

Don't push the river

David Norwood, in his moving piece, has introduced us to Richard Rohr's book *Everything belongs: The gift of Contemplative Prayer* (Crossroad 2003). My comments relate to Chapter Five of that book which Richard Rohr entitles 'Don't push the river'. Being a contrarian by nature and an engineer by training, the idea of pushing the river rather appealed to me. But of course it is exactly what he is telling us not to do. If one were to sum up the chapter in one sentence it would be 'Go with the Flow'.

'There is a kind of knowing', he says, 'a kind of powerful conviction, that comes from spiritual emptiness. It comes from letting go and living out of the beginner's mind. We call this knowing "faith". It is a very *spacious* way to live.' He contrasts the 'big mind' of the East with the 'small mind' of the Graeco-Roman culture which can 'analyse, organise and fix almost anything'. But it was no accident that Jesus came at the cross-roads of the East and West – Palestine occupied by the Romans and Greeks. 'Small mind is preoccupied with clarity and control, as is the Roman Church to this day'. But religion, in its institutionalised form 'is often the *least mature manifestation* of the living presence of Christ. Suffering and risen people everywhere tend to show forth God's Glory more than managed religion'.

'If we can learn to trust God, the next movement of our soul is to trust ourselves'. Jesus tells us 'Don't be afraid ... it is radically okay. Nothing will be wasted; all has been forgiven; nothing will be used against you. As Julian of Norwich heard from Jesus "Sin shall not be a shame to humans but a glory ... Sin is behovely (it had to be), but all shall be well". That's the way Jesus responded to everybody'. Richard Rohr believes that 'there are no dead ends. There is no wasted energy. Sin history and salvation history are two sides of the same coin'. Forgiveness is almost the same as falling in love. 'When you "get" forgiveness, you get it'. A number of fathers in the early church believed that God's love was so perfect that in fact it would finally win out in every single person's life. This was what gave rise to the notion of purgatory and has never been condemned as heretical. 'In the entire history of the Church it has never been declared that a single person is in hell. Even Judas. We almost hold out for universal restoration'. The vengeful part of us does not want Hitler to be loved by God. But does that sound like one of the parables? 'Remember the prodigal son? The punch line ... lies in the parable's older brother'. Rohr says that two thirds of Jesus's teaching is

about forgiveness. 'Forgiveness is God's entry into powerlessness, as we see in his image on the cross'.

'Prayer is being loved at a deep sweet level.' Rohr wonders why God gives humans such a 'strong and constant fascination with one another's image, form and face.' He speculates that how we relate sexually is probably a good indication of how we relate to God. Rather than quoting the Song of Songs, St John of the Cross or Mary Magdalene he gives us a wonderful poem by the Moslem mystic Shams-ud-Din Mohammed Hafiz (ca. 1320-89) called 'You left a thousand women crazy':

Beloved,
Last time,
When you walked through the city
So beautiful and so naked,

You left a thousand women crazy
And impossible to live with.

You left a thousand married men
Confused about their gender.

Children ran from their classrooms
And teachers were glad you came.

And the sun tried to break out
Of its royal cage in the sky
And at last, and at last,
Lay its Ancient Love at your feet.

'He is talking about seething human desire, but he is also convinced that it is a sweet path to God'. But Christianity has 'relegated the body to a shadowy realm. This hardly demands verification after a look at our tragic sexual state, our pollution of the physical earth, our gross unbalanced consumerism, our pendulum swings between obesity and dieting, between "couch potato" numbness and obsessive fitness concerns.' "Sex" is the one "Sin" that we are all supposed to be upset and shocked about "while omitting the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy and good faith" (Matt. 23:23)'

'Most of us are still shooting for the stars. We are looking at ascents and "higher states of consciousness" while Jesus quite simply "comes and lives among us". We try to do "end runs" round body and

souls to feel “spiritual” but it has not worked at all. In fact we find ourselves in a major spiritual crisis in the West.’ Rohr asks ‘How many healthy, happy, holy Christians do you know? The present climate is not just a result of human failure but also of not finding an integrated and healing sexual ethic.’ In the eucharist, the placing of bread – the Body of Christ – in the mouths of believers is ‘intentionally shocking, sexual, oral, mystical and momentous. Only after thousands of “communions does its truth dawn on us. *We bear the mystery of God*’.

This brings him to the river. ‘Strangely your life is not about “you”. It is part of a much larger stream called God. ... Faith might be precisely that ability to trust the river, to trust the flow and the lover. I want to make things right, quickly. I lose my ability to be present and I go up into my head and start obsessing. I’m into goal-orientation, trying to push or even create the river. Faith does not need to push the river precisely because it is able to trust that *there is a river*, which is God’s providential love. ... Some say that FEAR is merely an acronym for “False evidence appearing real”. I promise you grace will lead us into fears and voids and grace alone will fill them up, *if we are willing to stay in the void*. I have to stop taking hold of myself. I have to hold, instead, a degree of uncertainty, fear and tension. It takes both practice and grace. What must be sacrificed is the attachment and the strange satisfaction that problem-solving gives us. We must not get rid of the anxiety until we have learned what it wants to teach us. The problem gets worse as we get older. We start organising and shoving other people around to suit our agendas. We can put out a certain judgmental energy even when we don’t want to’.

He turns finally to personal and social prayer, which he calls the ‘ultimate empowerment of the people of God’, giving us a sense of ‘abundance and connectedness’. He speaks of the need for the “weeping mode”. ‘Weeping is a gentle release of water that washes, baptises and renews’. It is the opposite of blaming and denying. ‘It leads to deep healing when inspired by the spirit’. Francis and Clare cried a lot, sometimes together. ‘St Ephrem the Syrian said that freedom to cry was a clear sign that you had actually experienced God. Rohr then turns to the gift of contemplative prayer. This is not a way of thinking. ‘It’s much more a way of not thinking. It’s not a way of talking; it finally moves beyond words into silence. It moves into the mystery that is too deep for words. Prayer must lead us beyond mind, words and ideas into a more spacious place where God has a chance to get in. The prayer of silence is not so much to express but to experience dependence. We acknowledge and rejoice that we are the beloved. Silence leads us to a kind of revelling

in the mother's arms, revelling in the silence that follows making love. There are no words. There is nothing to say, just the knowledge that "it is good, it is very good" as in Genesis 1. That feeling of sadness is the primary gift that Jesus came to give us, even more than the great mystery of the church. Indeed it is the foundational experience of all healthy and happy "church".

Ponder that. The feeling of sadness is the foundational experience of the Church.

I cannot resist finishing with another favourite poem, "Love" by George Herbert, parish priest.(1593- 1633).

Love bade me welcome, yet my soul drew back
 Guilty of dust and sin
But quick-eyed love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
 If I lacked anything.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
 Love said, you shall be he
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear ,
 I cannot look on thee
Love took my hand and smiling did reply
 Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, said love, who bore the blame?
 My dear, then I will serve
You must sit down, said love, and taste my meat:
 So I did sit and eat.