

# stillpoint

## CREATION SPIRITUALITY COURSE SESSION 2 : THE VIA POSITIVA

### Introduction

- Welcome back to the second session in this five week series
- This is an experiential course i.e. you are not coming to a series of 5 lectures by me but rather this is hopefully going to be an immersive experience where we explore some ideas but we don't just do that with our minds but also with our bodies, our senses.
- And just to say again - I'm not pretending to be an authority on this material, I've never taught it before but I'm wanting to learn about it with you
- So let's begin with a brief recap of last week's teaching

### Recap

- Creation Spirituality is a liberation theology for people in over-developed cultures
- we need to be set free from
  - a disenchanting view of the universe
  - a loss of wonder
  - a suppression of the feminine
  - a suspicion of the physical, particularly the body
  - a utilitarian view of creation
  - an intellectualisation of human life i.e. challenging the primacy of thought as a way of being
  - an unchallenged, relentless dominance of consumerism which defines us as consumers
  - the myth of redemptive violence/militarism
  - addiction ('addictive enslavement')
  - ego
- CS is in contrast to inherited theological models which permeate the Western Christian tradition - which we could call fall/redemption theologies.
- CS begins its theological worldview with Gen 1 rather than Gen 3 i.e. the starting point is blessing
- CS rejects the doctrine of *original sin* - not Jewish, not in the teaching of Christ etc. - in favour of *original blessing*.
- the 4 paths of CS are the via positiva, the via negativa, the via creativa, and the via transformativa
- these are a way of naming the spiritual journey - delineating a way towards wholeness and integration
- the 4 paths tell us what matter and they tell us where to find God

### The Via Positiva

- so it's time to get into the first of the 4 paths - the via positiva
- the via positiva is about awe and delight, savouring pleasure and goodness
- in Matthew Fox's CS framework, in addition to the 4 paths he outlines 26 themes
- each of the paths contains a number of themes
- the VP has 10 themes which I want to take us through this evening

•obviously - given the time we have I will only be able to say a few words about each of these so I encourage you to read the books if you want to go deeper

## Theme 1 : 'Dabhar'

- this theme is to do with the 'word' of God
- Fox is very unhappy that the idea of God's word has been reduced to spoken or written words
- Fox prefers to use the Hebrew word for word - which is *dabhar*
- this word is better translated as the 'creative energy of God'
- the *dabhar* of God is constantly at work in the world - creating and recreating
- creation is a word of God - a testimony which communicates truth
- it's a holistic understanding of the word of God
- the problem with our inherited understanding of the phrase 'word of God' is that it's quite rationalistic
- dabhar is not purely left brain - cognitive & rational - it's also right brain - affectionate, loving and playful
- when we open up our understanding of the phrase 'word of God' in this way it gives us the opportunity to *listen* again
- to listen to the truth of creation for example
- I like this idea! When I was at theological college I remember hearing a lecture by a conservative teacher who equated the phrase 'word of God' with 'bible' with disastrous results - so every time he found the phrase 'word of God' in the scripture he read it as 'bible'!
- the *dabhar* of God is so much more
- the *dabhar* of God is like a river running through all things
- we need to get out of the way or - even better - flow with it

## Theme 2 : Creation as Blessing

- ...and the recovery of the art of savouring pleasure
- obviously this is a very big deal in Fox's teaching
- the *dabhar* of God brings all kinds of different blessings
- but there has been hardly any *via positiva* in the Western Christian Traditions (WCT) because it has lacked a theology of blessing
- instead the WCT has focussed on sin, guilt, and introspection and has left creation, blessing and *dabhar* out
- but the covenantal God of the OT is a God of blessing - promising good things, fruitful lands, healthy children and wholesome living
- so 'being is blessing' - just to exist is to be blessed
- basing our theological models on original sin is out of kilter with reality
- even if we were to take that doctrine literally these are the facts:
  - the universe is about 20 billion years old
  - humans have been around for about 4 million years
  - so creation was around for 19, 996, 000, 000 before we arrived
  - so fall/redemption theology - with its anthropomorphic obsession with sin - fails to account for the vast majority of existence
- this has resulted in things like the loss of pleasure from spirituality, the increase of pain, of injustice and distrust
- so CS is very dubious about original sin
- but it does have a concept of sin
- in CS we would say that most of what we call sin is actually the symptoms of sin
- we need to focus our attention on the sin *behind* sin
- for Fox this is dualism - separation - subject/object relationships

- take any sin - war, burglary, rape, thievery - each of these actions is treating another as an object outside oneself rather than seeing yourself in relation
- if creation is a blessing then our proper response is to enjoy it
- pleasure is one of the deepest spiritual experiences of our lives
- here we see an interesting meaning of the word *contemplative*
- this word comes from two words - con and temple - meaning to 'temple with' or 'be one with'
- so we are talking about becoming one with the things we love - savouring them, enjoying them - and thus we make them holy
- God is the source of all authentic pleasure
- (Van Morrison illustration?)
- blessing is also about fertility - we see this right through scripture

### Theme 3 : Humility as earthiness

- the fall/redemption theological model has defined humility as a kind of despising of oneself
- in CS we see that the word humility comes from the word *humus* or earth
- in CS to be humble means to be in touch with the earth - in touch with one's own earthiness and to celebrate the blessing that our earthiness, our sensuality, and our passions are.
- in C/F theology passion is something to be suspicious of
- this comes from a dualism which denigrates the physical in favour of a disembodied spiritual existence
- but this is a profoundly un-Jewish idea - in Hebrew we don't find separate words for soul and body
- in fact teachers like Eckhart and John O'Donohue would say we are all souls with bodies rather than the other way around i.e. the body is in the soul rather than the soul being in the body
- in CS passion is trusted and honoured but we need to put what we call 'the bridle of love' on them
- I was reminded of Philip Sheldrake's lovely little book 'Befriending our Desires' - we can trust our desires - as long as we can distinguish between our deepest desires and the superficial ones - and not try to purge ourselves from them
- i.e. don't cut back on passion - allow love to make it work for you
- the bridle is a way of focussing rather than an instrument of torture
- can we get beyond the suspicion of our earthiness, sensuality and passion that we have inherited from the WCT?
- so humility is not about denying one's gifts or uniqueness but living close to the earth, in step with creation, learning from creation, simple living
- we all come into the world with a huge energy - eros is a good word for this (and it means far more than what we normally mean by the word *erotic*)
- humility in CS is about how we harness that energy and ground it in a proximity to the earth

### Theme 4 : Cosmic, Universalist

- CS is cosmic in its outlook - rooted in cosmology rather than anthropology
- justice is derived from cosmic order
- creation is always moving towards balance - homeostasis
- when we live out of sync with creation the results are violence, greed and broken-ness
- the way towards wholeness or integration is finding our place within the cosmos rather than seeing ourselves as separate from it
- the WCT has 'lost the cosmos' - to use Otto Rank's phrase i.e. lost any sense of our relatedness to creation
- the has resulted in society becoming neurotic
- CS is about trying to 'regain the cosmos' through ritual, deeper, more connected, understanding etc.
- WCT is profoundly introspective and self concerned
- in WCT the soul is within the body - contained and requiring introspection

- in CS the soul has the body within it but isn't contained by it - the soul expands and grows outwards in communion with all that is

### **Theme 5 : Trust**

- the psychology of the WCT is based on fear rather than trust
- the WCT has not been able to teach trust
- a fascinating insight of Fox's is that people leave religion because they grow up, they mature - and that maturity comes as they realise they can't base their lives on fear; they must learn to trust. This is what life teaches them but their religion - which is locked into fear patterns - is out of sync/step.
- CS is based instead on a psychology of trust
  - trust in dabhar
  - trust in goodness, and blessing
  - trust in God
  - trust in yourself (personal illustration?)
- Of course, trust can be broken and often is, and this is hugely psychologically damaging and requires urgent healing for us to be human again
- the church should be a place for the healing of trust
- in the NT the word for trust is often translated as faith which then becomes a list of things you have to give mental assent to
- we need to retranslate faith to mean trust
- God trusts humanity and we need to trust God and to trust ourselves
- this enables us to expand our gifts and not, out of fear, bury them
- trust leads to bigness, fear leads to smallness
- a trust psychology leads to compassion as we trust others
- CS helps us to 'trust the process' because it is based on the cycles and processes we find in creation rather than mythical states of perfection

### **Theme 6 : Panentheism**

- where is God?
- the WCT has focussed on a God outside of us - God is always elsewhere
- this has gotten a lot of things out of balance (Carl Gustav Jung, for example, thought that this was quite psychologically dangerous)
- CS in contrast develops a panentheistic theology
- not pantheism - which says that everything is divine
- panentheism = the divine is in all things and all things are in the divine
- it preserves transcendence but introduces a whole lot more immanence
- and it avoids the subject/object dualism as we are all inter-connected within God
- panentheism is a way of seeing the world sacramentally
- in other words we look upon the world in such a way that what we see acts as a sign of a deeper reality i.e. our interconnectedness
- even though God is in all things and all things are in God we don't always see the world in that way - so sacraments like the eucharist etc. remind us that all things are holy.

### **Theme 7 : Our Royal Personhood**

- there's a lot of talk in scripture about Kings and the like
- what does this mean?
- the first meaning is that God is king. But what does that mean?!
- it means that God is with us leading us and that God is creator
- another dimension to kingship in the OT is the human king

- the human king is an embodiment of the divine king
- human kings are meant to preserve the balance of creation particularly by protecting the powerless and the poor
- the prophets were sent to challenge the kings when they failed to do this
- the idea of kingship would be most fully embodied by the messianic king that Israel was waiting for who would embody Yahweh's care of creation
- in Jesus' announcing of the kingdom he is calling people to a sense of royal personhood
- this royal personhood means that each person has dignity and responsibility
- we see Jesus restoring people's dignity by associating himself with the last and the least and saying that they are in fact blessed.
- But our royal personhood also means we have a responsibility
  - for justice-making and preserving creation
  - for asserting one's own dignity - especially if others are trying to take it away from you
  - or for letting go of privilege and siding with the oppressed
- the WCT has tended to preach the church rather than the kingdom and subsequently lost sight of the royal personhood of all people
- we need to recover a kingdom (queendom?!) based theology rather than a church based one
- our outlook is often too small - it's not about in here - it's about out there - the whole world, creation, the cosmos, the kingdom

### **Theme 8 : Realized Eschatology**

- this is about a new sense of time
- in F/R theologies this time we are in is rather like a holding pattern - we're circling waiting for something to happen
- the important events are either in the past or the future
- we may have a static view of creation as a past event but there is little sense of ongoing dabhar
- we are basically waiting for heaven, for the end of time
- even in salvation terms the main event was in the past
- apart from anything else this theology reinforces the mind's obsession with past and future
- in CS the focus is much more on the NOW
- making the past present and the future present in the now
- or - as Jesus puts it - praying that the kingdom will come now
- it doesn't deny that all is not as it should be
- but its response is not to flee the present for either a more heavenly future or a more miraculous past.
- Rather its response is to trust so deeply in the depths of the present that the future becomes a reality in the now.
- now is the moment of divine breakthrough and dabhar.

### **Theme 9 : Holiness**

- holiness in the WCT is characterised as perfection
- verses translated as 'be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect' reinforce this
- but the word translated perfect here is the greek word *teleioi* which is perhaps better translated as mature or whole.
- we are being called to grow and to mature and to become more whole
- as Richard Rohr has pointed out - it seems that God's holiness isn't based on the idea of removing every imperfection or anomaly but the ability to include these things and not be limited by them.
- ongoing creation leaves scars and imperfections
- we look at a tree and we see all kinds of twists and knobby bits etc.
- does this mean it isn't perfect?

- Holiness means not being held back by imperfection but being able to deal with it and allow it to be included in the ongoing work of dabhar
- imperfections give us community - we compensate for each others limitations and inabilities and imperfections
- striving for perfection is very often an ego quest and F/R theology hasn't helped us here
- again it encourages an introversion or introspection and an obsession with how we are doing which is all about ego
- also perfection - if that's what we're aiming for - is quite a static state whereas surely we are being invited to grow, to expand, to ripen - and this never ceases
- we see some of the consequences of this idea of perfection being played out in our consumer society which is never satisfied with what is - everyone is striving for the perfect body, perfect relationship, perfect wardrobe, perfect car etc.

### **Theme 10 : Sin, Salvation and Christ from the perspective of the VP**

- Within each path, Fox offers some different perspectives - new meanings - on key Christian themes
- Sin - in path I - can be seen to be about injuring creation and upsetting balance and harmony
- it could also be seen to be about turning what's beautiful into something ugly
- also - importantly - sin comes about through denial of interconnectedness
- so the ecological crisis is a sin that comes about through our lack of awareness of the fact that we are deeply, intimately connected to the environment
- in fact, psychologically speaking, it's akin to self-harm
- sin - in path I - could also be thought of in terms of limiting pleasure or not trusting our passions or our sensuality
- sin from the perspective of the VP is also about introversion
- it's about a failure to trust and a failure to celebrate
- Hildegard talked about sin as a 'drying up' as opposed to a verdant, ripe, fertility - in other words a choking of life
- Salvation from the perspective of the VP is about
  - healing - particularly of broken trust
  - the regaining of the cosmos
  - the return of eros and playfulness
  - simplicity
  - remaking broken connections
  - being awakened to regain awe and wonder
- from the perspective of the VP Jesus is
  - the living dabhar of God
  - wisdom
  - a source of fertility (he describes himself as the vine)
  - the messianic king who invites all people to realise their royal personhood

### SENSORY WORK WITH ELEMENTAL MATERIALS

- we're going to move to the back of the space now to continue our exploration with some sensory work
- [small dishes laid out with various foods - a grape, an olive, a caper, a cherry tomato, a blueberry, a nut]
- one of the things we need to do is to open our eyes again to see the world
- one of the things we learn to do when we are very young is to learn the names for things - so we learn the name for everything, stick labels on the world and stop really looking because we think we know what something is
- but we don't really know what things are - we've just learnt their names

- so we stop looking properly and we begin to lose our sense of awe and wonder
- one of the things we are learning to do through CS is to regain lost wonder
- so we're going to engage with these simple things
- what's required is almost a refocusing of our eyes, our vision
- we don't look, we don't really see
- so i'm going to invite you to look at these small things - really look - pretend you've never seen them before
- and then we're going to taste them - but we're going to savour - we're going to taste them like we've never tasted them before
- and as we do we're going to give thanks for them and be blessed by them

## BODY PRAYER

a prayer/offering of our 5 senses:

FINGERS - offering our sense of touch

EYES - offering our sense of sight

EARS - offering our sense of sound

NOSE - offering our sense of smell

MOUTH - offering our sense of taste