

the JOURNAL



Baptist Union Retreat Group

Autumn 2011

PRAYING IN PRISON

Brian Howden Reflects on a Week of Accompanied Prayer at Woodhill Prison, Milton Keynes in May this year.

I was one of a team of six prayer guides (companions), who accompanied pilgrims on a Week of Accompanied Prayer (WAP) at Woodhill prison. The prison chapel was transformed with screened areas where we met our pilgrims for half an hour a day Monday to Friday.

For me these meetings were a profound experience. Whilst it is true our role was to accompany the pilgrims on their journey, it was equally true they were accompanying us on ours – a walking together in the presence of God. The level of openness to the presence of Christ from the pilgrims opened up layers within me to the God who surprises us as he makes himself known.

I drew on past experience of being part of Weeks of Accompanied Prayer and biblical passages to offer the pilgrim, but I increasingly found during the week that the most important part, was not the prayer resources I offered but simply being present in our 'one to one' meetings each day and to 'go with the flow'.

For their part, the pilgrims shared their past: what had brought them into the prison system, intimate details about and longings for family life, their work in the prison and hopes for the future when they would be released. For different reasons they didn't always pray with what had been offered or find the space to pray at all, but valued being able to talk to someone, without having to watch their backs.

Taking part in the Week was profoundly humbling as I listened to the failure that had brought them to where they were -their pain and their longings and hopes for the future. I commented in one of the **'Listening to the pain in people's lives leaves it's mark on the listener'** daily group supervision times, that I had earache. "That's not surprising," said one of the team, "listening to the pain in people's lives leaves its mark on the listener too."

The whole experience underlined for me the importance of seeing prisons as places of rehabilitation. The courts have played their role in sentencing, but the role of prison is not solely about protecting society from those who have committed crime, but a place where support is given to help prisoners on release to re-engage with society and be given appropriate support, so as not find themselves back inside, through reoffending. It underlined for me that we share a common humanity and as Christ walks alongside us, so we too walk alongside others on their, perhaps, very different journey.

For all of the prayer companions, as well as the Prison chaplain and staff, this was a first experience. We all wondered how it would come together. Would it be possible to accommodate the one-to-one



Woodhill Prison, Milton Keynes.

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The Baptist Union Retreat Group is a Founder Member of the Retreat Association.

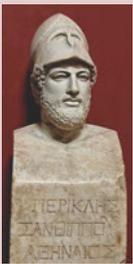
All views and opinions expressed in this Journal are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of BURG or of the members of the Committee.



SNIPPETS

“The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places.”
Ernest Hemingway.

“What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others.”



Pericles (a Greek statesman, orator and general during the time of the Persian and Peloponnesian wars. c. 495 – 429 BC)

“The trouble is, living in the city, that ‘still small voice’ is drowned out by the noise of the buses, the aircraft, my three children, next door neighbour’s children, the crowd at Old Trafford when they score a goal, and most of all, the constant background noise of my own mind telling me what needs to be done next”

“Somehow, in some obscure way, I am strangely warmed’ by the thought that in the hurly burly of the city, of the myriad of happenings that I never get to see and myriad of people that I never get to know, God is waiting - along with the rest of us - for the number 86 bus.”

From Bus Stop Spirituality
by Niall Cooper

meetings within the structured and disciplined life of the prison? Would the prisoners respond to what was being offered?

We were dependent on the prison chaplain to make the week happen. He was familiar with the process of Weeks of Accompanied Prayer, having been involved in spiritual direction work in parish ministry before coming into prison chaplaincy.

In our conversations around organising the week we knew what we would like to see happen – our own learning was how this might happen within the restraints of prison life. In the end the whole week ran very smoothly and we felt welcomed by the prison staff who were pleased we were there, even if what we were doing would have appeared very new to them!

The week before the WAP took place, the team of six companions attended the weekly prison choir practice in the prison chapel. All the pilgrims for the Week were part of the choir group and it was good to meet them in this setting and for them to meet us, not knowing at this stage who we would be paired with.

The Week began on Sunday morning 15 May. We met in one of the halls that forms part of the chaplaincy accommodation in the prison. We sat around in a circle, went through some introductions and were led in an imaginative contemplation taken from the Gospel of John Gospel 1: 35-39, where Jesus asks John’s disciples, ‘what do you want?’

This was followed by a moment for each of us to talk to the person next to us about any response we wanted to make to the meditation.

We were led into a place of receptiveness to God and an openness to what he was going to do

God was already at work. One prisoners asked whether he could sing to the Group. ‘Yes,’ we said, whilst I wondered what we were saying ‘yes’ to. I need not have worried, what followed was a song that led us into a place of receptiveness to God and an openness to what He was going to do in the coming week. It was incredibly moving and for my part unexpected!

At the close of the opening session we met with the two pilgrims we were to accompany during the week, introduced ourselves, offered a prayer suggestion for that day, and agreed to meet the following morning and each day during the week.

One pilgrim said he wasn’t sure he could make every day as he had other duties within the prison but as the week progressed it became clear that the WAP had priority, so long as the prison system could release him from other responsibilities. Even at this first meeting I was aware of an openness and commitment to engage in the Week.

At the close of the Week we met in the same space where we had gathered a week earlier. There was a buzz as the pilgrims entered. They were invited to respond to the Week with a word(s) that expressed something of what the Week had meant to them and to bring a symbol or picture that was or had been important or significant to them.

It marked a moment, a sacred moment, as each in turn expressed something that had spoken to them or touched them. Such moments are unique, a gift and it has left its imprint on me.

And to complete the Week, the prison kitchen staff had prepared a banquet style buffet lunch – not something that would form part of a prisoners’ normal diet! They ate what they were able, given the time restraints of having to return to their prison wing. The food said something important about the generosity of God who goes beyond the ordinary in making himself known.

I was pleased to know the chaplaincy team were going to put the food that hadn’t been eaten in a fridge so that those attending the weekly worship service the next day could enjoy the ‘baskets’ left over.



A RETREAT - WITH A DIFFERENCE

Reporting on 'The Still Small Voice', a retreat with a difference, held in September at Katherine House in Manchester

We were welcomed to Katherine House by Sister Brenda, and what a welcome it was – open hearted and warm! Clare McBeath & Tim Presswood led us through the weekend in a very relaxed way using the liturgies they had written and encouraging us to look for God in the City. (*Do take the opportunity to look at their website – dancing scarecrows*).

Friday Evening As we introduced ourselves and Clare got out the wallpaper, creating a cityscape as she recorded an impression of what we said (*see the photo*), we realised we were actually there, in the city of Manchester. What would we discover? What would this retreat reveal?

After introductions, we set off on our first task – an 'Awareness' walk:

- Deliberate, unfocused stroll
- Alert to all that is present
- Being ready to be prodded
- Mooch
- What am I experiencing?
- Pause – stop - reflect

Walking through this Jewish area of Salford we discovered similarities to and differences from our normal lives; under the same sky with plants and trees – even security gates – but so different.

The Hebrew signs and Jewish men on their way to synagogue were unfamiliar, as was the young men doing drugs outside the Ukrainian RC church. Behind the lighted window, one sensed the women preparing for the evening meal.

And so to our evening meal at the Italian restaurant. We ended our evening with prayers, including the urban encompassing prayer, before going silently to bed.

Saturday's theme: Attentiveness

First of all listening to the music of the city

- Music describing the romanticism and idealism of the city
- The atmosphere
- City sounds
 - Gershwin (USA)
 - The Verve (Manchester)
 - Moondog



Wallpaper cityscape



"QUOTES"

"Certainly a retreat with a difference. We have not so much withdrawn from the world as entered into its heart, which is the modern city."

"I valued the gaps – times in the sessions for silent reflection - something lacking in many churches today."

"I enjoyed the opportunity to be creative and to be enriched by the creativity and reflections of others. And to experience the life of the city and for those experiences to lead our thinking, praying and learning."

"Homely welcoming place.
Silence within noise
Noise within silence.
Changing landscapes
Changing people
Changing lives....
Minds Look beyond –
bigger picture
Look within – you / me
Different yet the same
Christ in us."

Then into central Manchester to consider how Jonah applies to the city:

- We discovered places of sanctuary in the city
 - In the Cathedral
 - Even in the Cathedral of consumerism – the Arndale Centre
 - The Earth café for lunch – the hospitality of the Buddhist Centre
 - With no sense of season – harvest – one looks around to find connection / rootedness / groundedness in other things
 - “I find God in the city, in the bustle,” said Tim

And so to Sunday-

- to discover newspaper articles that caught our attention to bring to God and to ask

- Where have you heard God’s voice?
- Welcome and hospitality in unexpected places?

And then to share communion before our farewell lunch, taking home with us the city experience with its surprising warmth and welcome and presence of God.

Urban Encompassing Prayer

I look to the East where football fans share fish, chips and obscenities,
Christ is there

I look to the West where shops and offices hum with busyness
Christ is there

I look to the North where Friday prayer sets the rhythm of the week
Christ is there

I look to the South where students watch debt mount and seek to put the world to rights
Christ is there

I look to the past where echoes of factories and mills remind us of times gone by
Christ is there

I look to the future where dreams are dreamed and hope burns bright
Christ is there

I look at the faces revealed around me and the self buried within me
Christ is there

Clare McBeath & Tim Presswood 2008: adapted 2011



*Clare
McBeath
and
Tim
Presswood
in
musical
mode.*

Silent Flight

In the silence
The clarity of your voice,
Climbs high
Upon the eagle's wings.
The chains of doubt
That imprison my soul,
Fall away beneath my feet.
In the freedom and majesty
Of the sentinel's gaze,
Faith is strengthened
And hope returned
To a weary heart,
Upon the silent flight
Of eagle's wings.

Eternal Journey

As the crimson flame of life
Breaks slowly
Above the horizon,
The white, frosted meadows,
With trees and hedgerows
Of sculptured ice,
Speak loudly
Of your presence.

Once more
Upon this journey,
As another day begins,
Without effort
Or intrusion,
Through the peace
And tranquillity
Of your silent voice,
The moment becomes eternal,
And the journey
Begins again.

Sanctuary

Shafts of light
Through cathedral windows.
Dappled shade
Upon the leaves
Beneath my feet.
Bird song
In the branches above.

In the distance
Hind and fawn
Cross the forest track.
The sweet fragrance of autumn
Fills the misty air.

A gentle breeze
Moving colours
To the forest floor.

So precious
Such beauty,
So hard to find
Such peaceful sanctuary

From *In Search of Silence* a collection of 45 poems by Chris Roe. This collection of work is available online at www.silentflightpublications.co.uk

READING FOR BURG MEMBERS

We asked Heather Andrews to suggest some books on the subjects of spiritual direction and contemplative prayer.

Trawling through the bookshelves of memory I see many titles familiar and inviting. I skip over the youthful influences and come to two books which sparked a journey of contemplative prayer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer* and *Poustinia* (Fount 1975), by Catherine de Hoek Docherty probably familiar to many, and on through many interesting paths.

Reading and reflecting took me on a journey springing from the Brethren influences of early childhood and the Baptist theology that formed my youthful faith, and continues to be the grounding bedrock of these explorations) each twist in the journey adding riches and challenge.

A voice familiar to us from Radio 4's 'Thought for the Day' now, Angela Tilby DLT 1989, *Extended meditations on Genesis: Let there be light*. From a Jesuit perspective Anthony de Mello had much to teach: *Wellsprings* (Image 1986) is a book of searing spiritual exercises; *Awareness* (Fount 1990) – eye-opening! Its first chapter entitled 'Waking Up!', and *The Way to Love* published after his death. (Doubleday 1992).

Other Books which contributed to spiritual growth and development: *God of Surprises*, by Gerard Hughes (1991) and several of his other books; *A Seven Day Journey with Thomas Merton*, which is a 'recipe' for a DIY retreat (Esther de Waal Eagle 1992) and Thomas Merton on *Contemplative Prayer* (DLT 1993), an analysis of our growing in self-knowledge.

Medieval mystical writers provide interesting pathways to explore: Books on the spirituality of Theresa of Avila (Rowan Williams, Continuum 2000), Hildegarde of Bingen. Melvyn Matthews draws insight from Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, Thomas Traherne and ETTY HILLESUM in *Awake to God* 2006 SPCK.

One of my favourites: *Toward Holy Ground, Spiritual Directions for the second half of life*, Margaret Guenther (DLT 1996) brings a refreshing older woman's voice – particularly her appreciation of St. Ann ('God's Grandmother!') which delights my soul when I read it. Margaret's earlier book *Holy Listening, the Art of Spiritual Direction* draws me and uses the metaphor of 'God's midwife', helping to bring to birth a depth of spiritual experience.

Kenneth Leech *Soul Friend* is I suppose a classic text approach to Spiritual direction in the modern world reminding us that 'The ministry of spiritual direction grows from a life of prayer, discipleship and the struggle for holiness'. Reprinted revised in 2000 DLT.

Along the lines of spiritual disciplines, that may well spring from a regular practice of contemplative prayer, Richard Foster has offered a succession of helpful books: *Celebration of Discipline* and *Freedom of Simplicity* are two that have challenged me about lifestyle, and set goals I may never achieve!

A straight-forward very accessible series of books which look at different approaches to the spiritual life is the *Traditions of Christian Spirituality* Series (DLT) which includes *What a Friend we have in Jesus – the Evangelical Tradition* by Ian Randall (2005), and *Following in the Footsteps of Christ – The Anabaptist Tradition* by C. Arnold Snyder (2004).

I'm so thankful for words of wisdom to encourage, challenge and guide. There are many more!

Heather Andrews.

* Original out of print but there is a reissued Abridged edition SCM Classics 2001.

NOTICES

LENT RETREAT

at

IVY HOUSE

Warminster

Friday, 30 March

to

Sunday 1 April 2012

AUTUMN RETREAT

at

SCARGILL HOUSE

Yorkshire

1 - 4 October 2012

GROUP INDIVIDUALLY GUIDED RETREAT

at

HOLLAND HOUSE

3 - 6 December 2012

Further details and bookings-
forms from Retreats
Secretary, Gill Roberts:

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BURG AGM AND CONFERENCE

Notes from the BURG AGM, Saturday 11th June 2011

The AGM was part of a Day Conference led by the Revd Dr Ruth Gouldbourne and the Revd Martin Taylor who introduced the theme, 'Prayer in a Noisy Place'. We met at Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church in the heart of the West End of London and were sent out by Ruth and Martin to experience the sights, smells and sounds of London first hand.

Returning to the Church there was space to speak about our experience and insights before being led in Communion at the close of the day.

Fifteen members were present for the AGM with sixteen people sending their apologies. Reports were received from Ian Green as chair, together with secretary's and treasurer's reports. The AGM is the occasion to receive the annual Report and Accounts, a necessary part of our life, not only because they tell the story of BURG during that year, but also because BURG is a charity, required by the Charity Commission.

We remembered with sadness Chris Hutt, who died in March 2011, giving thanks for his life and recognising the important role he had played in the life of BURG as treasurer.

We welcomed Mr Bill Carpenter who has now taken on the role of treasurer. Ron Ayres, Janet Boyle and Gill Roberts were all re-elected for a two-year term and David Pountain, again co-opted with special responsibility as editor of the Journal.

We agreed changes to the Constitution, which reflect more accurately the original intentions of those who worked on the Constitution back in 2003.

We also agreed to raise subscriptions, having held the current level for a number of years – this had been proposed by the BURG Committee back in September 2010, before the new treasurer was appointed! Subscriptions will increase to £20 single membership, £37.50 couple, £32.50 group or church and £37.50 house or college. The change to take effect from 1st January 2012 for new members and from the AGM 2012 for existing members.

And finally the AGM in 2012 will be held during the Retreat Association Conference at Swanwick, Derbyshire on Wednesday 16th May at 4.00pm. At previous conferences there has been a good number of BURG members present and we hope a number of you will be able to attend in 2012. The dates are the 14 to 17May.

*Brian Howden
Secretary*

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To whom all enquiries about membership should be sent.

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The Editor welcomes contributions, related to the retreat movement, in the form of articles, reports, prayers and poems but cannot always guarantee to include them.

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A REFLECTION ON THE BURG CONFERENCE

WHEN Ruth Gouldbourn spoke of the challenge and pain of city living, of the physical, mental, emotional restrictions of being bombarded with noise, I contemplated how we are inter-woven with noise from our earliest moments.

It is there from the baby's first cry, from the sounds of medical interventions, from the gentle voices of those we love, and from then on we are afflicted by sound of all kinds. And then there is the cost of this as well as the joy of hearing voices we love.

We were then 'sent out' into the city to feel the effect of the sounds, the noises, and this for me was frightening as I am, as I always express it, 'dyslexic about direction' and terrified of getting lost!

I was able happily to trail Janet as far as the British Museum (I think it was or it may have been another!) and she very kindly gave me clear directions how to get back. I hung onto her every word and managed to commit it successfully to my scared brain which was hopping about all over the place.

I listened to the sounds of the feet on steps, and the different sounds of the interior space. I felt the hush of the different feel of the air as I entered on the gallery spaces, and lost myself in contemplation of the various treasure hoards that had been found beneath the quiet earth.

After a time, returning to the sounds of African drums playing in the foyer area, back into the street, and firmly following Janet's instructions without deviation found myself firmly back in Bloomsbury Baptist Church. Shaking, I may say!

Altogether a different experience than I had expected from 'ministry in the city' but memorable.

Heather Andrews