

Learning, gentleness and the arts – Abbesses of Saxon England as models of ministry

A Quiet Day Conducted On-Line.

Greetings from Lesley McLean. This material is brought together for your day of quiet in the company of people all over Australia who are your virtual companions.

When Evelyn Underhill was writing about the importance of setting aside time for quiet she described such times as an opportunity ‘to reset your compass’.

So, that is the purpose of this quiet day.

A time of quiet means quite simply that – a rest from the stimulation of talking, listening to the radio or watching television or reading. Mostly, you will sit or walk by yourself, contemplating short pieces of reading or nature. Writing or drawing is also an act of contemplation. So you may wish, or need, to write or draw.

If you are on your own at home for this quiet day, resist the temptation to check on the news of the day or answer the telephone or check your emails.

If you are gathered with a group, resist the temptation to talk.

From Jesus’ teaching in the Gospels we know that he expects his ‘disciples’ to engage with heart, soul and body.

This time of quiet concentration may be a struggle; stay with it. It is expectation and desire to succeed that intensify the feeling to quit. Evelyn Underhill says that ‘struggling to see does not help one to see. The light comes, when it does come, rather suddenly and strangely. It is just like falling in love; a thing that never happens to those who are always trying to do it.’

Your intention to encounter God will strengthen and reward you, even if imperceptibly at first.

Practicalities

What you may need during the day:

A note pad and pen – for taking notes, writing reflections.
A sketch-book and pencils if so inclined.

A Bible, Prayer Book and Hymn Book.

Get your lunch prepared and a snack or two even if you are on your own at home, so you don’t have to distract yourself thinking “What am I to eat?”.

Make sure your phone is disabled. You may need to let your family and friends know what you are doing so they don't worry.

If you are hosting a group, arrive early enough to set up self-serve tea and coffee, make sure there are enough chairs, and that visitors know where the toilets are. Provide tables for people who want to sit and write.

Timetable

Arrive at 10.00 am for chatting, settling in with a cuppa. You might want to arrive earlier if you need more time here.

Morning session 10.30 am -12.30 pm

Lunch 12.30 – 1.30 pm

Afternoon session 1.30 – 3.30 pm

3.30 -4.00 pm Departure chatting.

Appoint a leader and/or reader to read prayers and readings. If you are on your own read these aloud purposefully and carefully. Remember, we are together even though separated by distance.

Corporate prayer whether spoken, sung or silent is powerful.

Each session will begin with prayer. Liturgical resources are from *All desires known* by Janet Morley, *Celtic worship through the year* by Ray Simpson and *Out of the Silence...prayer's daily round* by Jim Cotter.

Readings will be followed by a commentary. Points for reflection are offered. Twenty minutes is suggested for silent contemplation.

At Midday there are prayers. Some may wish to have a celebration of the Eucharist.

The Quiet Day begins with Prayers:

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier.

Our help is in the name of the eternal God,
Who is making the heavens and the earth.

Eternal Spirit,
Flow through our being and open our lips,
That our mouths may proclaim your praise.

Canticle
Psalm 100

Let the whole earth be joyful in you, O God,
Greet you with gladness,
And celebrate your presence with a song

We joy in your steadfast love and rejoice in gratitude and wonder.

For we know that you are creating us,
You are alive in us and we belong to you.
You are weaving us into a marvellous tapestry,
A people of diverse threads and colours.

We joy in your steadfast love and rejoice in gratitude and wonder.

We enter your gates, a motley procession,
with heartfelt thanksgiving and joy.
We dance with delight and bless one another,
in the Spirit of your love, intimate and just.
For you are gracious and courteous, compassionate in embrace,
faithful through all generations.

We joy in your steadfast love and rejoice in gratitude and wonder.

Silence

Living, loving, holy Mystery, **our joy rests in you and comes from you, for we are indeed content to be your people, and we are humbled by your care of us. You are God and there is none other. You are steadfast, faithful, loyal, and kind. We would seek to embody your will on earth, and to trust you for all that is to come.**

[if you are familiar with, or remember, reciting or chanting from the *Book of Common Prayer*, you may wish to replace the modern unfolding; see below for JUBILATE DEO]

Sentence from Scripture

You desire truth in the inward being: therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. Psalm 51:6.

Collect

God of wholeness,
you have created us bodily,
that our work and faith may be one.
May we offer our worship
from lives of integrity;
and maintain the fabric of this world
with hearts that are set on you,
through Jesus Christ, Amen.

Janet Morley

Sit quietly until ready to proceed with the introductory remarks.

Morning Session: Time Team Tactics

We have begun our time together with prayers and psalms. The *Jubilate Deo* (Psalm 100) is a morning canticle in Anglican Prayer Books and links us back through the ages to 7th and 8th century Anglo-Saxon England. This golden age, centred mainly in Northumbria “was one of the most amazing flowering of culture known”. It was influenced by Roman Christianity from the Old Empire and the new wave of missionary endeavour led by Augustine from Rome and Celtic missionaries from Ireland and Scotland. Monasteries for both men and women flourished, led by a galaxy of spiritual stars, the women leaders shining with equal brilliance. It is to three of these Abbesses that we look today as models of ministry.

The lives of the saints of old are shrouded in mystery; and for the women, neglect. Hilda of Whitby, the brightest star, is recorded by Bede and honoured in the Calendar of Saints. Etheldreda of Ely is also a Prayer Book saint and Werburga of Chester has given her name to many churches and towns over England and a medieval monastery. Through the mists of time and despite historical neglect their names live on. What was so inspiring about their Christian lives that inspired their contemporaries and guided their ministry? We will not be discouraged by these women’s brilliance and or impressed by their apparent success. A glimpse at what formed their strength and holiness will empower us for ministry.

So into our spiritual dig we go in true archaeological Time Team style: out with metaphorical trowels to scratch away the dust of our preconceptions, and a strong spade to dig deeper and uncover the essentials.

Romans 12.1-8

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgement, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Take some time to read this piece. Take note of a particular word or phrase that strikes you. No matter how familiar the passage is, there is always something new that can take hold of your senses.

Reflection

At the end of the old game of Hokey Pokey you “put your whole self in”. Paul is asking his readers to put their whole selves in the Christian frame, body, mind and spirit. Like a Scout troop or a battalion on parade, he wants Christians to be present with all their being. Presenting yourself is a spiritual act, is worship, and this is what the 7th century nun did; worshipping was the order of the day, seven times daily. And the worship was a community affair, as Paul says, by one body with many members. Worship drew people into contact with God and “near to the heavenly mysteries”. The renewing of their minds came from worship. The unlettered and the learned knew the psalms by heart, so that the essence of their devotion to God penetrated deep into their hearts and minds. The psalms were interpreted in a Christological context: “God spoke through David as a prophet of Christ”. The psalms “formed the structure of the Anglo-Saxons’ thought”.

Paul’s teaching about the variety of gifts is reflected in Anglo-Saxon culture. Teaching was a vital part of the Abbesses’ ministry; they themselves were learned scholars and fostered the skills of others. Richard Foster offers helpful encouragement on study as one of the twelve classic spiritual disciplines. The four steps involved in study that he lists echo the Abbesses’ essentials practice: repetition, concentration, comprehension and reflection.

Foster adds that study demands humility, a quality Paul stresses and which is contingent in gentleness, the second aspect of the ministry of the Abbesses. The gentle person knows the measure of their own capacities and with “sober judgment” embraces the capacities of others whether less or more than their own. The gentle person is not angry, threatened or self-obsessed. As a model of ministry gentleness is far from the ideals of modern business practice. Ambition, competitiveness and self-seeking may be inherent in human nature and in our society; they are not, however, consistent with Christian teaching.

The Anglo-Saxons integrated worship and study with delight in the beauty of holiness. They took seriously the notion of gifts as from God so that their artistic gifts glorified the Gospel. Words mattered, so their monks and nuns illuminated manuscripts, and their monasteries had magnificent books in church for anyone to read at any time. The Anglo-Saxons “used Latin, but soon created their own written language.” They built beautiful churches with glorious glass windows where they worshipped in the presence of the angels. “This delight extended beyond the glory of the places to the glory of sound. They sang their prayers. Singing mattered: they were a singing people.”

During the time for Contemplating you may wish to consider these questions:

- * In what ways can you put whole yourself more in, be present?
- * How serious are you about accepting your gifts and acting on that knowledge?
- * How gentle are you with yourself and others?
- * What delights you?

Engage your imagination, your experiences of the holy – in liturgy, hymnody or creation; at a party, poetry, reading, art and film, in your relationships.

Don't forget your sense of humour or the fun times.

This is a soul-building exercise, to strengthen the memory of the love-with-God times.

Gathering: Midday Prayer

Glory to God above,
Glory to Christ beside,
Glory to the Spirit within.

May the glory of God be seen in work done from the heart.
May the glory of God be seen in communication that ennobles the spirit.
May the glory of God be seen in clean and honest living.
May the glory of God be seen in beauty of art and form.
May the glory of God be seen in the pursuit of true learning.

Pause

May the glory of God be seen in the stature of waiting.
May the glory of God be seen in the grace of unknowing.
May the glory of God be seen in the dignity of humbling.

Sentence from Scripture

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. 2 Corinthians 3:18

Collect

As the press of work pauses at noon,
May God's rest be upon us.
As the sun rides high at noon,
May the Sun of Righteousness shine upon us.
As the rain refreshed the earth,
May the Spirit bring rain upon our dry ground.

Silent prayer ends with:

The glory of God in my working.
The glory of God in my speaking.
The glory of God in my eating.
The glory of God in my resting.
The glory of God in my thinking.
The glory of God in my looking.
The glory of God in my listening.
The glory of God in my travelling.
The glory of God in my crying.
The glory of God in my loving.
The glory of God in the present moment.

Arms of the glorious Three be around those we shall work with, and may the glorious Three pour lovingly and generously upon us, and upon all who are with us, hour by hour.

Lunch 12.30 – 1.30

Gathering A Prayer to begin the afternoon:

God our vision,
in our mother's womb
you formed us for your glory.
As your servant Hilda
shone like a jewel in the church
may we now delight to claim her gifts
of judgement and inspiration
reflected in the women of this age
through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Janet Morley

Afternoon session: Who were these women and what did they do?

Hilda, Etheldreda and Werburgh were 7th century royals, and related to each other. In fact sainthood ran in the family: Werburgh's mother, grandmother and great-aunt Etheldreda were all saints and daughters of kings; Etheldreda was followed by her sister and her sister's daughter, three Saxon queens in succession as abbesses of Ely; Hilda was followed at Whitby by her relative Enflada and her daughter Elfleda. I am sure it does help to drink in virtue and godly living with your mother's milk.

It is tempting to think they had everything going for them to achieve life a sanctified life – no television or advertising, no cars or supermarket trolleys, and plenty of serfs to pick up the mess - so one assumes they had plenty of time of their hands to pray. But realistically we know temptations are part of the human condition. Bede records visiting a double monastery where “men and women alike are sunk in slothful slumbers or else remain awake for the purpose of sin.” They were also feasting, drinking, gossiping, and the women dressing up and making friends with strange men. As in the world today war and murder, rape and pillage were ever-present dangers.

Medieval images depict the holy three as impressive rulers, dressed in copes and holding crosiers, holding the church or pointing to the page of an open book. Theirs were not the only double monasteries; they were not the only abbesses. It is 20 years since women were priested in the Anglican Church in Australia and four since two women were handed a crozier and given authority as bishops. It is remarkable that 1400 years ago women were so highly considered in these rough and tumble times that they administered double monasteries. They were more likely to know Latin and Greek than their brothers. They were in authority over men, they taught them. Hilda was spiritual guide not only to ordinary people but also to kings and princes.

The story of the deed that brought her close to inventing English literature is often told (see the addenda for Hilda and Caedmon) but I am moved by Hilda's ability to keep her feet on the ground and her head in the heavenly realms. What I mean is that she could so easily have dismissed the alderman's chatter about some illiterate cowhand dreaming he could compose songs. She was a royal after all, and top lady with 600 personnel to keep in order, plus a busy prayer schedule and important people to advise. Even if we know it's the good and right thing to do to take notice of the unlovely and work for the poor it is often hard to prioritise. It seems to me Hilda never lost that Christian ideal

that what we do for the least of these we do it for Jesus. This is gentleness born of humility, a word derived from the Latin for earth. Hilda's model of ministry is gentle because it is based on the common humanity we share that is formed in the image and likeness of God. Gentleness cares, is attentive, has no bias. It is authority that comes from the author of peace and lover of concord.

What happened in Hilda's double monastery was repeated in many others. The foundations Etheldreda laid in her monastery at Ely were sound. The abbey flourished for 200 years, only to be brought to ruin by marauding Danes in 869. A hundred years later a Benedictine monastery was founded for men and in Norman times the cathedral was begun.

St Werburgh learnt her monastic skills at Ely under Etheldreda and exercised them by founding new monasteries, and reforming existing ones. She was renowned for humility, caring and childlike trust. She seemed rather the servant than the mistress.

The impact of these women's lives remains visible long after their deaths. Towns, streets, abbeys and churches bear their names. Schools and universities honour Hilda's passion for learning. Digging deeper has uncovered the source and essence of their remarkable ministry.

During the time for Contemplating you may wish to consider these questions:

- Is there time for learning in your life? What might you do to give some learning time to God?
- Consider the strengths of gentleness. How can one be gentle while exercising one's gifts of leadership?
- What does the beauty of holiness mean to you? How might you be enriched? And then, what might you do to enrich the worship of others?

Gathering _____ Closing Prayer

Lord have mercy.

Christ have mercy.

Lord have mercy.

*Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name,
Your kingdom come,
Your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
As we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
And deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours
Now and for ever. Amen*

Abide with us, O Lord,
for it is toward evening and the day is almost over;

abide with us,
for the days are hastening on
and we hasten with them;
abide with us and with all your faithful people,
until the daystar rises and the morning light appears,
and we shall abide with you forever. New Zealand Prayer Book.p. 424.

Let us bless the Lord **Thanks be to God.**

Silence ends 3.30 Goodbyes

Many blessings, Lesley.

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Addenda

An alternative reading of the opening canticle:

O be joyful in the Lord, all ye lands : serve the Lord with gladness, and come before his presence with a song.

Be ye sure that the Lord he is God : it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.

O go your way into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise : be thankful unto him, and speak good of his Name.

For the Lord is gracious, his mercy is everlasting : and his truth endureth from generation to generation.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost;
As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be: world without end. Amen.

St Hilda and the poet Caedmon

There lived in [Hilda's] abbey, as a servant, a man named Caedmon, who, according to Bede, had never been able to sing or play the harp until in a dream someone called him by name, saying, "Caedmon, sing to me."

What shall I sing?" he asked.

"Sing me of Creation," came the answer, and Caedmon at once began "to sing in praise of God."

The dreamer mentioned his new gift to the alderman of the town; the alderman told Hilda. And Hilda at once took him under her motherly wing. McGinley *Saint-Watching*.

Caedmon became the first poet in Old English whose works were written and have therefore survived. He sang about the content of Scripture, learned by heart, and in English. Ward *High King of Heaven*.

Some hymns that may be useful

Teach me my God and King
Teach me, my God and King,
in all things thee to see,
and what I do in anything
to do it as for thee.

A man that looks on glass,
on it may stay his eye;
or if he pleaseth, through it pass,
and then the heaven espy.

All may of thee partake;
nothing can be so mean,
which with this tincture, "for thy sake,"
will not grow bright and clean.

A servant with this clause
makes drudgery divine:
who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
makes that and the action fine.

This is the famous stone
that turneth all to gold;
for that which God doth touch and own
cannot for less be told.

George Herbert AHB 458; Common Praise 583

God be in my head, and in my understanding;
God be in mine eyes, and in my looking;
God be in my mouth, and in my speaking;
God be in my heart, and in my thinking;
God be at mine end, and at my departing...

Richard Pynson's *Horae B. V. M.* (Sarum Primer, 1538 - Henry W. Davies, 1910)
AHB 456; TiS 549; Common Praise 439

I bind unto myself today
The strong Name of the Trinity,
By invocation of the same
The Three in One and One in Three.

I bind this today to me forever
By power of faith, Christ's incarnation;
His baptism in Jordan river,
His death on Cross for my salvation;

His bursting from the spiced tomb,
His riding up the heavenly way,
His coming at the day of doom
I bind unto myself today.

I bind unto myself the power
Of the great love of cherubim;
The sweet 'Well done' in judgment hour,
The service of the seraphim,
Confessors' faith, Apostles' word,
The Patriarchs' prayers, the prophets' scrolls,
All good deeds done unto the Lord
And purity of virgin souls.

I bind unto myself today
The virtues of the star lit heaven,
The glorious sun's life giving ray,
The whiteness of the moon at even,
The flashing of the lightning free,
The whirling wind's tempestuous shocks,
The stable earth, the deep salt sea
Around the old eternal rocks.

I bind unto myself today
The power of God to hold and lead,
His eye to watch, His might to stay,
His ear to hearken to my need.
The wisdom of my God to teach,
His hand to guide, His shield to ward;
The word of God to give me speech,
His heavenly host to be my guard.

Against the demon snares of sin,
The vice that gives temptation force,
The natural lusts that war within,
The hostile men that mar my course;
Or few or many, far or nigh,
In every place and in all hours,
Against their fierce hostility
I bind to me these holy powers.

Against all Satan's spells and wiles,
Against false words of heresy,
Against the knowledge that defiles,
Against the heart's idolatry,
Against the wizard's evil craft,
Against the death wound and the burning,
The choking wave, the poisoned shaft,
Protect me, Christ, till Thy returning.

Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me.
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

I bind unto myself the Name,
The strong Name of the Trinity,
By invocation of the same,
The Three in One and One in Three.
By Whom all nature hath creation,
Eternal Father, Spirit, Word
Praise to the Lord of my salvation,
Salvation is of Christ the Lord.

St Patrick's Breastplate, the full terrifying version.
AHB 454; TiS 478; Common Praise 203

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,
Be all else but naught to me, save that thou art;
Be thou my best thought in the day and the night,
Both waking and sleeping, thy presence my light.
Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word,
Be thou ever with me, and I with thee Lord;
Be thou my great Father, and I thy true son;
Be thou in me dwelling, and I with thee one.
Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight;
Be thou my whole armour, be thou my true might;
Be thou my soul's shelter, be thou my strong tower:
O raise thou me heavenward, great Power of my power.
Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise:
Be thou mine inheritance now and always;
Be thou and thou only the first in my heart;
O Sovereign of Heaven, my treasure thou art.
High King of Heaven, thou Heaven's bright sun,
O grant me its joys after victory is won!
Great heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be my vision, O Ruler of all.

English versification is by [Eleanor Hull](#), 1912; this version was popularised by virtue of its place in the *English Hymnal*. AHB 455; TiS 457; Common Praise 386

[Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:](#)
[such a way as gives us breath,](#)
[such a truth as ends all strife,](#)
[such a life as killeth death.](#)

Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength:
such a light as shows a feast,
such a feast as mends in length,
such a strength as makes his guest.

Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:
such a joy as none can move,
such a love as none can part,
such a heart as joys in love.

George Herbert AHB 457; Tis 552; Common Praise 405

Ye holy angels bright,
Who wait at God's right hand,
Or through the realms of light
Fly at your Lord's command,
Assist our song,
Or else the theme too high
Doth seem for mortal tongue.

Ye blessèd souls at rest,
Who see your Saviour's face,
Whose glory, e'en the least
Is far above our grace,
God's praises sound,
As in His sight
With sweet delight
Ye do abound.

Ye saints who toil below,
Adore your heavenly King,
And onward as ye go,
Some joyful anthem sing;
Take what He gives,
And praise Him still
Through good and ill,
Who ever lives.

My soul, bear thou thy part,
Triumph in God above,
And with a well-tuned heart
Sing thou the songs of love.
Let all thy days
Till life shall end,
Whate'er He send,
Be filled with praise.

Richard Baxter AHB 26; Tis 108; Common Praise 626

Some suggestions for Empowerment for the Ways ahead

Making spaces for the beauty of holiness

- Create quiet times and places – this can be at home, or by making a visit to a favourite garden and country road.
- Within your power limit noise and information input factors.
- Make a holy site in your home, inside or out, where you can meet God.
- Cultivate beauty for your delight with music, poetry, gardens or art.
- Search out churches where you feel at peace, or delighted – even once a year apart from your routine will help.

Developing the art of gentleness

- Talk things over with a trusted friend or spiritual guide.
- Honestly accept and know your gifts, thanking God for them.
- Practice reframing your thoughts from the negative to the positive.
- Honestly know and accept the gifts of others, thanking God for them.
- Learn more about God and yourself.

Exploring learning

- join a study group. Richard Foster may sound forbidding but his chapter on study is very encouraging. The study guide version of his book is a very good place to start.
- Hunt around for old and new books. Ask others what helped them. Keep your ears and eyes open for current comment, music, resources, such as chants featured on ABC FM Breakfast: their reference - Anon (Arabic-Byzantine-Early Christian) *Alyawm (Today, he has raised the earth)* Sarband B&M (Books & Music Series) SHM6021.2 (Spirit in Sound: Chant (Bourgeault 2006)
- Consider joining a community, perhaps on-line. such as the Community of Aidan and Hilda. www.aidanandhilda.org.uk/ This website is not only a wonderful source of information and ideas but is an encouragement to a sense of companionship.

Digging deep

- Remember the delights you have had.
- Search the store of hymns and songs, psalms and prayer already in your memory.
- Thumb through an old hymn book or a new one for a phrase or verse.
- Learn a prayer, collect, psalm or verse off by heart – even a new one each month. Add these to the deepening of your faith hope and trust.

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