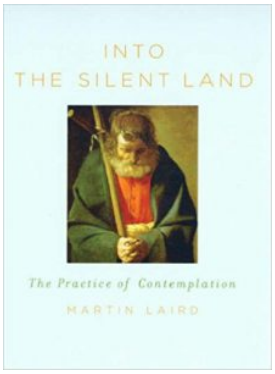
Review: Into the Silent Land – The Practice of Contemplation



I have recently been engaging with the more contemplative side of Christian spirituality. It hasn't been a mere academic exercise. My current circumstance demands I reflect on all matter of things regarding life, and church, and the ways of the world and it has led me to something of an eddy, of going around in circles a bit.

It's an *intellectual* eddy; I know what I think about things, and while I will always have an enquiring mind, it's been a long time since I have come across new thoughts about the things that matter.

It's a *leadership* eddy; I am aware of all manner of strategies for mission, and while it will always be a defining passion, it's been a long time since I have come across anything that is essentially able to reach beyond insubstantial churchy forms.

The grace in this is that God has led me deeper, to an unsettling proposition: that the answers to life's deepest questions are not fundamentally about intellect. The foundations of vocation are not, in the end, matters of skill, ability, or even opportunity. Rather, we are called to spiritual depths, to simple mystical things such as the love of God, and the fact that, lo, the Spirit of Jesus is actually with us to the end of the age.

In these eddies, I have remembered an experience I had about eight years ago. At that time I experienced what some might term a "breakdown." It was also a "breakthrough." I found

myself in a place where intellect and leadership had been taken away from me by my overworked and broken brain. All that was left was worship, rest, silence. Jesus' Spirit was present, and all that was required of me was to simply, trustingly, "be" in his presence. Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling.

My brain healed, and life moved on. Now in recent years, with my brain and body well and able, I am facing again the end of intellect and "leadership skills." In that place, I have been helped by Martin Laird's *Into the Silent Land*.

It's not a perfect book by any means. In fact, I would go as far as to say that it might be a hindrance to those who are not confident in their biblical theology. There are, for instance, clear influences of late 20th-Century pseudo-Eastern spiritualism when he oversteps from seeking closeness and oneness with God, to an almost panentheistic sense of "union" in which we avoid the "illusion of separation" (page 15). Nevertheless, I found it a *helpful* book. If we are to *discipline ourselves*, including our interior life of thoughts and feelings and anxieties, we need some equipping. We can *learn* to *quieten our soul*.

I can certainly identify with the experience of the "wild hawk of the mind" (chapter two) as the "mind's obsessive running in tight circles generates and sustains the anguish that forms the mental cage in which we live much of our lives – or what we take to be our lives…" (page 20). I see the turmoil of anxiety and fantasy that can dominate my thoughts. But it takes more than recognition to resolve it; like attempting to calm waters by splashing down on the waves that rear up, our attempts at "self-control" can simply add to the churn. We need quietness, silence; we need to find ourselves *abiding* in Christ, not *striving* for peace but *living* in the peace that he has already given us.

Laird draws, of course, on contemplative practice, and

particularly on the notion of “breath prayer.” This is nothing magical, it is simply a discipline of praying and breathing that assists internal quietness. We use our body to respond to spiritual things all the time – standing to sing, closing our eyes for prayer, sitting attentively to learn, etc. – and this is of the same kind. It is the use of posture, a simple “prayer word” or phrase, and a focus on breathing. It has a quietening effect:

> *At times the mind flits like a finch from branch to branch and at other times it is like the three-headed dog, Cerberus, unable to decide from which bowl which of its heads should feed at any given moment. Then again, and more often that we may like to admit, the mind is uninspired and limp as a mildewed dish cloth. The mind has countless faces. For centuries the advice of the contemplative tradition has been: well, then, give the mind something to do. If it can’t be still, give it a short phrase or a word to repeat silently. And so when we sit, we give our attention wholly to the gentle repetition of the prayer word. We will find that our attention is forever being stolen. As soon as we become aware that our attention has been stolen by some thought, we gently bring ourselves back to the prayer word. (Pages 34-35)*

For me, this is not an eradication of self or something equally as eery, it is simply the *quietening* of all that is in me that tunes God out. Faced with various anxieties or concerns, I could push into them with my intellect or strength of will, and I all I would find would be more anxieties or concerns. Any wisdom, any insight, any creativity – that simple sense of “hearing from God” is elusive when I am noisy. In order to hear the groanings of the Spirit, to watch the glow of illuminated Scripture, I need the quiet.

If I confront my anxieties, I add to the noise. But instead, using a simple act of worship with my body, I “look over the shoulder” of the anxiousness, trusting that the Spirit of

Christ is present in the moment of all that's left. It's a surrender, an offering, a laying down, by relaxing the clawing clinging fingers of my mind. Into his hands I commit my anxious spirit… by meeting it with silence.

As I have practiced and adapted what Laird speaks of, I have found it beneficial. Whether it be times set aside, or five minutes caught during the day; I have resolved two things: 1) Not to reach for my phone and dull myself by flicking through distractions, and 2) Not to run with the bulls of my anxieties and fears. Instead, I have sat myself down, grasped hold of a phrase (usually a line from a worship song or psalm), and have leant back into that gentle worshipful repetition. I don't look for "results" (that would defeat the purpose), but there has been fruit nonetheless: a sense of peace, a word of encouragement for someone, a gentle prod to pray in a specific way, the strength to forgive.

Laird's ongoing explanation of this practice has described something of my experience. He speaks of "three doorways of the present moment" (page 52) and I get what he's talking about.

The **"first doorway"** is the sense in which we seek quietness as a refuge. We sense the noisiness. The "videos" of anxiety and fantasy are coming thick and fast, and we seek silence as a solace. We calm ourselves. We respond to the content of our thoughts. Has someone made me angry? Instead of responding to that anger, I quieten myself. In that place of quiet, God can change the narrative, or give me quiet resilience.

The **"second doorway"** is the sense in which we find ourselves using silence not only as a refuge, but almost as a deliberate form of engagement. Here we respond not just to the content of the thoughts, but the anxious thoughts themselves; we don't just look over the should of the person who has made us angry, we look over the shoulder of the anger itself.

> *The deeper we delve into the prayer word, the less we use it as a shield from afflictive thoughts. Rather we meet the thoughts with stillness instead of commentary. We let the thoughts simply be, but without chasing them and whipping up commentaries on them. (Page 63)*

From my own experience, I find myself noticing "I am anxious", rather than "I am anxious about X." In the first doorway, I seek silence, rather than chasing down the solutions to X. In the second doorway, there's a gentle recognition that anxiety is not my bedrock, Jesus is. Rather than focusing on the anxiety, I quieten myself, and so allow his presence, on his terms. The anxiety may be or not be, I will look over its shoulder, to the quietness of trusting Jesus.

The **"third doorway"** is where I think Laird slips too far ("my 'I am' is one with Christ's 'I am'", page 67). But there is some substance in his gist. It was something like this in the midst of my breakdown-breakthough: I could not do anything else, other than be. Being was simply enough. Outside of my triggering stressors, I could watch and observe almost everything, including myself. I didn't have a need to perform, to strive, to prove. I have heard people talking of "falling into the arms of Jesus", of finding themselves able to "breathe underwater." The words are hard to find – for me, it was like the gravitational pull of God was inside of myself, pulling me inwards towards a truer sense of self, that was God-centred, not me-centred. It was the utter contrast of the anxieties that would rip me apart. It wasn't mystical or amazing. It simply was.

My aspiration, moving forward, is to grow in this sense of abiding in Christ. I don't want to be defined by my circumstances. I don't want to be defined by my emotional chemical response. I want to be defined by the present character of God. It can't be manipulated into being by my intellect. It can't be manufactured by my strength of will. It

is a place of embodied trust.

> *The bottom line is this: minimize the time given over to chasing thoughts, dramatizing them in grand videos, and believing these videos to be your identity. Otherwise life will pass you by. (Page 71)*

This contemplative area is new to me. But it matches my experience. Above all, it has been a way for me to apply *hope*; a vehicle for faith in my inner world.

> *We move from being victim of what is happening to being a witness to what is happening. Things keep happening, but we experience them differently. This move from victim to witness is an early psychological fruit of the contemplative journey. (Page 81)*

I sometimes wonder what Jesus used to do in his times of solitude. I don't think it was complicated. I think it matched the "emptying out" of Philippians 2:1-11. In fact, I have been reflecting on Hebrews 5:7 where the writer talks of how Jesus often offered up anguished prayers that turned to "reverent submission." He didn't lose himself, but was able to place himself in his father's hands; it marked his ministry, most clearly on the cross. Truly, he must have ministered from an experience of *shalom* – the "stillness [not] of a rabbit hiding from a predator, but the stillness of a mountain presiding over a valley" (page 101).

Laird ends his book well, by finding application in the experience of our woundedness ("The Liturgy of Our Wounds: Temptation, Humility, and Failure.") Our rights-based culture cannot cope with woundedness, except by increasing the clamour, within and without. Yet the joy and blessing of failure and hurt is the thirstiness which draws us to look beyond the noisy experience. It's not an avoidance of woundedness, it is of finding God even there. "I am going to

seduce her and lead her into the desert and speak to her heart” (Hosea 2:14).