

Justice Spirituality

by Brian Davies*

Among the various groups and societies we may expect to find in a typical parish, alongside the UCM or CWL, Knights of St Columba, Mother & Toddler, Brownies; are the Prayer Group (Charismatic or otherwise) and the Justice & Peace Group. They would be perceived to be at the opposite ends of the spectrum: the one concerned with “raising the mind and heart of God” and the other with the political realities of the world. The former would normally be expected to give time to quiet and reflection, the latter to analysis and campaigning. It would be the view of many that while the prayer group is concerned with the ‘spiritual’ activity at the heart of Christianity, Justice & Peace is more of a fringe interest concerned with temporal, and therefore less important, affairs. But do prayer and politics have to be seen as so far apart? Is there not a need for a spirituality that enables people to integrate their faith and prayer life? Or, starting at the other end, an approach to prayer that sees the political activity as part and parcel of our love of God?

Since the word ‘spirituality’ is often used as if it referred only to religious activities – like prayer, devotions and sacraments – it is important to clarify what we mean.

SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality is about what is most personal in me; about what makes me; about what makes me what I am, with all my attitudes and values; about what motivates me and inspires me and makes me tick. This is where what is most authentically and profoundly me meets God.

Spirituality is about sharing in God’s spirit – however that is experienced. God is the source of all things, the great transcendent mystery, above and beyond us, eternal and infinite, not limited to space or time. But God is also experienced as immanent, working in and through everything that moulds and affects us – the one ‘in whom we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17:28) The God that Christ reveals to us is above all a loving and compassionate God. Spirituality is also about our relationship with other people, about community. God’s spirit is in everyone and at the centre of Jesus’ revelation about God that we call God

‘Abba’ or ‘Imma’ (Galations 4:6) If we have this intimate family relationship, all of us, with each other, then we will have for each other that same covenant-love God has shown us.

Spirituality, at the same time, is about our relationship with the whole of creation. God, creator and sustainer of the world and all it contains, dwells in all things giving them life and being. Through God’s Spirit we are all united in a sense with all of creation and share responsibility for it – as indicated in God’s covenant with nature (Genesis 9:8 – 17).

Our understanding then, of spirituality, is that it involves our life or self in its relations with all these – with God, with the rest of the human community, and with the created world. Spiritual growth is about removing barriers between the various areas of our life and trying to make of it a balanced whole – or, much of the time, simply experiencing these areas in tension together.

A COHERENT SPIRITUALITY

We are seeking a spirituality that will be a centre from which we can act and live our faith in today’s world, a spirituality which can give coherence to every area of our life and not just a part of it. This may be best expressed by reflecting on what the prophet Micah has to say:

*“This is what Yahweh asks of you, only this:
That you act justly,
That you love tenderly,
That you walk humbly with your God.”*
(Micah 6:8)

“Walk humbly with your God”

As we become more aware of God’s love and care for us individually, we realise we are called to respond, that we are all part of God’s saving plan. Our religious conversion then, begins with our experience of being loved in all our weakness and failure. In spite of our inadequacies, indeed somehow because of them, we are enabled to commit ourselves to a pattern of living proclaimed by Jesus, aimed at transforming the world. We are called to share in the proclamation of Yahweh’s programme of liberation i.e. the Kingdom.

“Love tenderly”

We are also concerned with a moral conversion, a conversion from being self-centred to being other centred. Everyone is to be loved and treated with respect. Our willingness to listen to others, to affirm them and entrust ourselves to them, to be compassionate means allowing ourselves to be vulnerable. Our model is the faithful and enduring love shown us by God – even in the face of unfaithfulness. Our God is a compassionate God, who has shown in Jesus the extent to which he is willing to enter into our pain and suffering.

“Act justly”

Even further, we are concerned with the response in the public sphere i.e. with political conversion. This involves working to build a society in which structures are just, where wealth, power, rights and responsibilities are distributed to every level. In particular, it involves sharing in God’s covenant with the poor and making an option for the poor in our own lives. This is not a bias against the rich, but a recognition that the whole of humankind is judged by the response made to those in greatest need (Matthew 25: 31 – 46). Moreover, in worldly terms the wealthy are well able to look after their own interests, while the poor need special protection against systems that inevitably favour the powerful.

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The spirituality with which many of us were brought up, and which may still sometimes influence us, largely lacked a social dimension, presuming and promoting instead, an individualistic understanding of the faith. It was often escapist and ‘other-worldly’, looking for salvation outside this world in some purely spiritual dimension, and rewarding people in heaven if they patiently endured injustice here on earth. The aim was to disengage from worldly affairs and certainly from politics. In general, it supported the established order of things (with all its inequality) as God-given and not to be questioned. To a large extent that traditional spirituality has been replaced by apathy. It is more common nowadays when people do refer to spirituality for them to insist that it is purely personal and private matter.

In contrast, the spirituality being proposed here recognises social justice as of key importance. It is prophetic, encouraging people to challenge the existing order wherever it sustains inequality and injustice. It means political involvement, understanding the need, in a society structured in favour of the rich, to bring about change in favour of the poor. It involves taking responsibility for the whole of creation and seeing that natural resources are not wasted or exploited for profit. The Bible leaves no room for doubt. It is justice and compassion rather than religious observance that are identified as the weightier part of the law (Isaiah 58, Mt 23:23). In God’s eyes, to be just is to safeguard and respect the rights of the poor (Leviticus 25; Is 10; Amos 8; Luke 4; Mt 25, James 2). The poor share with us their experience of a liberating God who is on their side to protect them against oppression – a God who “puts down the mighty and exalts the lowly, who fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty” (Lk 1:52-53). This God reveals to us that those who are most important in God’s eyes are not the honoured and powerful people of this world, but the ‘little people’ who seem of no account (Mt 13:55; 1Corinthians 1:26-28). Our God then, is above all the God of the poor. The insight we obtain into the lives of the poor and despised challenges us to change our priorities, hopes and concerns, and to redefine what we mean by ‘success’. To ‘opt for the poor’ is about sharing our resources with them, but more fundamentally, it involves sharing some of their experience – “the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties” (Vatican II) – in order to work with them for a more just and human society. This spirituality changes our whole life.

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