

Prayer: Embodying a Vision.

Glynn Cardy 19/9/2013

Tena koutou katoa. May the spirited me honour the spirited you, and be warmed by the spirits of the Ngambri and Ngunnawal people, whom we honour and who guard the land on which we gratefully walk. I light this candle to acknowledge our ancestors of spirit – all those feisty saboteurs and nurturers of hope.

E nga mate – haere, haere, haere.

Section I

Prayer is a way of being, a way of embodying a vision, a way of resistance. And I want to devote the first section of my address to giving examples and a story about such prayer.

In February 2012 three women, all in their twenties, were arrested in a Moscow Cathedral for saying a prayer,ⁱ and then in August that year were sentenced to two years in prison for hooliganism. The prayer they offered was short: “Virgin Mother, redeem us of Putin” – Vladimir Putin being the President, the Virgin Mother being Mary the protectress of Russia.

These Christian women embodied a vision.

In 2007 Putin made a statement later termed ‘nuclear orthodoxy’ – namely that Russia’s nuclear arsenal would protect her from enemies without, and the Orthodox Church would protect her from enemies within. The political and military chauvinism of Putin would form an alliance with the Father Lord Almighty God of the Patriarch.

One of the convicted protesters wrote: *“In our [prayer] we dared... to unite the visual imagery of [Christian] culture with that of protest culture, thus suggesting that [Christian] culture belongs not only to the Russian Orthodox Church, the Patriarch and Putin, but that it could also ally itself with... the spirit of protest in Russia.”*

The Pussy Riot prayers were challenging religion’s compliance with and courting of the political power-holders. Was not God a different God from the Father Lord Almighty Goliath? Was not God in midst of the marginalized and vulnerable, those who protested?

The women were not only pitting the God of protest culture against the God of nuclear orthodoxy, but the de-hierarchized feminist God against the male hierarchical one.

During the prayer the group cloaked their faces with balaclavas to de-hierarchize the liturgical space. They appealed to the feminism of the Virgin Mary against

the anti-feminism of Putin and the Church elite. The words and actions of the prayer held out a dream, a vision – one of mutuality and equality between women and men, between laity and clergy, and between the governed and the governors.

I preached a sermon that year in support of these Christian witnesses. That sermon was translated into Russian and I was informed that it was welcomed among those marginalized by Church and State. I mention this because what we do and say in our little corners of the world has impact.

At the trial, where the women were convicted of ‘hooliganism’ [read ‘disruption’], they purposefully drew a connection between their own actions and the New Testament where those persecuted for blasphemy - like Jesusⁱⁱ, like Stephenⁱⁱⁱ, like Paul^{iv} - turned out to be the rightful bearers of truth.

So, I’d like to suggest to you that prayer was more than words. Prayer was action. Prayer was attitude. Prayer was visionary. Prayer was solidarity with those oppressed by the domination system. And prayer was costly. Just like Jesus’ prayer when he disrupted trade in the Jerusalem Temple. Prayer was protest.

In Exodus 1 there is a story of two women, Shiphrah and Puah, midwives, who defied the power of the god-like Pharaoh. They were told to kill male Hebrew babies. Shiphrah and Puah, however, believed in a different God than Pharaoh and refused. The penalty for refusing would have been death. When summoned by Pharaoh, they lied: “The Hebrew women are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes.”

I think those who work in the health sector need to remember the ethics and courageous leadership of Shiphrah and Puah. They understood their God’s priority, and the priority of their profession to save life had a higher priority than the dictates of any other God or domination system.

Shiphrah’s and Puah’s actions were a prayer: a prayer of deception; a prayer that involved lying; a prayer of vulnerable women that increased their vulnerability by siding with the condemned; and a prayer that sided with the God of defenseless babies and defied the god-like power of the almighty Pharaoh.

Once again, like with the Pussy Rioters, we see a clash of Gods – a clash of ideologies, a clash between those with little power [foreigners, women] and those who lots of power [men in charge]. Prayer is not politically neutral.

The ideologies around these Gods are very different. The Father Almighty God has mainly male attendants [look at any photograph of church leaders], and a holiness code where everyone is a 'sinner' until forgiven by the God. It is an ideology that promotes compliance. For example it loves calling followers 'servants' – as if the word 'servant' is a badge of honour.

The 'God' [or 'Spirit'] of mutuality is better understood by means of a story. This story comes from Anthony De Mello

After many years of labour an inventor discovered the art of making fire. He took his tools to the snow-clad northern regions and initiated a tribe into the art – and the advantages – of making fire. The people became so absorbed in this novelty that it did not occur to them to thank the inventor who one day quietly slipped away. Being one of those rare human beings endowed with greatness, he had no desire to be remembered or revered; all he sought was the satisfaction of knowing that someone had benefited from his discovery.

The next village he went to was just as eager to learn as the first. But the local priests, jealous of the stranger's hold on the people, had him assassinated. To allay any suspicion of the crime, they had a portrait of the Great Inventor enthroned upon the main altar of the temple; and a liturgy designed so that his name would be revered and his memory kept alive. The greatest care was taken that not a single rubric of the liturgy was altered or omitted.

The High Priest himself undertook the task of compiling a Life of the Inventor. This became the Holy book in which his loving kindness was offered as an example for all to emulate, his glorious deeds were eulogized, his superhuman nature made an article of faith. The priests saw to it that the Book was handed down to future generations, while they authoritatively interpreted the meaning of his words and the significance of his holy life and death.

Caught up as they were in these religious tasks, the people completely forgot the art of making fire.^v

This story uses the metaphor of fire to refer to a whole different understanding of God and prayer. Like fire this way of prayer provides light, illumination and vision. Like fire this way of prayer gives warmth, comfort, and nurture. Like fire this way of prayer gives energy, power, and vitality. De Mello's story encourages us to 'make fire', to embody a vision of spirituality.

De Mello's story, like in the best of the Progressive tradition, is a subversive one for it suggests that this way of prayer is out of the control of the Father Almighty God's priests and their religion. You don't have to come to church to 'make fire'. You don't have to agree with the preacher to 'make fire'. You don't have to swear allegiance to any creed, canons, or bible to 'make fire'. Instead worship, liturgy, Bible study, and ministry all need to be evaluated in terms of how useful they are in promoting a way of prayer open to the wisdom, compassion, and creativity among the little, the least, and the powerless. What we do needs to be

evaluated in terms of how we help 'make fire'.

So lighting a spiritual 'fire' is not dependent on coming to a church and getting a bit of flame to take home, or having a minister come to your home to light it, or undertaking years of study to be an expert yourself. Rather lighting a spiritual 'fire' is something that can be learnt in many places from many different people.

Christians and the Christian God have no monopoly on spirituality's 'fire'. Keith Ward provides this helpful explanation:

"The uniqueness one can properly find in Jesus is something like the uniqueness one may find in a great work of art. It provides an insight into the deepest nature of things that nothing else can provide. It relates us to the [experience] of God in a way which is rather different from that found elsewhere... But it would be crass to hold that it is the only, or obviously the best, work of art in the universe."^{vi}

I want to now tell you a story about ash. Ash has a number of associations. Some of us put it on our heads on Ash Wednesday as a reminder of our finitude and mortality. Ash, with sackcloth, in the Bible was a sign of repentance and a challenge for others to also repent.

In 1983 I was arrested for putting ash on my head. I was subsequently convicted for disturbing the peace, and every time I enter Australia I'm assessed by immigration to make sure I'm a good boy and will behave.

The context was the ongoing struggle for redressing the confiscation and taking of indigenous people's land by successive colonial governments. Each year, on Waitangi Day [Feb 6th], the politicians and military would gather to celebrate the myth that New Zealanders are one people. We, a little team of Christian protesters, meant to, and successfully, challenged that myth. To be two peoples in one land requires in addition to learning how to speak and learn from each other, redress of past wrongs and transparent sharing of decision-making and resources.

Well at Waitangi 1983 the phalanx of protesters, with placards and the like, marched and voiced their displeasure, and were kept firmly outside the gates. The government [as governments so often do] had decided to flex their muscle with a large police presence.

They also decided to have their own church service, with a tame minister, to celebrate how the Father Almighty God had endorsed their racist policies for many generations so that we were now – like we'd always been – 'one people'. And in the best traditions of the Reformation our team decided that we needed to cry foul.

Now, the church service was outdoors, and at the end of each pew stood a police officer. Before the service began some friends with brown faces [who were

sitting quietly praying in their pew], were escorted out for the crime of being Maori. Then with a minute to go various clerical members known to us stood up and began taking the service. It was all very comic. The government's pet minister came rushing out, flapping his arms, and instructing the constabulary.

As for the sackcloth and ashes: that came during the intercessory prayers. Under our clothes – and rather itchy I might add – was the sacking. Around our necks was a little bag of ash, which we ripped and poured over our heads. It was all rather dramatic, and the police were very worried about what was in the ash. One of our team, a Catholic Irish priest, who was arrested also at the same time – for saying a prayer! – yelled out to one of the panicking cops when we were in the pen: “Ah, Davey me boy [remember in New Zealand a good priest knows everyone], don't you read your Bible anymore. Its sackcloth and ashes. And by the way how's your mother?”

Well, what followed were police cells, a trial, lots of media, and lots of talking to church groups. The government never again tried to run a church service there. They did though the next year invite the Maori Archbishop to speak, who in one of the better moments of his career, loaded his theological and biblical shotgun and let the power-holders have it.

As for us, the Bishop of Wellington got the front page headlines: “Anarchy says Bishop”. And he was right, if anarchy is the political and spiritual expression of mutuality and equality. I liked that he called it as he saw it. A number of church leaders I've dealt with since those days think that avoiding straight-talk assists reconciliation. Yeah, right.

So prayer was standing up for what one believes is right. Prayer was being seen to be a fool – an ‘anarchist’. Prayer was hoping for justice, and being blessed by seeing a little happen. It was drama. It was public theology. It was also prayer.

I want to conclude this section of my address with one more example of prayer in the context of protest culture, and that is the story of Abraham petitioning God to save the city of Sodom in Genesis 18. In this pericope we see that faith is not a set of beliefs, or obedience to an Almighty Father, but an attitude of courage.

Abraham's culture believed in an omnipotent God. This God tells Abraham of His intention to do just that to the wicked city of Sodom.

Abraham though, unlike his ancestor Noah who quietly sailed away while most of humanity drowned, argues with this God. He says, ‘Hey God, what if there are 50 righteous people in that city, will you still destroy it?’ (v.24)

Abraham is concerned not only about the righteous being murdered along with the wicked, not only about the fate of the wicked, but about the moral compass of his God. He keeps arguing with God: ‘What if there are 30 righteous or 20

righteous or ten?’ He challenges this capricious potentate image of God to be compassionate and let compassion not anger rule divine actions.

What is easy to miss from our 21st century perspective is that Abraham literally believed in a God who, at any stage in the argument, could have destroyed him. Yet Abraham does not flinch. He does not let fear quell his courage. He does not let the Sodomites alleged wickedness prevent him from defending them in the face of their impending doom.

To pray is to be courageous. To pray is to ask difficult questions and be a difficulty. To pray is to persevere. To pray is to champion the needs of the despised and defenseless and stands with courage in the face of considerable opposition. Courage is prayer.

Many of you know this, live this, or try to live this. I honour you.

Section II

To think of prayer as a way of embodying a vision rather than reciting words from a prayerbook or service sheet, or petitioning a God in private, might be a new thought. In this next section of my address I want to talk about how for me, like for many Progressives, not only has the forms of prayer evolved and changed over the decades of my life, but they have done so in tandem with changes in the concept of God.

Prayer is a journey of discovery. The first prayer I remember learning began with the words: “Our Father, which art in heaven.”^{vii} I remember too the posture of kneeling with head bowed and palms together. The emphasis though was on saying the words.

Not that I understood the words. What was the ‘art’ in heaven? What was ‘heaven’ for that matter? I was quickly told that ‘heaven’ was the location of our ‘Father’ who wasn’t actually our father. Not that one could locate heaven – though it did seem to be more ‘up’ than ‘out’ or ‘down’. It was all rather tricky.

Yet as time went on Sunday by Sunday I realized that the words didn’t matter. It was being together, saying them together, and addressing God that mattered. Not that we had many clues about God. But if God was anywhere God was in church. And a blend of voices – the well-dressed and the not so well-dressed, the knowledgeable and the beginners – all raised in unison was sure to be heard. Or so we hoped.

The benefit of the Lord’s Prayer of course is that you don’t have to think about the words. It can operate as a mantra. This is particularly so when it’s sung or chanted. It is meditative. The mind can wander as the tongue recites. Not that I could have explained that back then.

When I progressed to Youth Group the personalized version of God was all important. Father God was now Daddy God. It was quite nice as a teenager to have a surrogate all-forgiving dad when you were having difficulty with the flesh-and-blood one. So prayer was a kind of personal chat - a largely one way chat, with God having to be a good listener.

But such prayers and the deity they were addressed to, in time ran out of relevance and stalled. Talking can be therapeutic when one needs therapy, but what happens when one doesn't? A personal daddy-god is nice, though about as useful a teddy bear next to the pillow.

Then in my twenties the whole notion of a Father Lord Almighty God who made the planet, directs its future, and with a straight face calls its human creatures 'sinners', began to less sense than Santa Claus. [At least no-one treats Santa as a real presence!]. And as Santa was largely manipulated by marketers and retailers, so this God was largely manipulated by elites who wanted to solidify their control and keep others compliant. The object of prayer needed a makeover; as did the purpose and practice of prayer.

And for a pilgrim in the 70s [like me] the Jesuit priest, Daniel Berrigan, was a great example of how. In a long line of unsung saints, including Shiprah and Puah, including a shepherd boy who took five stones from a brook to engage the military prowess of Goliath, Berrigan and his brothers confronted the American war machine of the Father Lord Almighty God and the passive compliance of the churches that sang that God/Goliath's praise. They broke into a missile silo in Pennsylvania and tried to remake the nose cone into a ploughshare.^{viii} They poured napalm on draft cards. They disrupted trade in Goliath's temple.

For prayer, as I was slowly learning, was more than words, mantras, music, silence, receiving communion, or walking a labyrinth. Prayer was a way of living out a vision of a better world, and a better God – one known among the little and the least. Prayer was disruptive action. Prayer was critiquing the alliance between the Fathers – the political/military fathers and the religious God fathers. Prayer was trusting in the futility of five little stones rather than Goliath's swords. Prayer was creating communities of resistance – like the Progressive movement - to the Father Lord Almighty God/Goliath.

I often use the word 'soul' as an attempt to describe that which can't be seen or quantified, and yet influences how we feel about ourselves. A soulless life is a deflated life, where human potential is not realized, and possibilities are bounded by our limits.

Speech and silence are means of prayer. But the experience of sacredness comes in multiple ways and forms, touching and connecting with us through actions, incidents, musings, music, events, and environments. Therefore rather than thinking of prayer as communicating with the Sacred I prefer to think of prayer as living in such a way that we open our soul to that endless multiplicity of sacredness.

Language like 'God', 'prayer', 'Holy', and 'soul' is mystical language. It is the language of dreaming. It can underpin a vision of the whole earth community connected in a way that each individual is cared for, is freed, and is emboldened to be who they are and who they might become. This language points to health in its broadest sense. It points to justice in its mutual sense. It points to hope in its common sense. Such is the power of these mystical words.

In a moment I want to talk about five little stones that have aided and sustained me in my prayer and confrontations with the Goliaths. But before I do so I want to talk a little about God.

One of the recurring metaphors of Christian spirituality is journey. From *Pilgrim's Progress* to *The Lord of the Rings* authors have likened the Christian life to a quest. In this travelling metaphor God is both with and ahead of the pilgrim, known but still unknown.

The experience of many Christians is that their life of prayer is not dissimilar. Inculcated into Christianity with prayers verbally addressing an invisible male being called 'Father' or 'Jesus', they may find in time their quest leads them on beyond those familiar images for God.

Christianity's Hebrew roots warn against the pervasiveness of any image for God for it can easily become an idol. Instead Christians are encouraged to journey on beyond the familiar. Dissatisfaction with an image is therefore not a sign of faith disintegrating, but rather a sign of faith maturing.

This journeying on can be initiated by a growing restlessness, philosophical engagement, or a significant event - like the death of someone close, which in turn triggers dissatisfaction with the object their prayers address. The God of their childhood has not survived the transition into their adulthood.

When an image for God begins to disintegrate, so too can the prayers associated with that image. In this time of image disintegration there is often difficulty in finding any prayer meaningful. Sometimes this period can last for years. Some never return to prayer. God is put aside like a nursery toy that has little to do with adult life.

This period of disintegration is marked by the absence of God. God has lost meaning. Prayers are words addressed to nothingness. What was thought to be big is not just small; it's as if it's not at all. Such absence is like a dark night. In time many experience a dawn of meaning. For others it is a star or two.

For those who journey on, with the demise of a predominant image it is likely no single image comes to satisfactorily replace it. 'Mother God' for example doesn't take the place of 'Father God'. Returning to the nursery where image and reality are fused does not suffice.

Rather the way on is peppered with multiple images that in their multiplicity critique reliance on any one. So God can be 'ocean', 'friend', 'provocateur', 'mystery', 'wind', 'sister', 'compassion', 'night' and 'between-ness'. No one image nullifies the rest. Every image has meaning; every image is deficient. Every image has the potential to be a wall barring us from, and a window inviting us into, God.

Some pilgrims take hold of an image, wear it for a while, and then, as it starts to deteriorate, take it off before donning another. This ongoing iconoclastic experience of searching, finding, relating, holding on, being held, letting go, and losing, shapes the prayers of many pilgrims.

Some pilgrims never depart from the Father God imagery of childhood but instead of seeing such anthropomorphism as an idol, they see it as a 'window' frame. In time, although their prayers might still be addressed to 'Father', they no longer see the window but the expanse of God beyond.

One of the problems however for such pilgrims is when trying to communicate their faith their language still primarily frames God as both a being and a male being. It reduces God to the size of that paternal 'window'. It also brings with it metaphorical baggage e.g. we humans are always children. It also, as I've mentioned above, can get politically manipulated by the elites.

For other pilgrims the journey takes them away from all images and into stillness and its silence. Here there is a deliberate attempt to hold no image in mind but rather to let the inexplicable 'sacred' infuse one's body and soul. When attending a church service it is more the silence, the music, and the feeling of community that mediates God to the soul, with the words being 'noise' in between.

The word 'God' has for many pilgrims become synonymous with, or trapped in, one image – namely that of the supreme male being called 'Father'. Some therefore, especially those for whom God is not a 'being' at all, have used other ways of talking, such as 'the Holy', 'the Sacred', or 'the Great Compassion'.^{ix} This way of speaking and imaging can be called nontheism^x. For myself, I understand 'God' to mean the transformative power of mutuality.^{xi}

So what then, as I was asked recently at a seminar, might a said prayer look like? Here are some examples:

Learning The Silence

May we learn the silence of humility
The silence of wisdom
The silence of love
The silence that does not need words
The silence of being
May we learn to silence the noises of demand

*To silence our appetites
To silence our needs
To listen instead to the voice of our hearts
And the presence of the Spirit within. Amen*

[This prayer is not addressed to a deity, but is 'traditional' in the sense of acknowledging 'divinity' (the Spirit) within.]

In Times Of Grief

*In times of grief and pain
In times of suffering and fracture
In times of uncertainty and the failure of God
May we not sink in despair along with all we believed
But have the faith to learn to float
Knowing, hoping, that in time this too will pass.
Amen*

[Note it's the phrase the 'failure of God' that can provoke new thinking]

Let Us Make Room

*Let us make room.
To pray is to make room,
to enlarge our hearts,
to be enlarged by the heart of godness,
so that all the unnoticed, unnotable, and notorious
can come on in.
Let us make room.
And be that room.*

[Note this prayer – not exclusively directed at Abbott's asylum seekers policy – uses the word 'godness' rather than 'God' – inviting us to think differently about the word God.]

Sharing God

*With bread and wine,
We give thanks for one another,
For being together, for difference, for communities.
When we share food, we share God.
Sustain us we pray.
Amen.*

[Note this prayer moves us further into thinking differently about the word 'God' and what it means. Here it's interchangeably with a word like 'love']

And lastly:

Words don't do it any more

God.

Words don't do it anymore.

They can't express what I want to say.

So I remain silent, and wait.

I'm in that space between letters.

A blank space.

Yet today it feels more sacred than the filled spaces.

God.

[In this prayer the word 'God' is used like punctuation – brackets around our spiritual journey]

Section III

In the first section of this address I spoke about prayer being a way of embodying a vision – a vision of God/sacredness connected with the little, the least, and the powerless - and how in living that vision we will conflict with the false god made in the image of power. I spoke about how these Gods clash, the visions clash, not unlike in the encounter between the great warrior Goliath and shepherd boy David. As you may remember from that mythic encounter in 1 Samuel 17 David was aided by five pebbles from a brook.

The pebbles that have sustained me are children, animals, beauty, laughter, and the hospitality of kindness:

I heard read a New Zealand version of the old parable “The Emperor’s New Clothes”.^{xii} As you might recall it is a story criticizing power and pride. The Emperor [‘Mayor’ in this account] thinks he is wearing clothing that only the very intelligent can see and, unprepared to consider he might not be ‘very intelligent’, actually appears in a public parade naked. I pick up the rhyme as the parade begins:

“The Mayor tried his best to walk proudly, his bare belly wobbled and jiggled.
Then, during a lull in the cheering, a wee nipper started to giggle.
‘Mum,’ he chortled out loudly, ‘The Mayor is doing a streak!’
‘Shhh,’ said his mortified mother, ‘That’s quite enough of your check!’
But it seemed that the penny had dropped, everyone started to grin.
The grins turned to sniggers and chuckles, did all of them see only skin?”

Note three things from this extract: Firstly, the person the child is closest to [his mother] reproves him. Secondly, the child states the unadorned truth, the existential reality. And thirdly, the child's honesty and courage engenders a politically destabilizing humour that brings down the mighty mayor from his puffed-up throne.

In Ched Myer's commentary^{xiii} on Mark 10:13-16 he is critical of those who think 'becoming a child to enter God's kin-dom' is about childhood innocence or appealing to the 'child within'. Rather he points out the lowly status and suffering of children in biblical times. Where, Myers asks, do we meet children in the Gospel of Mark? In every case it is in situations of sickness or oppression.^{xiv}

Myers draws upon the work of Alice Miller, philosopher and psychoanalyst, and informs us that the child is always the primary victim of practices of domination within the family. If, says Miller, we address and rectify the oppression of children we will 'as a matter of course bring to an end the perpetuation of violence from generation to generation'.^{xv} What a wonderful thought!

What Myers says about children in the New Testament, and Miller says about children in her urban American context, is familiar to us in New Zealand. The statistics and reality around the prevalence of child poverty, violence, and our ongoing failure to rectify them are shocking and sobering.

So in terms of prayer and living the vision, this 'pebble' firstly calls and challenges us to protect, to make room – safe room – in our systems, budgets, policies, churches, and society generally, for children, their needs and wellbeing.

Then this 'pebble' also invites us to relate to children, to play, to use our imaginations, to honestly name and courageously change realities, to ask any and every impossible question, and dream of impossible new tomorrows. This 'pebble' invites us to imagine outside the lines, to colour outside the lines, and to laugh a lot. When we make safe and joyous spaces for children, question, dream, and laugh lots the might of Goliath does not seem so mighty.

Secondly: animals. I love the story of Balaam's ass. The religious bureaucrats who determine what readings are recited in church each year always leave out Balaam's ass. Maybe they think we shouldn't laugh when we read the Bible? Maybe they think donkeys don't talk?

The hapless donkey tries to avoid danger three times, and three times is beaten by Balaam who believes that he is quite entitled to beat an animal. Finally the donkey, via a bit of divine magic, talks back to Balaam admonishing him. Balaam then gets into an argument with the donkey - who is the ass now? – and relents and repents.

The lessons are these: Firstly, don't underestimate the wisdom of animals. They see and feel things we don't. To live well with animals one needs to learn how to cooperate. To live well and sustainably on this planet we need to learn how to cooperate. Secondly, those who use violence against animals, believing they have every right to do so, are condemned in this story. Violence is never justified against an animal or person. Protection of the vulnerable is the defining mark of a mature adult and a mature society.

Like with children, this pebble of prayer, invites us to be tender, protective, and cooperative. Animals also like to be touched – patted and stroked. The experience of sitting with a cat on one's lap, stroking it, feeling both comforted and connected, is a common one. I would call it a prayer, for it manifests a reality and a vision of the mutuality known as God.

Thirdly: beauty. Beauty is all around us - in architecture, art, music, movement, nature, relationships... and much more besides. Beauty is all around, even where and when life is extremely harsh and miserable, if we train our eyes and ears to see and hear. Such training often happens by learning how to be silent, still, and to contemplate.

Michael Ramsey, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, once wrote that prayer was not pious words or a peculiar way of getting things done in the world. Rather, it was about listening and waiting – being attentive to that which is beyond oneself. Prayer is like art; or rather prayer demands the sort of attention that art demands. It takes time. It requires silence.^{xvi}

I find it interesting and instructive that the one Christian denomination that has the best record in advocating for the little, the least, and powerless, is the denomination best known for its long periods of silence in worship. I refer of course to the Society of Friends, the Quakers. It's as if in silently contemplating beauty [and in doing so also all that seeks to destroy beauty] a strong commitment arises to challenge the god made in the image of power and those who serve that god's agenda.

I have a friend who walks. Beaches are her favourites. She walks out for hours at a time. Sometimes she talks as she walks. Sometimes she thinks. Sometimes she doesn't think at all. Her body moves, feeling the sand, the sea, the air and the ions. She opens herself to wonder. She returns re-stored, spiritually renewed.

To limit prayer to verbal address or active listening is to miss the totality of her experience. As she walks along the beach, sometimes holding nothing in her head, absorbing the wonders of her environment, the Holy is there. The physical act of strolling is itself a prayer. So too is the feeling of the breeze on her face,

filling the sails in her heart. Such restoration is prayer. You can't divide her walk up, you can't divide prayer up, and you can't divide her up.

The fourth 'pebble' is humour. As in both the story about the Mayor and Balaam's Ass humour and courage are closely linked. Humour upsets those who think they are mighty. It can destabilize the mighty. And they hate it.

When we laugh together and joke together we embody and live into the realm of God.

There's a great Bob Fulghum story about the game Hide & Seek compared with the game Sardines. In the former the individual hides until found, and then is a loser. The winner is the one who isn't found. And at the end there is only one winner. Hide & Seek is a winners-losers vision of the world and of the realm of God.

In Sardines though there is only person hiding. When that person is found the seeker gets into their hiding place with them, as does the next successful seeker, and the next. In the end they are all discovered, chiefly by the sounds of children piled on top of each other and giggling. This is my vision of the world and church: being found, being together, and lots of laughter.

The fifth and last 'pebble' I call the hospitality of kindness.

I'm reminded of a suburban bowling club that had a problem. The club was proud of its beautifully manicured greens, bordered by elegant box hedges. In order that spectators could sit around the perimeters the greens were sunk below ground level.

The problem was nightly visitors – hedgehogs! During the wee hours these prickly fellows would take a tumble from the box hedges and land on the green. There they would stay, trapped by the encompassing surrounds.

Well, the bowlers conferred about how best to beat the problem. An additional Perspex barrier around the green was suggested. It was trialed, but the prickly ones overcame it. The next suggestion was an electrical barrier, just strong enough to deter. It didn't work. Maybe it was the spikes? Next someone suggested poison, but nobody wanted to clean up the results.

Finally, old Jack suggested they build a little ramp - a bridge of sorts - that went from the green back up to the spectator seating. Everyone laughed. It sounded ludicrous. But you know what? It worked. Those balls of prickles didn't want to be on the green come morning any more than the bowlers wanted them to be there.

Sometimes prickly people come into our lives, difficult people who are a nuisance and a problem. We can spend a lot of energy trying to keep them from being destructive. But sometimes all they need is a little 'bridge' to get from here to there, from this place to wherever they are going. It's when they are stuck that a problem arises. Then a touch of kindness and imagination can go a long way.

When we open our souls to the needs of the different and difficult, and allow kindness and imagination to predominate, we can encounter the grace & wisdom of the Love called God. Hospitable kindness is prayer.

Conclusion

There are many things, simple things, which nourish the soul. Kurt Vonnegut once said, "We should be unusually kind to one another... We should also stop being so serious. Jokes help a lot. And get a dog, if you don't already have one."^{xvii}

This understanding of prayer I've outlined above – an understanding of prayer as a visionary way to live, to connect, to be open, and to be mutually in God and with God - is foundational to my spirituality. I have found too that the difference between those who worship a hierarchical Father Almighty and those who don't, who pray in/within a God of mutuality, is very large. These Gods frequently clash. They are irreconcilable. We need to choose sides. "Choose this day whom you will serve?"^{xviii}

At the Pussy Riot trial the charge of blasphemy couldn't be proved. Instead they were convicted for 'hooliganism' or what we might call 'disruption'. Such charges were what Jesus was accused of. Such charges were what were brought against Daniel Berrigan and his fellow protestors. The political and spiritual Goliaths will always fear and punish pesky shepherd boys or girls, men and women. And they have a reason to be afraid these Goliaths: for the power of mutual love and justice is ultimately stronger, more far-reaching and life-changing, than the powers of domination and control that are founded on fear. But as Berrigan says, "It's not going to be easy to change things".^{xix}

ⁱ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grEBLskpDWQ>

ⁱⁱ Mark 14:55-59

ⁱⁱⁱ Acts 7:54-58

^{iv} Acts 23:1-3

^v De Mello, A. *The Prayer of the Frog*, India, 1987, p.7.

^{vi} Ward, Keith, *A Vision to Pursue*, SCM 1991, p.70.

^{vii} Anglican Book of Common Prayer 1662

^{viii} Isaiah 2:4.

^{ix} *The New Zealand Anglican Prayerbook*

^x Note that nontheism has a variety of meanings depending on who is using it, ranging from a disbelief in God as a 'being' to a disbelief in any power that might be called God. I favour the former end of the range.

^{xi} This coincides with Carter Heyward's definition of God as 'the power of mutual relation',

^{xii} Gurney, C *The Mayor's Flash New Clothes*.

^{xiii} Myers, C *Binding The Strong Man: A political reading of Mark's story of Jesus*, New York : Orbis, 1994.

^{xiv} Mark 5:21ff, 7:24ff, 9:14ff

^{xv} Miller, A *For Your Own Good: Hidden cruelty in child-rearing and the roots of violence*, New York : Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1983 p.280

^{xvi} <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/belief/2013/feb/15/prayer-attentive-that-which-other>

^{xvii} Vonnegut, K, *Armageddon In Retrospect*, London : Jonathan Cape, 2008, p.31.

^{xviii} Joshua 24:15.

^{xix} <http://www.successories.com/iquote/author/72261/daniel-berrigan-quotes/1>