

Session 2: 'The Cloud of Unknowing': Longing for God

- We don't know his name; possibly a monk, and probably a priest, but he was certainly, like Richard Rolle, a solitary.
- He wrote *The Cloud of Unknowing* around 1360; written to guide others in the way of prayer; the author is a spiritual director par excellence.
- To teach about contemplative prayer (not claiming it's the only way of prayer).
- Cardinal Hume said if you could only have one book of devotion, *The Cloud* was the one to have – high recommendation!
- Writing for individual he's directing but also for wider audience – all who desire to grow in contemplation.
- For those who are '*wholly determined to follow Christ perfectly*' both in their active life and in their contemplative life.

Longing for God: 'Your whole life must be one of longing...and this longing must be in the depths of your will, put there by God, with your consent.' ((ch 2). At end quotes Augustine: 'the whole life of a good Christian is nothing but holy desire.' This longing, this desire for God is at the heart of the whole book. Desire needs to be desire for God not spiritual experiences.

Different attitude to experiences to Richard Rolle. Indeed, he may have been partly reacting against Rolle's writing. What matters, he says, is a simple desire of the will, a longing of love for God, and *not* any extraordinary experiences.

'If they come, welcome them; but do not depend on them, because they are weakening things; it takes too much out of you to stay for long in such sweet feelings... and you may even be tempted to love God for the sake of having them. You will know if this is so by seeing whether you complain unduly when they are absent' (ch50)

He advises instead 'Lift up your heart to God with humble love and mean God himself and not what you get out of him.'(ch 3) 'A naked intention directed to God and himself alone, is wholly sufficient' (ch7) No sweetness or experience compares with a 'will in harmony with God's' (ch49) This is the 'substance of all perfection' It doesn't matter what experiences we have or don't have, what matters is *our longing for God and the setting of our will to seek him.*

Seeking God in contemplation: not about our *feelings*, our experiences, neither is it about rational comprehension.

We need to seek God who is beyond our understanding. God as God cannot be known, but only in so far as he reveals himself – which he has done through Jesus Christ. Influenced by Pseudo -Dionysius (*Mystical Theology*) that God is so wonderful he is beyond what our thinking/language can grasp. (*Apophatic* spirituality as opposed to *Kataphatic*)

Kataphatic: focuses on what we can say about who God is, using words and images – eg he is our shepherd, he is our rock, he is merciful, forgiving etc, etc

Apophatic: emphasises that ultimately no words or images can really express who God is or what he is like. All our language and ideas fall short.

Apophatic, Via Negativa – cannot know God through our reason, only through our love.... So he recommends a form of prayer which seeks to long for God in a '**cloud of unknowing**'. (cf The cloud is associated with God in the OT eg Exodus 24: 15-18).

But the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* mentions **2 clouds**: in this contemplative prayer, we long for God, we look to God in a '**cloud of unknowing**' and we also leave our rational thought in a '**cloud of forgetting**'. During this prayer we lay aside our thoughts and simply focus our attention on God. Nothing must be allowed to distract the soul's attention to God (not even edifying thoughts): 'for though it be good to think upon the kindness of God, and to love and praise him for it, yet it is far better to think upon the naked being of him and to love and praise him for himself.' In this kind of prayer, we are not thinking *about* God but simply being still in his presence and directing our attention, our will, our love towards him:

...outreaching love and a blind groping for the naked being of God himself and him only.' (ch 8)

'But only to our intellect is he incomprehensible; not to our love.' (ch 4)

'because he may well be loved, but not thought. By love he can be caught and held, but by thinking never.' (ch 6)

NB Preparatory exercises for contemplation are necessary. 'Nevertheless, there are certain preparatory exercises which should occupy the attention of the contemplative apprentice: the lesson, the meditation and the petition...or reading, reflecting and praying.' (ch 35). That is *lectio divina*: meditation on Scripture. But in contemplation itself our thoughts and meditations left behind.

Keep going and persevere: 'If then you are determined to stand and not to fall, never give up your firm intention; beat away at this cloud of unknowing between you and God with that sharp dart of longing love. Hate to think about anything less than God, and let nothing whatever distract you from this purpose.' (ch 12)

What do we do about distractions?

He advises using one word which helps us when distracted to keep our focus, our intention in seeking God in love:

'If you want this intention summed up in a word, to retain it more easily, take a short word, preferably of one syllable, to do so. The shorter the word the better, being more like the working of the Spirit. A word like 'God' or 'love'...and fix this word fast to your heart, so that it is always there come what may. It will be your shield and spear in peace and war alike.' (ch7)

Similar advice to many teachers of contemplative prayer from John Cassian to the present day: eg John Main of the Christian Meditation Movement, and Thomas Keating of Centring Prayer Movement.

Mary and Martha

There are several chapters reflecting on Jesus' visit to Mary and Martha (Luke 10: 38-end). For the author of *The Cloud* (and for many other writers on prayer) Martha illustrates the 'active' life, and Mary the 'contemplative'. It looks to Martha that Mary is doing nothing, but Jesus calls it 'the better part which will not be taken away from her.' This kind of prayer is not a waste of time.

Image of Darkness and Light: Sometimes it may seem God is hidden from us and we may feel nothing at all when we pray. This is actually because the light of God so bright, it is beyond what we can experience. We cannot sum God up in our own language and concepts, he is beyond all that, we simply have to reach out to him in faith, whether we feel anything or

not. We may experience a sense of darkness, of 'nothing', we may go through a 'dark night' but we should still persevere. (His teaching has similarities with St John of the Cross)

He says: 'One can feel this nothing more easily than see it, for it is completely dark and hidden to those who have only just begun to look at it. Yet to speak more accurately, it is overwhelming spiritual light that blinds the soul that is experiencing it, rather than actual darkness or the absence of physical light. Who is then who is calling it 'nothing'? Our outer self, to be sure not our inner. Our inner self calls it 'All' (ch68)

In faith and love we know that God is in that 'cloud of unknowing' and we continue to direct our will and our love towards him.

Contemplation is *not* the only way of prayer

'If you think that this kind of contemplative work does not suit your temperament either physically or spiritual, then you may leave it, and, under sound spiritual direction, safely take another without blame' (ch 74)

'To come to The Cloud for the first time is for most a stimulating experience. Its unemotional, matter of fact approach to the deeper levels of prayer, and its profound sense of the greatness of God – all described in limpid and splendid language – can bring not only refreshment but also real enlargement to one's understanding of the ways in which God can deal with the soul.' (Clifton Wolters)

We may have questions

- How does his teaching relate to Jesus and his teaching on prayer? 'Go into your inner (secret) room and pray to your Father who is in secret.' (Matthew 6:6) Don't heap up lots of empty words (Matthew 6:7)
- How does contemplation relate to the rest of Christian theology? He emphasises to prepare for contemplation need to meditate on Christ's Incarnation and Passion (ch 7, 8, 12) 'all men were lost with Adam, and all men bear witness in their works to their desire for salvation are and will be saved by sole virtue of Christ's Passion' (ch 25). Basic assumption he makes at the beginning is that no one should follow this contemplative prayer without following Christ wholeheartedly.
- Little reference to Holy Spirit and Trinity (contrast to Walter Hilton and Julian of Norwich)
- We need to remember that the book is not trying to give us all of Christian theology, but *simply a particular way of praying*. Its scope is limited and focused. It's more of a handbook for practitioners rather than a catechism. In that way it is very helpful, even today. Has been very influential to many who write about and practice contemplative prayer.
- And perhaps its stress on the unknowability of God and the otherness of God is a good corrective to the temptation to domesticate God, sum him up in a tidy way.

‘The Cloud of Unknowing’: Longing For God

For Discussion

1. Share together anything that has struck you/encouraged you/challenged you/disturbed you in the session this evening.

‘Lift up your heart to God with humble love and mean God himself and not what you get out of him.’

‘A naked intention directed to God and himself alone, is wholly sufficient’

‘If then you are determined to stand and not to fall, never give up your firm intention; beat away at this cloud of unknowing between you and God with that sharp dart of longing love. Hate to think about anything less than God, and let nothing whatever distract you from this purpose.’

2. How do you react to the quotations above? Have you ever been drawn to this kind of contemplative prayer? Share together your experiences and what you have found helpful/difficult.
3. What effect do you think the regular practice of this simple, (but difficult!) prayer has had/ might potentially have on your daily life?

For Personal Reflection

4. Do you keep praying and seeking God even when you feel dry and God seems absent? Ask God to deepen your desire for him, rather than simply for the gifts/experiences he gives you.
5. Try it out: Spend some time in silence simply being in God’s presence and longing for him. Lay aside your thoughts and when they distract you use a word or phrase to bring back your focus towards God.