**Learning Together # 1: (Christian) Spirituality, part 3**

In the first two parts of this resource material for discussion around spirituality I, Bruce, outlined some characteristics of spirituality and particularly of Christian spirituality. In this part of the resource material I’ll explore some of the ways in which Christian spirituality (one of the principles we identified as important for us in Poatina) can be maintained and encouraged and give you the opportunity to reflect on those methods or practices. I invite you to our next gathering on March 17th at 10am when we make the space to hear from each other about spirituality, spiritual practices you’ve found helpful, and how this principle (that many identified at the Poatina weekend as important to our life together in Poatina) might help us move toward s our goals expressed in the Poatina on a Page document.

**Connection/Communication:**

It’s my opinion that communication and connection are at the core of the Christian faith. In the Judeo- Christian tradition of spirituality, it’s the Divine being that makes the first move to connect with what has been created. So if we reflect the nature of the God we are reaching towards (as we suggested is the case in the first and second parts of our resource material on spirituality), we too will want to reach out and connect. Several things indicate this might be true: We see the intention to connect and communicate in the tiniest of babies; John Donne the poet writes “no man is an island”; biologists have long known we are gregarious beings. Even the most introverted of us needs human company; in fact solitary confinement is used in prisons to punish those we’ve already separated off from society because of their anti-social behaviour.

This desire to reach out to connect is, of course, one manifestation of love, a central attribute of the Christian God. Community (the characteristic behind the Trinity which makes love possible) and communication come from the same Latin word (meaning common); it may be a bit trite but I think it’s true that the health of a community is related to the quality of its communication. We’ll explore that a bit more in the 4th and last part of our resource material.

The Incarnation, which we celebrate each Christmas as a central distinctive of Christian spirituality, is also an expression of this desire (on God’s part) to communicate on a profound level. In contrast to the words of the song *From a Distance* that Bette Midler made famous in the 1990s, the Incarnation demonstrates that God didn’t communicate “from a distance” but humbly, within our human frame of reference and by sharing in our humanity. We can answer a resounding, “but he was!” in answer to the question posed in another song of that decade, “What if God were one of us?”

And I would suggest that forgiveness, the last of the three attributes of the Christian God that we suggested (in the last part of the resource material on spirituality) was a distinctive of the Christian God, is vital for ongoing communication and community. We all make mistakes, we all make bad choices, and we all fail to live up to even our own standards of behaviour; we need to forgive, to be forgiven and to find and implement ways of ‘making things right’ if we are to have any lasting relationships.

**Prayer:**

In Christian spirituality, and probably in other spiritualities too, communication and/or connection with God is often called prayer. Most of us have a pretty one-dimensional view of prayer, which usually involves us asking for something, often with our eyes closed. But communication involves not just talking and asking, but also listening and sharing what’s going on for us.

Rowland Croucher puts it like this:

…spirituality is the practice of prayer in the life of the individual Christian. There is not just one way to pray – there’s a hundred. Creative spirituality describes our relationship with a creative God, as we learn to share the joy of his aliveness.

(Croucher, R, *Recent Trends among Evangelicals.* John Mark Ministries, Heathmont, 1986, p 59)

Many people communicate with God not just by talking out loud or silently expressing their thoughts in the privacy of their minds. Some write their prayers, some sing, and some dance or paint or model clay or engage in any combination of these and other ways.

One book I, Bruce, have found helpful when thinking about prayer is Adele Calhoun’s book *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* (IVP, Downers Grove, 2005), even though I find myself baulking at the word *discipline*; my way of overcoming my inner resistance to the word is to substitute the word *practices* for *disciplines*! In her book (available from the gift shop or on loan from Bruce) she identifies 20 or more different ways that we can communicate with God. These include:

* walking the labyrinth,
* several different forms of contemplative prayer, such as
  + the welcoming prayer,
  + the centering prayer,
  + the listening prayer and
  + the breath prayer;
* praying with a friend,
* using the words of Scripture,
* praying while walking,
* praying at fixed times during the day,
* using a formal liturgy,
* caring for the earth,
* worship,
* gratitude,
* and celebration,

Whilst many of these are forms of ‘talking prayers’ or silently putting words together in one’s head, I think they could be used in other media, such as painting, dance, doodling and the like.

Adele Calhoun also outlines a number of ways that we can receive communication from God. Experientially for me, and I know for others, communication with God is far more dynamic and interactive than God and I taking it in turns to ‘speak’ or ‘listen’! But here are some of her suggestions:

* Bible study or reading
* devotional reading
* meditation/contemplation
* drawing icons
* journalling
* going on pilgrimage or retreat
* practicing simplicity
* silence/unplugging
* participating in Holy Communion/the Eucharist/the Lord’s Supper (or whatever you call it!).
* spiritual direction/companioning

Some of these practices can be ways of communicating with God as well as receiving from God!

In my own experience, I’ve found that deliberately opening myself up to the numinous, or cultivating a sense of awe and wonder (often but not only though spending time in the natural world, either in my veggie garden or out in the bush) has been a vital means of sustaining my spirituality. Reading certain books, watching certain movies, looking at certain works of art, listening to certain pieces of music, respectful and open conversations with others and listening to some sermons have also been helpful ways for me to connect and communicate with God.

What have you found helpful?

**Suggestions for reflection and discussion:**

1. What practices have you found helpful in sustaining your spirituality?
2. Would you feel free to sharing some instances in which this has happened?
3. If you were interested in exploring some spiritual practices that are new to you, who might you talk to or where would you go for some help?
4. How might we encourage each other in Poatina to deepen or widen our spiritual practices (if we wanted to!)?
5. If they have, would you feel free to share how your spiritual practices have helped you face some of the challenges, or increased some of the joys you’ve encountered living in Poatina?
6. Can you identify some spiritual practices that you think will help you individually and/or us corporately to better achieve our goals as a village?

Bruce Dutton, February 2018.