



Nazareth Letter November 2024
Discovering God's Mercy in the Wilderness: a Meditation

This month our Nazareth Letter is written by Revd Catherine Duce, Leader of the Nazareth Companions.



The Merciful Trinity by Sr Caritas Muller OP, a Dominican nun.

"Oh God, times are too hard for frail people like myself. I know that a new and kinder day will come. I would so much like to live on, if only to express all the love I carry within me. And there is only one way of preparing the new age, by living it even now in our hearts. Somewhere in me I feel so light, without the least bitterness and so full of strength and love. I would so much like to help prepare the new age." Etty Hillesum (An Interrupted Life: The Diaries, 1941-1943; and Letters from Westerbork).

It has been a difficult week. Our hearts are tired. People's pain is real for the victims of violence throughout the world. People's anxieties are high for what the next four years might bring in the US. People's sorrow is deep for the church after the Makin Report in the UK uncovered the ugliness of abuse and the lack of rigour of the Church of England to protect its most vulnerable. This feels like a wilderness.

When Covid hit in 2020 I recall Richard telling us, 'now I realise what the Nazareth Community has been preparing us for since 2018'. Increasingly, over the past few weeks I have been flooded with similar thoughts. In this place of wilderness and anxiety, I feel more and more convinced the place we need to return to is the simplicity of our Nazareth way of life and our faithfulness to these practices. Can we, like Julian of Norwich in hard times, 'teach our soul to cleave to the goodness of God'? Why is it, that in periods of greatest darkness, such as that experienced by Etty Hillesum in the second world war, both the worst and the very best of humanity shines through?

In this letter I would like to lead us in a meditation on the patient, loving mercy of God. To do this, I invite us to just spend a few moments looking at the stone carving of the Merciful Trinity on page one of this letter.

Many traditional images of the Trinity depict God the Father on His throne often in the centre, holding the Crucified Son, with the Holy Spirit hovering above in the form of a dove; images that can feel quite cold and formal. What I love about this image is its intimacy and connection to humanity. The way it has a human being – you and me perhaps – right at its centre – vulnerable, suffering, weak, unable even to lift their head.

Is this human being in a place of acceptance and surrender?
Is this human being showing us how to rest in the presence of the active and Merciful Trinity? Or is this human being in a place of brokenness or remorse?
I wonder how this image speaks to you today.

Certainly in the intimacy of this image we discover that all humanity is hallowed by God; a truth more deeply understood in community life as we attune our ears to the pain of this world. 'God is no longer pure God, but always God-with-humanity-in-His-heart' writes Ruth Burrows in her book *Essence of Prayer*.

Let's take a closer look at this carving.

The Father, in the circle on the right, bends over the human person, holding him tenderly, supporting his body and kissing his forehead. We think of the Father who ran to greet his lost son. This is God the Father who welcomes and embraces us, who hears our pleas and supports us, who loves us into life and sustains us in our suffering. This is the mercy of the Father treasuring us at every minute of our lives.

The Son, in the left circle, gently and attentively tends to the person's feet, tending their wounds. The image reminds us of the Last Supper when Jesus washed the feet of the disciples. This is the Son, who assumed our fragile and

vulnerable condition and became human. This is the Son who showed his great love and compassion for each person he met. Our brother, our sister whom we find it most difficult to love is also truly held here at the centre of the loving Trinity.

Then finally the Holy Spirit looks down lovingly on the human being as if beckoning them to awaken and arise. The image reminds us of the tongues of fire at Pentecost warming and enlivening us, and the dove at Jesus' baptism, hovering over us, protecting and inspiring us. It is the Spirit who teaches us how to pray, and who grants us the gifts that we need to live out our Nazareth rule of life here on earth and to grow together in community in the silence. Can we open ourselves up to this Spirit?

'True belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world'¹ We discover in this stone-carving that each person of the Trinity has their role to play. And yet, graciously, God the Trinity extends the invitation to us to participate in this dance here on earth, however imperfectly, however wounded we might be.

So I invite you to ponder:

Where do I need to be held?

As I tend to the needs of others in my ministry, how open am I to receive inner healing myself?

From where does my inspiration and my help come?

Luke 15: 17-24

when the younger brother came to his senses he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

Isaiah 40: 28-31

²⁸Have you not known? Have you not heard?

¹ –Brene Brown (Writer, *The Gifts of Imperfection*)

The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
29 He gives power to the faint
and strengthens the powerless.
30 Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted,
31 but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint.

Merciful Trinity,
You hold us, you enfold us, you surround us with your steadfast love,
Still our busy minds and restless hearts.
Forgive our foolish ways,
Soften our hearts to become channels of your peace
and bearers of your grace in our wilderness world.
This we pray in your holy name,
Amen

Wonderings

I wonder how this stone-carving image speaks to you today.
I wonder what helps you to 'cleave to the goodness of God.'
I wonder how you would illustrate or describe the mercy of God to a friend.
I wonder how you are preparing for a 'new age'.