the painful process of *becoming*.

A pertinent case in Lunn's consideration is the question of leadership in the church. As ministers of the gospel, we want to serve as Jesus did, and *lead* as he did. We want to give ourselves, and receive others as he has received. We want to live in the knowledge of his *power*. All of this gets expressed within community dynamics, including the necessities of hierarchy and the exercise of authority, and it often goes wrong. No wonder the monastics had to wrestle with the concept

of *obedience* in their walk of holiness.

Gill and I have observed a tendency to resolve this process by a form of avoidance: A falling back of how we see leadership, not into some form of accountability in community, but into a form of nihilism that renders anything other than the unboundaried inclusion as inherently violent and abusive. Leadership is anathema, not aspiration. Community is merely the gathering of individuals, because personhood will inevitably collide with any sense of moving together; it is best to keep the collective impotent and stationary and allow each one their own self-adventure. In the end, such a mode denies that Christ is present in our (often flawed, but very real) ways of being, and would rather embrace a painless vacuum in which the Body of Christ is close to meaningless.

*I would argue that, for a society to function, authority must remain external to the self. Narcisissistic tribalism is not a healthy way to exist but there are elements of it that should be encouraged; togetherness, sociality, loyalty.. (page 164)*

*There is a generalized view that 'millenials', the generation who grew up straddling the millennium, have no respect for authority. In reality I think we do respect authority, but we do not acknowledge them, as an acknowledgement of them would insist that we were not totally independent and 'free'. These more subtle authorities hold sway over their subjects and coerce an unconscious obedience from them. They maintain this power by continuing to challenge the very idea of authority which they freely exert on people in order that any alternative that challenges their influence can be undermined swiftly and easily. This leads to the dangerous tendency to dismiss clear, transparent authority whilst allowing deceptive and sycophantic forms to hold power over us. (page 160-161)*

*And there it is: the mantra for the Church at the present*

*time. No one can tell anyone what is right or wrong. All must be accepted and placed as equally authoritative and by so doing authority is displaced and no longer shared. (Page 163)*

The alternative monastic vision of leadership is more worthy. Gill and I have attempted to encapsulate it as “church as family.” The focus is on person rather than program, discipleship shaped by devotion to God. We echo Soul Survivor’s Mike Pilavachi who has spoken of a desire to “raise up sons and daughters” rather than “hire and fire employees.” We have become aware of the critiques, e.g. the dangers of heavy shepherding and the avoidance of objective accountability. But this is exactly the value of looking to the long traditions; they can assist and enable the life-giving modes of leadership to be pursued healthily. When, for instance, Lunn desires for bishops to learn the ways of the abbot, he’s calling them to a vocation with a substantial legacy of knowing what it is to be both released and bounded by the way of Christ.

*“It is within this capitalist context that leaders have begun to be more obedient to plans, initiatives and strategies than to people. It is after this shift that we begin to experience the degradation and humiliation that comes with abuse of power. We become pawns in a game rather than treasured companions in a journey. St. Benedict wants the abbot to model his leadership on Christ who, as we saw... was ‘self-determined and self-limited’ (page 168)*

**In conclusion**, I agree with Lunn, the Church needs a new form of monasticism. The more Gill and I read, the more we realise that this is why we answered the call so many years ago. If we are to be anything more than cogs in a Western World machinery of self-actualisation, or competitors in the marketplace of feelgoods and flourishing, we need to return to some ancient roads. We need a rediscovery of the way of Christ.

*Being sent somewhere to tell our story is easy. Being sent to live a life dependent on God, to be stripped of all our identities, comfort, power and influence; that's mission. We are looking not to interrupt our lives with acts of service but to find that our life with God is a perpetual life of servanthood to God, with God and by God. (page 181)*

*The Church needs to recapture a vision for a shared life, bound together by a shared narrative, shared principles and shared practices. (page 177)*

We wholeheartedly agree that “this living out of discipleship in a community distinct by its core will draw others towards the Church” (page 180). At the moment, we are wrestling with what this means in practice.

During the pandemic lockdown we have attempted monastic rhythms within our large vicarage household. We have stumbled in our little community as I'm sure many communities have struggled. Yet we are more convinced than ever that a more monastic mode of life is a vital part of bridging the gospel into upcoming generations. In the midst of our experiment, Lunn's book is a resource as it gives words to the questions we were asking, but not voicing: As our context turned us inwards into introspection, we were encouraged to realise that “...as we seek a theological framework for the sustainable life of community, we must start with our shared, a-contextual story” (Page 57). We remembered to worship. Surrounded by the expectation to do and perform, we became grounded in the monastic balance of “the prayerful and devoted... and the more overtly missional, serving mendicant” (page 62).

As we come out of pandemic into the season ahead, we ponder, with Lunn, a crucial question: “Could an Anglican parish church create and adopt a Rule of Life? I, myself, have asked the same question and came to the conclusion: no” (page 200) His answer looks to the incompatibility of statutory



responsibilities and the devoted way of life.

I think I agree. In the pandemic lockdown, much of the parochial responsibilities were suspended, and we could operate more monastically. Now we are coming back out, the creative collisions resurface. An Anglican parish, as an *ecclesiastical* unit, is barely fit for purpose as an expression of *ecclesiological* reality. Yet it can, I think, offer a place of harmony: A village around the monastery, the community around the community, intertwined, served and blessed.

The collisions will continue. But so will the creativity.