

HOME RETREAT – THE CONTEMPLATIVE CALL TO NATURE -30/10/21

Suggested Timetable (But do make your own)

- 11.00 Talk – The Contemplative call to Nature
- 11.30 Read through the talk again.
- 11.45 Coffee break
- 12.00 – 13.00 Look at the You Tube Interview with Carmody Grey – And think about it.
- 13.00 – 14.00 Lunch break
- 14.00 – 16.00 Siesta/Leisure/Gardening
- 16.00 Tea break
- 16.15 – 18.00 Look at the two Extracts and the Richard Rohr Reflections on Contemplating Creation.
- 18.00 Vespers Live stream from the Abbey
- 18.30 Supper break
- 20.15 Compline Live stream from the Abbey

Appendix 1.

Your Room/Cell & Being/Doing

The Priest & Dr Jung

A story may help to illustrate the need to get to know ourselves: A priest once went to Dr Jung because he was near to a nervous breakdown. "Doctor," he said, "I am working a 14 hour day and feel I am going mad." After an extensive interview, Jung suggested to him that he changed his life-style, worked an 8 hour day, had his supper and then stayed quietly with himself until bedtime. The priest was so grateful and went away to try this remedy. After supper, he soon got restless, and so listened to Bach and read a book by Hesse. The next day the same thing happened, and he listened to Mozart and read a book by Mann. By bedtime he was frustrated and angry – and stormed into Jung the next day complaining that the remedy hadn't worked. Jung listened to an account of his two days, and said "But I asked you to be with yourself for those hours before bed, not with Mozart or Mann, Hesse or Bach." "I couldn't think of anything worse than being with myself all that time," said the priest. "Yet that is the person you impose on the rest of us for 14 hours every day." said Jung.

1. How can our Room/Cell teach us everything?
2. What makes us afraid of our own company?
3. Can I cope with Silence, or do I need distractions?

4. Has this period of isolation made me consider those who are normally isolated? Lonely? Have mainly their own company to deal with?
5. Have I considered how we isolate people deliberately? In Prison? In detention Centres?
6. Do I know enough about our treatment of Asylum-seekers?

7. Do I see Being and Doing as opposites and incompatible?

8. How can I keep the tension/balance between Being & Doing?

Appendix 2.

ROAMING:

1. Look at the following website from HomeAway - Note the title.
<http://app.mailaway.homeaway.com/e/es?s=225508597&e=13140428&elqTrackId=e6db9f79cb214ccfb85124da3f0fecb1&elq=2959f5b527c841bda6b899fa621d6d7a&elqaid=53896&elqat=1>
2. What attracts you to being away from home?
3. What other forms of 'Roaming' do you engage in?

Despite its attractions, even benefits, why might 'roaming' not be 'good for your soul'

Appendix 3.

Scripture Readings, Questions and the Future

2 Samuel Ch 7:8-17

Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: 'Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; ⁹ and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. ¹⁰ And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, ¹¹ from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. ¹² When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³ He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ¹⁴ I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. ¹⁵ But I will not take^[b] my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. ¹⁶ Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me;^[c] your throne shall be established forever. ¹⁷ In accordance with all these words and with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.

This is God's promise to David to establish his Throne and House forever. God will build David a House – not David a House for God.

1. Do you see any connection with our topic of Enclosure?
2. The Temple built by David's son, was a symbol of God's presence, his promise and of stability in Israel. What did God require of his People to maintain this Covenant?
3. What went wrong?

“Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. Jn 4:21-23

4. Where is Enclosure now?
5. Where is Enclosure after the lockdown for the whole world?
6. Paradox: Enclosures & Universal Openness?

Appendix 4.

Focus on God

Apostolic Constitution *Vultum Dei quaerere* on women's contemplative life, 22.07.2016

Final Chapter: The witness offered by nuns

36. Dear sisters, everything that I have written in this Apostolic Constitution is meant to be, for you who have embraced the contemplative vocation, an effective contribution to the renewal of your life and your mission in the Church and the world. May the Lord be ever present and active in your heart and transform you entirely in Him, the ultimate aim of the contemplative life, and may your communities or fraternities become true schools of contemplation and prayer.

The world and the Church need you to be beacons of light for the journey of the men and women of our time. This should be your prophetic witness. You have chosen not to flee the world out of fear, as some might think, but to remain in the world, while not being of the world. Although you live apart from the world, through the signs of your belonging to Christ, you tirelessly intercede for mankind, presenting to the Lord its fears and hopes, its joys and sufferings.

Do not deprive us of your participation in building an ever more humane and thus evangelical world. In union with the Lord, hear the cry of your brothers and sisters, who are victims of the “throw away culture”, or simply in need of the light brought by the Gospel. Practice the art of listening “which is more than simply hearing”, and the “spirituality of hospitality”, by taking to heart and bringing to prayer all that concerns our brothers and sisters made in the image and likeness of God. As I noted in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, “intercessory prayer does not divert us from true contemplation, since authentic contemplation always has a place for others”.

In this way, your testimony will be, as it were, a necessary complement to the witness of those who, as contemplatives in the heart of the world, bear witness to the Gospel while remaining fully immersed in the work of building the earthly city.

37. Dear contemplative sisters, you are well aware that your form of consecrated life, like all other forms, “is a gift to the Church, arises and grows within the Church, and is completely directed to the good of the Church”. Persevere, then, in profound communion with the Church so that in her midst you may become a living continuation of the mystery of Mary, Virgin, Bride and Mother, who welcomes and treasures the Word in order to give it back to the world. Thus you will help to bring Christ to birth and increase in the hearts of men and women who, often unconsciously, are thirsting for the One who is the “way, the truth, and the life. Like Mary, you too strive to be a “stairway” by which God descends to encounter humanity, and humanity ascends to encounter God and to contemplate His face in the face of Christ.

Questions:

1. Has the lockdown conditions helped you focus more on God or on the Spiritual?
2. How will you express this focus or develop it after Lockdown?

Appendix 5.

How not to be an idiot: Hannah Arendt on public life in COVID-19 times

Anna Rowlands

We are living in an unnatural state. We are living like this for good reason, of course, but it is still an *unnatural* way to live. It seems that it has taken the experience of a pandemic to remind us of things that we already knew. We are creatures made for touch, embrace, proximity, interdependence and mutual care. Although, yes, we also need our spaces of retreat, safety, privacy and sanctuary. We want to be both with others and able to retreat from them and protect ourselves from others; sociability *and* privacy are both part of what keeps us well. This isn't really news, but, goodness, haven't we had it rammed home?

But there is another dimension to our creaturely nature we have re-discovered through this crisis, which is perhaps less obvious: we are creatures who need not just a social life, and a private life to keep us well, but a *public* one too.

The notion that we discover in a crisis that we are social, private *and* public persons are sentiments that would have made a lot of sense to the twentieth century political theorist Hannah Arendt. Arendt was a committed thinker of what it means to be social, public and private persons. To live in a moment when we have lost the usual markers of our public lives — spaces of free association, sport, leisure, work, worship, education and political action and disputation beyond the home — but when we have seen the global focus on the public ethics surrounding health, social care, food production and distribution, financial markets and incarceration rise, would have fascinated and disturbed Arendt.

Arendt wrote sharply of the Roman world's contempt for a life that is lived in search of complete privacy. A life spent in the privacy of one's own company (*idios*), outside of the world of the common, is "idiotic," Arendt notes in *The Human Condition*. To live only a private life was not fully to be human. The etymology of the word idiot/idiotic takes its meaning from the privacy of being locked into one's own world alone. This is not a life lived well, not the human being fully alive.

Arendt makes use of this sharp thinking to drive home her double definition of what it means to live a public life — a life that has rounded value. The public realm, for Arendt, has two meanings.

First, the public realm is that realm in which we come to appear to each other, when we emerge out of our own concerns to found a shared world. It is the space between people that opens up

in the presence of others who “hear what we hear” and “see what we see.” We need these experiences of common knowing and judging. Second, the public realm is “the world itself,” what is common to us all and distinguished from our private space. It is all that relates us, and separates us — so, not just the things we agree on and share, but also the common realities that divide or separate. The public realm is not a flat world of mere chatter; it is the world of common projects, as well as of structural inequalities. This common world is something pre-existing that we are born into and pass on, and it is something we can make anew between us, as we create a space of reasoning, judging and acting. The public realm therefore is an expansive and fluid place, a *happening* as much as a *location*.

Taking these definitions of public life, it is clear that limited to our households and keywork, we have not become wholly private persons. We remain ourselves, even under domestic lockdown, public persons. What we have done in accepting lockdown is sacrificed the physical realm of public appearance as a matter of commitment to all we hold of value in that common world. We stay at home, to protect a common world; we accept the shrinking of our world and extreme limit as a public act. Lockdown is not a form of self-selecting privacy. Indeed, arguably, to accept lockdown and social distancing is to allow our commitment to the public good to shape our private living, for it to enter into our households, domestic and work arrangements in ways unprecedented in our lifetimes. We are allowing the state to dictate rules that encroach far into the terrain of what we have thought to be most private: our freedom of movement and association; our intimate relations; our care and generative relations. Our private lives are now matters for social comment and mutual, and even state, policing.

Arguably, what this illness, and our governance decisions in the light of it, has done is to intensify the publicness of everything and everyone, yet while shrinking our physical public world. Lockdown and the months of social distancing to come are experiences of the privation of particular goods, but they are not the privatisation of our lives. This is not what is happening to us. Nor should it.

What Arendt does for us is to remind us that our “publicness” is as important to our flourishing as our sociability and our privacy. She draws a distinction between what it means to act “socially” and what it means to act “politically.” The social realm for Arendt is both the context where all our basic survival needs “are permitted to appear in public” and also the realm of “behaviour.” One of the things she fears about modern societies is that society — focused on how we behave and what we will permit for ourselves and others — becomes the realm of *conformism*. This is worrying not just because we don’t really get vibrant societies out of conformism and sameness, but also, Arendt says, because there is a risk that we think this is all there is to our living together. We lose ourselves in the tasks of managing behaviour and forget that our true public task is *to act*, and to distinguish ourselves in doing so. The risk, says Arendt, is therefore that we

confuse *behaviour* with *action*; that in modern liberal societies “behaviour replaces action as the foremost mode of human relationship.” This confusion can happen in any area of our modern lives and institutions, secular or faith-based. None is immune.

Arendt wants to drive home the point that healthy public life requires that we do not just see ourselves as social actors but also as fully public persons, committed to judging and acting as members of a common world we want to inhabit and pass on. Arendt tells us that public action is action in which we stand out, are individuated, become in some way excellent in a manner that is of service to others and a greater good. This is the space where we take risks, subject our common life to scrutiny, seek justice (that sometimes requires us to transgress what seem like accepted laws) in order to be increasingly open to the claims and needs of other humans — ones who are not our household and our kin.

This public life is the opposite of conformism; it is a life of skill, struggle, negotiation, endurance, contestation. It is the space where we stand and act in the name of what we believe, *with* and *for* others. This kind of public space cannot be placed under lockdown, suspended or suppressed. In fact, in the last two months we have been utterly dependent on it; we have intensified its importance — it has become, quite literally, our life support system. This is the space where healthcare workers, innovators and key workers have individuated themselves and been excellent for us, through both skill and public commitment. While one side of our public lives has disappeared, we have intensified our public services in every dimension of their “publicness.”

Nonetheless, there is a side to our publicness that we are less sure footed about right now. It is the space where we *contest* what is happened and what is revealed to us about our common world. It is the space where we ask hard questions about the demographics of this virus, the values we ascribe to life and market, and where we interrogate the hierarchy of who it is we have believed to have had value and who not, and to be disposable or not. It is the space where we work together to survive this rupture and, when we can clear our heads, wonder about what life we wish to build together during and in its aftermath.

It is also the space in which we pay close attention to the kinds of words we use in public life. Arendt is clear that the public realm is constituted by both speech and action. In combination what we say and what we do form our public sense of the world. How we use language to define this virus, to frame our moral choices, to create hierarchies of value — *this* is all part of how we form a public life, and must be part of our public scrutiny. Words matter. They open and close moral worlds. Is it better to say that this is a proxy-war, a battle — evoking the conflictual world of friends and enemies, us and it-them? Or to use humanitarian language — a challenge to our ways of being human, a time to rise to a challenge of care, compassion and sacrifice? The adoption of political metaphor by global political leaders has been fascinatingly gendered so far.

I wrote in the [first article in this series](#) that the commentator [Matthew D'Ancona](#) is right when he says that we are suffering from a sense of collective “asphasia”: an inability to be articulate about what is happening right now. For reasons Arendt would understand, it is hard to think about it in isolation and hard to write about it. And I argued in turn that those thinkers who can help us pay close attention to what is emerging, but do not demand instant articulacy, are especially helpful and honest guides to thinking during a pandemic.

When I have spoken with keyworkers managing complex areas of social care, they have talked not only about this pandemic thinking fog, but also that what is happening to our public and social services is a rapid change driven by very short-term planning and outcomes. We are reduced to the interval of the moment. The emergency COVID-19 housing of the homeless and changes for those seeking asylum are cases in point. Our attitudes to those we have often labelled “low-skilled” or “un-skilled” has shifted — at least at the level of mere sentiment, if not policy and wider mindset.

We are creating suspended spaces of action, short term and reactive, but thinking through where we go from here, beyond the *short term*, on the one hand, and the *sentimental*, on the other, into a place that is better than where we came from, will requires sustained attention in the longer run. It will require a commitment to both paying deep, unflinching attention now, and fresh thinking, social innovation and change that helps us not retreat into hostility, animosity and austerity of public imagination, as we find the headspace. This is a fragile moment in which the latter world of increased social division is just as possible as the former world of real social change.

In a short review essay entitled [“No Longer and Not Yet,”](#) Arendt writes about events that represent an “absolute interruption of continuity” and the ways that these events open up an “empty time.” It is worth quoting at length her remarks:

Hume once remarked that the whole of human civilisation depends upon the fact that “one generation does not go off the stage at once and another succeed, as is the case with silkworms and butterflies.” At some turning points in history, however, at some heights of crisis, a fate similar to silkworms and butterflies may befall a generation of men. For the decline of the old, and the birth of the new, is not necessarily an affair of continuity, between the generations, between those who for some reason or other still belong to the old and those who either feel the catastrophe in their very bones or have already grown up with it, the chain is broken and an “empty space,” a kind of historical no man’s land, comes to the surface which can be described only in terms of “no longer and not yet.”

In this “no longer” and “not yet” of pandemic times, we are being opened to the moral claims of others in raw and demanding ways. These are immediate claims, with longer term trajectories we cannot yet contemplate, but in time must. In the interval we are living in, we are being asked to

push against the anxiety that closes us from the claims of others. And to remember who we are: social, private, public beings with a vocation to protect life. In time this will need to become a different kind of public task — one of the renewal of our common worlds.

[Note: This is the second of three articles exploring the COVID-19 pandemic through the work of Simone Weil, Hannah Arendt and Gillian Rose.]

Questions:

1. What things, aspects of life, have you REALLY missed, during this lockdown period?
2. What aspects of life have become more interesting? More intense? More bearable?
3. What have you found most challenging during this time?

Appendix 6.

TheologyinIsolation 15: How should we draw on the Christian tradition during Covid-19?

How many quotes, reflections, or articles have you glimpsed, since Covid-19 began, which draw on the wisdom of the early church fathers and mothers? Through my Twitter feed, the words of historical Christian figures have been offered up as means of help, wisdom, and encouragement - whether it's Martin Luther on how to behave in time of plague; Theresa of Avila, or Benedict, on how to live in community, or isolation; or Saint Therese of Lisieux on how to suffer well - our saints have something to say. Now is the time to bring to the fore your favourite Christian from the tradition, if indeed, you have one.

My personal favourite, thus far, came to my attention through a course I'm teaching this semester, entitled 'Evil in Early Christianity'. Evagrius of Pontus, a fourth-century monk, enriches our isolation through his writing on theology and prayer:

Against the thought of listlessness that is eager to find another cell for its dwelling place on the pretext that the first one that it had was very foul and full of moisture so that it got all kinds of diseases from it:

Here I will dwell, for I have chosen it (Ps 131:14).^[1]

This tweetable quip comes from Evagrius' book, *Talking Back* (*antirrhētikos*). According to Palladius, it is the third of the 'sacred books', following *Praktikos* (on prayer) and *Gnostikos* (on knowing God). The clue as to the book's purpose is in its title; Evagrius wrote it to teach his followers how to combat demons, drawing on Jesus' use of Scripture after his baptism, whilst battling Satan in the desert. Evagrius demonstrates his own knowledge of the Bible by employing no fewer than 498 verses of Scripture with which to combat demonic thoughts. He moves through themes such as greed, pride, and sadness. The quote above is aimed at the 'Demon of Listlessness'; I'm sure many of us can resonate with this, currently!

As a historical theologian, I am always on the search for treasures from the Christian tradition. I like this quote from Evagrius because it brings a little light relief to a difficult season; it has been all through Twitter and has put many smiles on faces, reminding us of something we already know, but which is helpful to remember: others have struggled in the past, and are struggling now, with feeling 'cooped up'. We are not the first people to experience hardship and we won't be the last.

So, why is it that I, as someone who believes that the tradition has a great deal to offer contemporary theologians, want to press 'pause' ('pause', not 'stop') on the way sources are being used during Covid-19? One word: Context. We need to take care with how freely we distribute our treasures from the past because 'context matters'.

Interpreting sources responsibly takes time. The ancient Christians depict a very different kind of lived experience, and if we overlook this, we risk losing in translation some important points, or making connections that an early Christian writer was not making. For example, Evagrius was writing about demons, not Covid-19. His isolation, and that of the monks for whom he was writing, was a radically different experience from the woman, in twenty-first century Great Britain, living on the 20th floor of a council block with six kids and a violent partner, who is about to lose his job and who can't go to the pub. Reports of domestic violence have risen 25% in England in the past few weeks. Evagrius' context was different. He exerted agency; he and his monks chose their lifestyle, and they were not, in fact, in isolation all the time. The monks to

whom he was writing had the freedom to move around, as did Evagrius. They were not trying to raise a family, whilst continuing to work from home, or suddenly out of work, or homeless. Whilst it may be comforting, for those of us in privileged contexts, to draw on these ancient treasures, there will be many in our society for whom this luxury is not possible.

This same point applies to the plethora of writing which has appeared on my screen, these past few weeks, on how we should learn from monastic communities. Some years ago, I spent a year living in community with the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul. It was an experience I shall always treasure, and from which I learnt some valuable practices, regarding a rhythm of life, centred around prayer. Whilst I hold dear that period of my life, it was not at all the same as my current context, and I'm hesitant to make too many connections between my practice of prayer then and now. I was not working full-time as a professor and my family responsibilities were very different. Of course, traditions other than our own can teach us important lessons, but we need to be very careful about recognising some key differences in context and vocation. Public theologians and Christian leaders have a responsibility to take care how we disseminate our treasures from the past. Otherwise, we risk adding to the sense of failure that so many, struggling at home, are already feeling.

Theological reflection and learning takes time. Whilst our anxiety and activism may push us towards a desire for quick answers, let's not plunder the tradition. Instead, take a moment to contextualise the intended learning so that listeners/readers may be encouraged, and not ashamed, during a period where encouragement is much needed.

Point taken: But the writer seems to suggest that the life of Saints and Monks/Nuns is a think of the past! They live in this context also and are experiencing Covid 19 as well as living their situations of Isolation – which they chose. By way of encouragement, I am sure there are more real heroes today, even saints, who are battling with their own present context, than we can imagine. We may feel that the NHS are the only heroes. That is not true. Like the troops in any war, they are supported by thousands of others, every family who have tried not to spread the virus, being some of those others, but can still gain insights from the experience of 'traditions other than our own who can teach us important lessons.' – contextualised or not!

Questions:

1. Has being together as a family unit given you any insight into the challenges/ delights of being such a unit?
2. What new skills, realisations have helped you grow as a person?
3. How have you coped with being separated from members of the family?
4. What changes to family life will you make post-lockdown?

Thank you for following this Retreat on Enclosure. We hope you will follow more each Saturday.

