

Philip Roderick - Quiet Garden vision from seed to unfolding

Talk given at 25th Anniversary Celebration at St John's Waterloo, London on 20 May 2017

To start with some thank-you's. I've had some lovely messages from people who couldn't be with us in person. Whilst giving thanks for the beginnings of Quiet Garden, it's important to remember that new stories of involvement in this ministry are being birthed here right now. It's about people and stories. We're storytelling the last 25 years.

To begin with, heartfelt gratitude for several categories of people without whom all this wouldn't be happening:

Staff – people like Jackie, Penny, Rose, Mollie, Mary-Anne, Matt – core wonderful people without whom this would not be happening

Trustees, Patrons – We have two patrons here today as well as former and current trustees

Quiet Garden hosts - This would not be happening without you

So there's a whole plethora of people involved, together with those who simply love the idea and come along. In fact I've already overheard two or three people this morning saying "I'm just finding out about this, sensing whether I'm called to be involved in this".

One example of a couple involved in our work over the years is expressed in a quote from John and Jenny Frye in South Africa

"This small group of Quiet Garden hosts here in Cape Town asked me to send a message of good wishes to you as you celebrate 25 years of Quiet Garden. It has been a true planting of the Holy Spirit as one thinks of that tiny seedling at Stoke Poges germinating and growing into a Movement which has spread to so many countries and continents. I think of the folk who have become disenchanted with church and have found new ways to find God in their lives in Quiet Gardens:

- the creation of quiet places or areas in prisons, hospitals and schools which have comforted and encouraged hurting and lost people;
- the space to enjoy God's creation, His word and the blessing of silence, that has brought healing and hope to many over all this earth;

to mention a few ways in which this ministry has grown."

This articulates the extraordinary mystery of solidarity in praying. As we pray, we become interconnected - like strawberry runners - though even more invisible and delicate than that. There comes into being a delicate membrane of prayerfulness. We are delighted to be link people who love gardens, love green, love prayer, love God, love the neighbour, love the quest, love the activity and love the passivity. And that's what we're engaged in.

In the past few months I've been telephoning a number of people who were involved in the very beginning of Quiet Garden and this is from a nonagenarian, called Sheila Lockett, who lives in Stokenchurch and part of her message that arrived only this morning was:

"I shall be thinking of you and joining in all the feast of thanks and good wishes worldwide. What an enlightened moment it was when the idea of Quiet Garden came to you, to offer refreshment and solace, wonderfully combining reflection and solitude but with an inner sense of support and oneness from the others in the group. Many treasured friendships have grown out of those days. Thank you, Philip, for all those special days and memories, keep them fresh."

Of course, we are all really only conduits. The whole process is very little to do with me or you. It is how God works - the Spirit broods over the face of the earth and will drop seeds of potential for people, for each of us. And as we respond to those little nudges, then something wonderful will happen. There's a consistent renewal of this vision, renewal of energy, renewal of gifting.

“When I was on the telephone to Sheila, she has a great giggle and reminded me of the place of laughter, as well as of love shared. “It was such fun in the first Quiet Garden, we had such fun.” It can be quiet, deeply quiet, as we were with Andrew’s meditation, but it can also encompass tinkling laughter, it can be dry and sunny, or wet and windy; all weathers are there in the Quiet Garden. People may shed tears of pain but also tears of joy.

So 25 years ... there is something here for all of us about being alert to the call, however the call presents itself. “How did your Quiet Garden begin?” a visitor may ask. As you unfold your story, the visitor will hear your story and allow it to percolate through their own narrative. Then your story will become part of their story as we realise that our story is in a mysterious way His story. I do believe that Jesus is the focal point of the whole Quiet Garden Movement. What did Jesus do? He withdrew to places of natural beauty regularly and consistently to be still, either by himself, to be alone often before dawn, or with his closest disciples. There is something about natural beauty or natural rawness which is pivotal to what we are doing. Loving the outside, but underneath that, loving God from the inside out: the art of loving deep, deep, down.

I Corinthians 3 5 – 9 “I planted, Apollos watered but God gave the growth ... we are God’s co-workers.” There is something here in the Quiet Garden offering of hospitality and prayer, about being co-workers with God. We may be completely insignificant and small on our own but we are co-working with the divine energy which is busting forth. Greenness of trees, the verdancy of God and we’re caught up in that verdancy.

On the very first Quiet Garden, I was giving the input on the place of silence and solitude in the Christian life. Noreen Cooper, who is here today with us, was the host of the Stoke Poges Quiet Garden. She had recently begun to keep two or three llamas. As I present to twenty or thirty people, imagine that behind me is a window into the garden and a view through a gate into a field beyond, where these llamas had recently been introduced. I was giving what I thought was a well-constructed talk, when I noticed that gradually people were gazing beyond me, almost through me – were they having some mystical experience?! One by one they were noticing two creatures with long necks and big ears – are these new participants from High Wycombe? The llamas had deliciously upstaged me. We need to be alert to God in the tiny things, and the big things. Not everyone will have a llama in their garden, but you may have a flower or a flower bed, you may have a pond or a puddle which has a reflection. It’s a matter of allowing ourselves to be noticing God in the tiny as well as in the majestic.

One of my favourite prayers is the Celtic milking prayer. It beautifully articulates our interaction with God and our neighbour – both present in a Quiet Garden.

*Bless O God my little cow
Bless O God my desire;
Bless Thou my partnership
And the milking of my hands, O God.*

*Bless O God each teat
Bless O God each finger;
Bless Thou each drop
That goes into my pitcher, O God.*

There is a crucial interaction between praying and doing. The milkmaid is asking God to bless every step of the way. So we start a Quiet Garden by asking God’s blessing on the journey, on the people gathered there on that day. We ask that the whole thing be surrounded with love and the Holy Spirit. The milking prayer is a dialogue between the milk maid and God, right down to

the detail – the fruitfulness of the drop of milk into the pitcher which provides the milkmaid’s breakfast. We can do that nitty gritty praying in our Quiet Garden: asking God’s blessing for the different ingredients of relationship.

Praying with the Body can make a real contribution to people’s experience in a Quiet Garden. We’ll soon be going outside into the garden at St John’s Waterloo to explore together some simple body prayers. As an introduction I share some stories and quotes from the great spiritual tradition:

Turning and tendency - William Law (1686 – 1761) English contemplative and cleric wrote: *“Seek for God in thy heart, and thou wilt never seek in vain, for there God dwells, there is the seat of God’s light and Holy Spirit. For this turning to the light and Spirit of God within thee is the only true turning unto God. There is no other way of finding God, but in that place where God dwelleth in thee.”*

Notice the verbs because our activities, our walking on a Quiet Garden day can deepen the presence of God. It is deeply personal, God is with you now and at every moment of the day. In a Quiet Garden we take time to notice. Jesus invited people to come away to a quiet space, to step out of the normal pattern of things and find God’s presence now. We can alert ourselves to this presence with simple movements, changing direction, turning, sitting, standing.

“For though God be everywhere present, yet he is only present to thee in the deepest and most central part of thy soul... This holy spark of the divine nature within ... came forth from God, it came out of God, it partaketh of the divine nature and therefore it is always in a state of tendency and return to God.”

Be partakers of the divine nature – the radical invitation to us

“And all this is called the breathing, the moving, the quickening of the Holy Spirit within us, which are so many operations of this spark of life tending towards God.”

Early morning cold water tap turning on and giving thanks:

Annette Jackson in the Hambleton Valley, South Bucks in the 1990s recalled her first prayer every morning: it came as she went down to her kitchen, turned on the cold water tap, took a drink of fresh, clear and clean water and gave thanks to God for it.

Bowing down, straightening up, picking up:

Brother Lawrence (1614 – 1691) lay brother among Carmelites in Paris wrote: *“I turn over my little omelette in the frying pan for the love of God. When it is done, if I have nothing to do, I bow down to the ground and adore God from whom has come the grace to make it. Then I straighten up, more contented than a king. When there is nothing more that I can do, it is enough to pick up a straw from the floor for the love of God. ...God has no fancy ways for this. One has only to go plainly and simply to Him.”* (Quote from Lorraine Kisley’s Ordinary Graces compilation p94.)

Make your body an altar:

Antony of the desert – the first hermit – wrote in his Letters of Antony: *“Make your body an altar, and set thereon all your thoughts.. before the Lord”* (Quote from Alexander Ryrie’s The Desert Movement p24)

Our task is to be Quiet Gardens, to share simple resources, honouring the admixture of pausing and moving, of lament and laughter, of turning and stilling; all such movements can invite us to be loved by God. We are all engaged in activity and everyone may touch a profound solitude at different levels during our lifetime and we welcome people to Quiet Gardens who on different places on that continuum. Our task as hosts, helpers and participants is to be alert to what God is saying and also to what our neighbour is saying. Are they saying “I need to be met, to find

someone to say hello to.” It may be that the next person may simply want to be alone. We can learn to notice within ourselves where we are on the spectrum. Just as Jesus modelled for us, there is a movement from withdrawal to engagement. It is a prophetic task and we are invited on occasion to assist others on their journey – What is nurturing now?

Key biblical text and three examples of Body Prayers for use in a Quiet Garden

1 Cor 6: 19, 20 Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God...; therefore glorify God in your body.

1. Three hand shapes with outstretched arms:
open palms facing downwards - letting go of clutter, sins, blockages and allowing them to be released into the earth;
open palms, facing forward – opening up, welcoming the partner, the other, the stranger, the friend;
open palms, facing upwards – offering and receiving
2. Prayer for loved ones and for those across the world who need healing and restoring –; arms outstretched, palms down, beginning behind the body and moving in a large circle to the front, in contemplative intercession all the time.
3. The Lord’s Prayer body prayer “The prayer of prayers. The Lord’s Prayer can and has been rattled off through the centuries – our word ‘patter’ comes from rushing through the words of the Pater Noster (Our Father). Said attentively, however, the Our Father reveals itself as an inexhaustible meditation. Monastics have been known to spend an entire day on a single repetition of this prayer. It can be said to work upon the whole person: body, mind, heart and spirit.” Lorraine Kisley in her Watch and Pray (p111)

Philip D Roderick June 2017