

Holy Ground Exeter Cathedral 10th May 2020

I'd like to begin my talk this evening with a prayer by priest and hermit, Charles de Foucault.

Father,
I abandon myself into your hands; do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do, I thank you:
I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me, and in all your creatures.
I wish no more than this, O Lord.

Into your hands I commend my soul;
I offer it to you
with all the love of my heart,
for I love you, Lord,
and so need to give myself,
to surrender myself into your hands,
without reserve,
and with boundless confidence,
for you are my Father.

A wise friend of mine once encouraged me to memorise this prayer – a prayer of abandonment by Charles de Foucault. I've returned to it again and again on my faith journey – drawn in by its simplicity, and total display of love for God. How wonderful it would be if we could really live our lives through this prayer. A life of constantly letting go and surrendering, rather than continually seeking to achieve and to be in control. How wonderful it would be if we could accept that we are utterly dependent upon a God who is always beyond us, always beckoning us, and yet always with us. What fascinates me in this prayer is that the most active verb is assigned to God – that of 'doing' – 'do with me what you will'. In contrast, the person praying allows themselves to fall to their knees in a posture of reception: ready for all, offering their soul, surrendering their lives and loving God with boundless confidence. It is a prayer of release.

Why is it that there are so many obstacles to living out the freedom at the heart of this prayer? Even before COvid-19, a triage of pressures on our time can swamp our ability to slow down and abide in the presence of God. Long working hours, long commutes, family care responsibilities, and unhealthy habits of consumption and survival distract us from entrusting our lives fully into God's hands. Those of us who live in cities know that the city never sleeps. Sirens, buses and late night revellers make discovering silence seemingly impossible. Even our church life gets caught up in busyness, seeking to 'do' more and more, rather than modelling a resting place in which God can be discovered.

I'd like to tell you about the Nazareth Community. Three years ago in Lent a small group of us at St Martin-in-the-Fields started praying in silence together in the early hours of the morning. What began as a Lenten discipline unfolded into a whole new way of living together as community, nurturing habits that have become foundational for our very well-being – almost addictive in their joyous reward for helping discover a more manageable and sustainable lifestyle. Stresses and strains are still there, but silent prayer offers the steady accompaniment of gentle acceptance of all that 'is'. Often I'm given surprising insights as I reflect on a difficult day ahead.

Charles de Foucault once famously remarked that if we need to go to the desert to find God, then everyone trying hard to survive in a bustling city would need to have a little strip of desert with them.

In 2018 the Nazareth community was formalised as an experiment in being with; being with God and one another in the 7 S's of Silence, Sacrament, Scripture, Service, Sabbath, Sharing and Staying With. 50 members joined initially and now we have over 75 members, who recommit each year to following a rule of life that encompasses each of these 7 Ss. We are made up of members of the congregation at St Martins but also now joined by people from outside.

We are a hugely diverse group of people from across the world. Asylum seekers, solicitors, vergers, artists, priests and poets. Some of us have a home, some of us do not. We all have a story to tell. We all have something to give and something to receive.

What we've discovered is that community life can flourish through shared times of silence; the soil out of which we all grow. We have come to depend upon the Holy Spirit as the active agent in our midst as we begin to notice new blessings all around us. Now don't get me wrong we are still living with immense pressures in the messiness of life. But through silence we are learning to receive one another as gift. We are learning to bear with one another through the pain and sorrows of this world.

In fact, it's as if God has been preparing us for this time of trial, of the Covid 19 pandemic, and many of us have found great strength from these cultivated habits of community prayer as we've struggled to adjust to lockdown.

I want to talk about these cultivated habits which we call the 7 S's.

Firstly, Silence: solidarity in solitude

As we sit in silence together three times a week from 7-8am on Mondays and Thursdays and Saturdays – now via Facebook Live – we wait upon God as if our hearts, souls and bodies depend upon it. We are alert in a posture of stillness. Kneeling on a prayer stool, our prayer is an outpouring of love and gratitude to God. Remarkably despite being dispersed across London, we find solidarity in our shared

solitude. If I'm honest, silence on your own is really difficult when you are used to praying with others. It can be a struggle even after years of practising it. But somehow having regular and steady prayer times in this lockdown, knowing that others are praying too, has been a source of great strength as we wait upon God in all the immense unknowing and uncertainty ahead.

Sacrament: living God's future now

Regular sacrament is a beautiful aspect of our community life. Although we are prevented from receiving the sacrament each Wednesday night at the moment, at our informal Bread for the World service, we are still live streaming our Eucharistic service. Through this experience of exile we are discovering new ways to live as the body of Christ seeking to live God's future now. My colleague Richard Carter, leader of our community, and parishioners living near to the church are doing extraordinary work feeding dozens of hungry homeless people on the streets of Trafalgar Square each Sunday afternoon – this is Eucharist. This is seeking – in all the injustices of this world - to live God's future now. In his book *The City is my monastery* Richard writes this beautiful reflection about sacrament:

My brother Daniel told me about Brian who had for thirty years slept on the same bench outside St Andrews by the Wardrobe Each week he visited him with the street rescue team They tried to persuade him to visit the hostel But he did not want to come in Too claustrophobic Too many other people This was his home-this bench His ceiling the sky But over the years, he learnt to trust Daniel Then one day completely unexpectedly he said he would come He was frail His clothes were soaking wet Daniel helped him 'Don't leave me sir,' he said so politely 'Don't leave me, please.' He was wearing several layers of socks They had been on his feet so long they had disintegrated Had to be gently peeled away from his skin Daniel washed his feet 'That must have been very difficult,' I said 'No,' said Daniel 'I felt so privileged that he allowed me to do this for him... It felt the most holy thing I have ever done in my life.' It was sacrament It was not long after that Brian died It was as though he wanted to prepare himself for burial 'Do this in remembrance of me...'

Scripture: feasting on the Word

Our Wednesday service of Bread for the World is followed by a very particular form of listening group – a form of lectio. I'm hoping we can experiment with this in the Zoom group after this service. An important distinction is that this is not a discussion group. We prioritise listening to how the text is speaking to each person present. It has proved to be a profoundly beautiful way to share our lives together.

Sharing: seeing life in abundance

Then monthly, on a Saturday morning, we gather for community sharing and we are changed by one another's stories. It has been powerful to see the language of us and them break down as we have rejoiced in our diversity. So often stories of greatest resilience come from the most vulnerable in our community and these stories are transformative for everyone present. Maybe you have drawn close to someone who has no recourse to public funds and yet their lives often have a richness marked by God's grace.

Sabbath: beholding God's creation

There is no doubt that a great unforeseen gift of this time of Covid 19 pandemic has been to see God's creation sigh deeply a breath of relief and emerge rejoicing. One walk a day has assisted in our cherishing of every moment and every detail in the summer sun – flowers in the capital's parks, water, birds, and wildlife - all the joys of God's creation around us. Our Community WhatsApp group has been active sharing photographs, films, prayer requests, poems, pictures to sustain and nourish and support those who are struggling at this time. Richard Carter our community leader has been doing guided walks and meditations in the parks with thousands of viewings. I cannot anticipate this way of sharing to end after lockdown. That said, with all these Zoom meetings, do you too find times of Sabbath hard to keep at the moment? Are your boundaries between work and home so disrupted it can be hard to switch off? It's worth cultivating new habits for these new times.

Service: anticipating Christ in stranger

Whilst many of us are locked up in our houses we are all too acutely aware of the service of many in our country to those who are sick and dying. Those who are caring and risking their lives hourly for a stranger in their midst who is suffering. Seeing Christ in those they serve. As an incarnational community many of us miss being with one another face to face – as I'm sure you do too at Holy Ground. We marvel at the capacity of online communication, but nothing can replace the joy of human touch – hugging nephews and nieces, attending to the needs of elderly parents or volunteering in the local hospice or foodbank. This longing is real and good.

Staying With: living with all that is

Our 7th and final experiment in being with helps us to stay with all that unsettles and distresses us, remembering that we are never alone.

The Nazareth Community is only one expression of a gathered community – inspired by monastic communities throughout the centuries and throughout the world, not least in Melanesia, and yet adapted for modern day London. We hope other churches might experiment with setting up a Nazareth Community or an equivalent to discover a rhythm and experiment suited to their context. On Monday 18th May we are holding an online workshop about the Community. Im happy to talk further about this after the service.

So to end, on the surface, Charles de Foucault's life seems very remote from ours. His fierce monastic austerity culminated in a ministry among the Tuareg people in the harsh Moroccan desert. Yet his generosity of spirit, his freedom from worldly ambition, and his total self-surrender and trust in God can still speak to us today. He was assassinated on 1st December 1916 – and 1st December happens to be my birthday. I think that's why I'm so drawn to this prayer of abandonment which I pray each year on his feast day. I'd like to end this talk with that prayer.

Father,
I abandon myself into your hands; do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do, I thank you:
I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me, and in all your creatures.
I wish no more than this, O Lord.
Into your hands I commend my soul;
I offer it to you
with all the love of my heart,
for I love you, Lord,
and so need to give myself,
to surrender myself into your hands,
without reserve,
and with boundless confidence,
for you are my Father.