

prayer at the end of the October session:

We realise more and more how much Your action and Your love is the more important thing. Help us to be open to that love, and open to one another, and to all whom You send to us. Help us to be men and women of prayer, without worrying about it, or knowing it, or wanting to see it (p.380).

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Passions of the Soul

Rowan Williams

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This slim and inspiring book is based mainly on a series of retreat talks delivered a few years ago to a group of Anglican Benedictine nuns at The Holy Cross Convent in Worcestershire.

Most of the book is dedicated to considering The Eight Beatitudes of Jesus as a set of counter proposals to the 'passions'. The author asks us to recognise that the 'passions', traditionally understood as 'The Seven Deadly Sins', are not something to be afraid of but an integral part of what it is to be human. They need to be dealt with in a way that not only enhances our capacity to deal with our own inner lives but also illuminates the path which will lead to a life lived in the knowledge that 'we are because God is', to a life lived in the freedom of Christ.

The early desert fathers such as Evagrius and Cassian were profoundly aware of the infinite capacity we human beings have for self-delusion, and the great difficulty we experience when trying to be honest about our motives when considering our behaviour in any given situation. As a way to deal with this Rowan Williams would like us to 'focus on the idea of truthful love as a key to thinking about "passion" and our liberation from it,' and to see 'the eight Beatitudes as a reversed image of the things that go wrong in the soul.' This is not to underestimate the courage and commitment this can take and a

recognition of all the major influences on our lives such as family, gender, class, ethnicity religion and culture which can profoundly affect our capacity for truly seeing what our behaviour represents and how we can overcome our destructive patterns. To do this we need to learn skills of discernment, to become aware that the language of sin and guilt has often been used as a very powerful controlling mechanism for those in power in the church and society at large and can seriously affect how we understand our levels of culpability. He suggests that using a spiritual friend or guide could be a great help in this venture.

According to him, 'What is both wonderful and difficult is that God's unchangeable life is reflected in this changeable world, a world of diversity, interdependence, movement. God has so shaped the world that we grow into our deepest freedom in a world of constraints and challenges (xxi).'

Rowan Williams suggests that we see the eight Beatitudes as a 'reversed image of the things that go wrong in the soul, identified as pride, lust, anger, gluttony, avarice, envy, sloth which he refers to as listlessness, and despair.'

I think he does a wonderful job of using the Beatitudes to demonstrate the possible destructiveness of the passions and their dehumanising effect for both the individual and the society in which they operate. In using the Beatitudes he helps us to see a life that can be lived with generosity and consideration for ourselves and others — not a life which is spent trying to be 'good' but one which embraces the complexity of our human desires and encourages us to live with courage and trust in God's mercy and love. He also addresses many of the misunderstandings of the language of the Beatitudes. To give one example: the meaning of the word 'meek' or humble is very difficult to detach from the whole notion of passivity and timidity. Yet we are reminded that Jesus uses the word meek or humble to describe himself: 'Come to me all of you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens ... for I am gentle and humble of heart.' So for Rowan Williams, 'Meekness then might be reimagined as something to do with an attitude to others that is not self abasing, but simply alert to the reality of others (37).'

His counterproposal for pride is 'poverty of the Spirit'; for gluttony, 'hunger and thirst for justice'; for anger, 'Blessed are the meek'; for avarice, 'Blessed are the merciful'; for lust, 'purity of heart', for envy, 'Blessed are the peacemakers'; for sloth or listlessness; 'Blessed are those who mourn'; and finally for despair (the eighth passion in the Greek tradition), Judas Iscariot the symbol of despair and Peter the symbol of

hope and trust. In all of these examples we are led into ways of thinking which develop our capacity to understand what it is to be human and to become the persons God created us to be.

At the end of part one he gives us this wonderful summation:

And this is what the life of *Apatheia*, the life of freedom from the tyranny of 'passion' is finally about; living in the joyful and grateful awareness of God's perspective on the creation God loves and transfigures; praying and labouring day by day for that inch-by-inch growth in clarity, freedom, charity; growing in the right kind of detachment that lets us see our muddled lives embraced and healed in Jesus, the author and the pioneer of our faithfulness (76).

In part two, through two short essays, 'To Stand where Christ Stands' and 'Early Christian Writing', he gives us a very brief overview of Christianity demonstrating that the main aim of Christian life is to draw nearer to Christ with the rest of the Christian community (*Koinonia*), not a set of moral precepts which must be obeyed. Throughout the history of the Church there has been, and continues to be, an ongoing tension between what is considered to be holy and Christlike as embodied in individual men and women, the right to freedom of conscience, and the authority of the church.

As he says in the introduction, he has included these two essays for the lay readership, in the hope that it may lead them to investigate some of the literature which inspired our forefathers and mothers to try to live a life of true holiness in the Freedom of Christ.

To me there was such a sense of joy and celebration when reading this book. It brought me to a very powerful sense of what St Paul might have envisaged in his famous perplexing statement, 'Where sin abounds grace abounds more freely.' Oh to have been there at the retreats!

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