



March 2026 Nazareth Letter

Rowan William's Retreat Reflections at the Nazareth Joint Weekend.

Compiled by Catherine Duce.

Dear Nazareth Community and Companions,

This month's letter I hope captures some of the wisdom in Rowan Williams talks delivered at our recent Nazareth Joint Weekend together. The whole experience of our time together is still very vivid in my mind. My hope is that these notes will help you process and reflect upon the rich content of the talks, offering spiritual nourishment to everyone, whether you were at High Leigh or not.

Rowan Williams gave three talks at the weekend on Silence, Sacrament and Service.

Silence

- There are different kinds of silence and we need to disentangle life-giving silence from other kinds of silence.

Simon & Garfunkel's famous song, the Sound of Silence, talks of *the silence of denial* – the silence that is a conspiracy against the truth, a silence that is a refusal to acknowledge, name and confront corruption that is arising within us and around us. This is not a spiritually desirable form of silence. I wonder which silences you can hear in our world at the moment that need breaking.

There is also *the silence of shock* – In the book of Ezekiel we read how Ezekiel is transported to where the exiles of Israel are living, He sat with them for seven days without saying anything (Ezekiel 3:15). The silence of shock might be corporate or personal; those moments where there is nothing to say. Sometimes it's a multigenerational trauma. We can't bring ourselves to confront the truth; a silence born out of deep pain and deep powerlessness.

So too there is *the silence of simple apathy. The silence of complacency.*

Then we talk of 'breaking the silence'. It's a slogan that resonates especially with those who have been silenced. Some people have been actively silenced and discouraged from speaking from their centre, from their heart – actively discouraged from being themselves. They are denied a voice. So much of our language about liberation has been about finding a voice. In any context it is good to ask, who is not being heard here?

So this is to say we must always remember when thinking about silence that there are also destructive silences and unhelpful silences.

- It's not that silence is better than words.

There are also times when words and the Word is needed. There are times when speech can liberate and set free. There are times when the Word can release us. The Word made flesh, and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus can heal, and forgive us. There are times when words can be liberating – liberating speech arises from another kind of silence – the divine Word born out of silence. The 14th Century Meister Eckhart said that our own silence is an occasion for the Word to come to birth in us.

There is silence. There is word. That's a way of saying that God is first and foremost God. God doesn't have to do anything or be anything but be God. God does not have income tax returns to file, exams to pass, careers to succeed in. God is God. And God does not have to do anything in particular to be God. And instead of that being a kind of beaming complacent passivity, it is instead the source of an intense unbroken action of gift. Because there's no defence. There's no pushing away here. There is just the goodness of God being what it is. And for it to be what it is, is an explosive transfiguring reality. A word that breaks other kinds of silence.

- We discover a freedom in silence.

This is a freedom from having to win and succeed. Silence is not a punitive prohibition. I don't have to impress anyone. Nobody is in competition in silence. There are no winners and losers. It's a freedom 'to be acted upon' in prayer. In silent contemplative prayer we are free to be enlarged because we are not interrupting the action of love. Our silence is a search for a transforming word to come to birth that challenges more toxic forms of silence.

In the presence of God, in the presence of the sheer, what I've called Godness of God, we are set free because we know we do not have to win. We do not have to control. We do not have to persuade God to do things for us. We know that because God is God, we are welcome. And the silence of our prayer, it's a kind of crystallization of just that, the silence of freedom, the freedom not to have to win, not to have to be in charge.

It's a silence which seeks to keep open the connection between where I am and who I am and what I am and who God is and what God is.

- Then there is the silence of the body.

Silencing the body allows a flow of energy through us. A life flowing through us. When we still our bodies it is a release – a release of energy within. Our bodies are not passive in contemplative prayer. It is not flicking the switch off. It's unblocking the channels to sense the flow of life. What happens in the body is a journey into the much more transparent. The woman caught in adultery wonderfully captures this: Jesus bending down, doodling in the dust, creating space, defusing- a silence that

pushes back against the silencing of a victim and leads to freedom for all involved in the story.

- Prayer is not about expertise, we are moving clutter out of the way. We are seeking the silence we need for the Word to be born in us in a transformative way. Think how Jesus himself disappears early in the morning to find a quiet place
- Distractions in prayer get worse the more attention we give them. Richard Hooker said “our greatest eloquence is silence” . Often we feel we have to talk to control and curate the image. But I don’t have to win, I don’t have to project, rather we accept the provisional. We become present. We recognise our anxiety, our fear, our anger but can stand back and ask ourselves: Who is it serving?” “Who is our anger serving?”
- Something happens when you pray silently together- you hold each other and are held. You exchange life and breath.

Sacrament

- All of us humans speak to one another in ways that are far deeper than words. It’s as if our personalities are imprinted on the environment we are in, the things that we use. We come to treasure things that have been used by people we love.

In our rather small and overcrowded kitchen at home, we have a very large Welsh dresser completely unsuitable for the room and absolutely full of late Victorian china tea services. It's there because I remember it from my aunt's home when I was a child. My aunt having said to me consistently through her very long life, "One day that'll be yours". So it's there not so much for its intrinsic beauty which is a bit limited but because of Auntie Kerry and all of us will have stories we can tell about the way in which things speak of relationships. Things carry relationships.

- David Jones, the great Anglo-Welsh artist and poet of the last century wrote an essay on Art and Sacrament. He points out that what we do as humans is to make things speak eg flowers on a grave. This is a core part of our humanity. We are always interacting, receiving, and responding, to the things around us.

God makes a universe that's always throbbing with, pulsating with relationship, communion, communication. And we as human beings are there to pick it up, tune our ears to what's going around and then reflect that and enhance it as best we can. So it's no surprise in one way that when the word of God becomes flesh the self-communication of God takes bodily human shape among us in Jesus. Jesus does things with stuff. Jesus does stuff with his own flesh and blood. We are the people God is doing stuff with. Sacramental action is not other but deeply rooted in the people we are. We become sacramental. We are the people through whom God speaks

- Jesus does things with stuff
Look at Jesus' ministry. His welcome. His touch. His accepting of unlikely folks for dinner – eating pizza with the tax collector, this is a sacramental act long before the Lord's Supper. Jesus uses his own body as the means of communion- the people who is with become sacramental acts. Spitting on to the eyes of the blind man. As his life draws to a close he does things with stuff in a very special way. He says as he breaks the bread, the life that is in me is in this act, and this sharing and this bread. The life that is in me is the life that you will receive when you do this too. It's so striking that in the early church the apostles identify themselves as 'Those who ate and drank with Jesus'. This is a world where communication is always trying to break through – love, mercy and welcome. This is sacramental existence.
- And crucially, among this stuff is "us" too.
We are a community of beings knit together with bread and wine. Our flesh and blood speak of Jesus too. Sacramental action is deeply rooted in the types of beings that we are. We are each renewed and fulfilled in this way of being. We too become sacramental. Austin Farrar's last sermon preached in 1968 coined the term 'the priest is a walking sacrament'. Surely, said Rowan, the whole body of Christ is a walking sacrament. We are living sacraments saying something to the world.
- The sacrament is a sign of a God who keeps his promises
In the Eucharist we hear these words: Whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup I will show up. I am made manifest. I am going to stand in the middle of this community. I am the one who keeps on turning up. When you mess it up I'm not going away.

Whenever I sit before the reserved sacrament in prayer, what comes to my mind again and again and again is - *this* is what proclaims to me the faithfulness of God. The God who turns up. We can celebrate the Eucharist in all kinds of ways and all kinds of frames of mind. As those among us who are ordained know all too well, we can celebrate the Eucharist as priests in all sorts of frames of mind. And I'm not, I think, the only priest to have suddenly realized halfway through the Eucharist, just a minute. What am I doing? Oh, you know, I'd forgotten just how serious it is. And the silent piece of bread and the silent chalice in my hands say to me, "Never mind. I'm turning up anyway. Seen or unseen, invited or uninvited. Here I am."

And to me, that is the most miraculous and most extraordinary thing about the sacrament. It's just God saying, "Here I am. You may not understand. You may not live up to what you say or believe. You may not achieve what you think you ought to achieve. You may not even be doing my will, says the Lord. But never mind. Here I am anyway. Here I am anyway. Where two or three are gathered together, there I am. And the act itself and the stuff itself,

the act of saying the blessing with this bread and this wine, that is God turning up.

- At the very heart of the church there is that silent consistency of God. Where we are summoned back into a reality. Are you showing up? Are you staying? The church should be able to say we are not going away. The church should be able to demonstrate a faithfulness if we can. A bit like the covenant of marriage at its best, or taking vows in a religious community. I'm not going to walk away. I am going to be a sign of God's commitment to you. I am going to be a sign of a faithful God to you.

So what do we see in the church at the moment? Success metrics, recruitment, we need to pay bills, accountability – all this is important – yes. But more is going on – the sacramental faithfulness of God is grounded in the Eucharist. God takes this risk of fidelity. Can we? We are the stuff God does things with. We stagger on but more important than your fidelity is God's faithful fidelity. You are the object of God's faithful love.

Service

- If we are called to service, we are called to authority.

It's quite clear that one of the things people remembered most vividly about Jesus was that he messed up people's ideas about authority. He's somebody who acts with authority consistently. And we're told that the people who listened to him recognized that he spoke with authority unlike the experts. Jesus didn't give judgments and opinions. He acted. He, as we might say these days, he took his authority and made a difference. And when he spoke, the words he spoke changed things. They liberated people. They delivered the awareness of God's mercy. They opened the doors of healing. He spoke with authority.

Rowan then looks at two stories in the gospels – the refusal of Peter to wash Jesus' feet (John 13:1-15) and James and John asking for prime seats in heaven (Matthew 20:20-28), when they ask for visible signs of authority Jesus replies "If you want to be great, you must be a slave. You must be a servant".

Jesus exercises supreme authority in service and he expects the same of us.

Our freedom to serve is absolutely bound up with our authority to change things.

- Things change by attention and availability, by putting oneself at the disposal of our neighbour. Service is not a passive or reactive thing. We don't need to become a doormat for others. We don't have to triple lock the doors to protect ourselves from the other. We can instead be who we are freely. It is the liberty to push back against corrupt, death dealing patterns of power.

And the freedom we are given is the freedom to set others free. Jesus is the redeemer, literally the releaser. And in redeeming, releasing us, he releases us to release others that together we may love, serve, give breathing space, make room for one another, and witness to how the world might be. A world which so readily assumes that the only model for our living together is struggle, competition, winning and losing. And we have been delivered from that. Thanks be to God.

- Service is about making room in us for God and for the other. Those serving are expanding our souls, making room, making space- not a tight defended territory but an openness, a breathing, life giving space.

Like Mary who prayed My Soul Magnifies the Lord.

My soul expands to the scale of God, or begins to. Breathing in the life of God.

There is now more room within us.

Those who are addicted to power as force and control are shrinking their souls. Those who understand authority in terms of service are making great their souls. And so service is a way of expanding within, making room for God and the neighbour. So that instead of rushing around making sure that all the windows are shut and the doors are locked, instead of shrinking within, we go around flinging open the doors and the windows and not worrying too much about the leaks in the roof. We make room.

- A Christian could be described as someone in whose company people can breathe more freely around them. Do people find freedom in our company? How do we help people around us breathe more freely? I do not have to control the frontiers to allow them to breath. The church has been known at times to induce a sort of spiritual asthma in people where instead of being able to breathe more freely their breathing becomes more shallow and they feel less able to be themselves.
- Christian service is so much more than solving other people's problems at a distance. Service begins with a particular attention to another human being. What are their fears, what are their hopes, what are their desires. And what are my hopes and fears. It's not just letting them get exactly what they ask for and agreeing with them. Service first and foremost is allowing them to name their need, their fear, their desire, their hope. Giving the other space to breathe. Just look at Jesus for how to model this. What do you want me to do for you? He continually asks. He gives people space to share and respond and act. Tell me what happened. Such as the woman who touches the hem of his coat, or Zacchaeus.
- Service is linked so profoundly with having a contemplative attitude. Service begins in contemplative liberty. That liberty of silence. It begins with opening up our own fears and anxieties to make room for others.

If we are set free to contemplate the mystery of God, then in some sense, we are set free to contemplate the mystery of creation more fully, both to respond more fully and justly and to listen to the world around us and to respond more fully and justly to the needs of human beings and also to listen to ourselves.

Freedom from selfishness, competition, territory, freedom to let God be. A God who sets us free. There is always a reciprocal nature of service.
Forgiveness- the offering is returned and enlarged.

In the action of service we grow. We are putting something into the water supply. It circulates. It's part of releasing somebody to serve somebody else.

- Service is deeply intertwined with the 7 S's:

Service is grounded in what silence makes possible.

Service enacts the sacramental transformation that God brings about.

Service is a staying with that allows us to see more fully.

Service is opening up the possibility of sharing, sharing fears and desires and hopes.

Service is the story of scripture itself. The story of a God who constantly messes up our ideas about authority. The story of a God who puts Godself, you might almost say, at the mercy of humanity because of God's ceaseless attention to the world God has made.

Scripture for Lectio

Jesus Washes the Disciples' Feet

13 Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. The devil had already decided that Judas son of Simon Iscariot would betray Jesus. And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from supper, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" Jesus answered, "You do not know now what I am doing, but later you will understand." Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean. And you are clean, though not all of you." For he knew who was to betray him; for this reason he said, "Not all of you are clean."

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had reclined again, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.

Wonderings

I wonder which silences have been life-giving for you.

I wonder what stuff speaks to you far deeper than words

I wonder what it means to you to be a walking sacrament.

I wonder how the silent consistency of God sustains you.

I wonder how your acts of service bear authority. I wonder what difference this makes to you.

I wonder which words from Rowan have stayed with you.