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Acedia, depletion and pastoral resilience: series introduction

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In January 2017 Martin Seeley, Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich, commented on local radio that in terms of contemporary parish ministry the Church was 'asking the clergy to do an impossible task' (BBC Radio Suffolk). Bishop Martin's comments served only to increase my commitment to investigate further the issues relating to 'burnout', 'compassion fatigue' and 'personal and pastoral resilience' among clergy.

This line of thought dovetailed neatly into what I had been reading and thinking about over the previous years. I had experienced 'burnout' while being the senior minister of a large multi-staff church in Canada. I had experienced what I have called elsewhere, 'ministerial meltdown'. Then during my reading of works by the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, I came across a malady that monks experienced and that the Desert Fathers and Mothers analysed in great deal, namely *acedia*. Although written about as early as the fourth century, acedia is still present in various forms, as we shall see in this series of articles.

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One aspect of acedia was that the monk wished to abandon his cell, the place where he was stationed, and move somewhere else – perhaps to deal with a mounting sense of exhaustion, compassion fatigue, loss of joy, purpose and fulfilment in his desert location and spiritual vocation. What I discovered was that the perception of what defines acedia has 'morphed' through the centuries, from a sin to a medical condition. The name and the classification of acedia may have changed, but at the base of this 'affliction' lay the causes of a depletion of pastoral resilience.

This desire by ancient monastics to 'escape' their cell is very prescient. Today the Church worldwide is haemorrhaging clergy in worrying numbers. Runcorn notes this in his *Fear and Trust: God-Centred Leadership*. He writes:

> Research a few years ago revealed that three out of ten ministers have felt, for a prolonged period, like leaving the ministry. Seven out of ten feel consistently overly burdened by the task. An estimated 200 ministers a week in the UK miss Sunday activities through stress-related issues.[1]

I think we can safely say that this situation has not improved, with the clergy taking on more multi-church responsibilities. In terms of the Methodist context, Haley and Francis undertook a piece of empirical research using data from 1,339 Methodist clergy. Haley and Francis note in their Preface:

> The publication of research in 2006 is timely. Currently the Methodist Church has decided that stress in ministry is a matter that needs further consideration. Our research data confirm that view and underscore the urgency with which the matter needs to be addressed.

They continue:

> According to our data 45% of circuit ministers claim to be exhausted by their work. The news is not all bad, because so many ministers are able to offset their exhaustion by the sheer joy they have in doing their work. Ministry is a special vocation, with rich rewards and tremendous personal costs. Yet clearly *for some the personal costs become too great, leading to professional burnout, high levels of stress and poor health. For the Church, not to take that warning*

> *seriously shows negligence towards the ministers and irresponsibility towards the ministers' families. It is also damaging to the mission and the pastoral care of circuits.*[2]

I recognise that the Methodist Church has taken some proactive measures to address this issue; however, there is much more that can be done. We will explore some of these options in later articles.

One thing to note from the beginning is that whatever coping strategies we propose, these will not alleviate the 'pain that accompanies pastoral ministry'. We serve a 'crucified God'[3] and a 'Christ who shed tears' (John 11:35).[4] Any pastoral resilience that we experience will come via growth, and growing is often painful, it tempers and tests us to make us stronger. We become resilient through following our crucified Lord, as presbyters we are called to share in his suffering. Resilience is never attained via a hedonistic path but via the pathway of vulnerability and laying down our lives, being open to learning through painful experiences and episodes. Writing in the context of vulnerability and church leadership, Herrick and Mann put this well:

> The word Jesus uses to appoint his disciples is the same word, τίθημι that he uses to speak of laying down his own life. It is a word which implies laying down horizontally, surrendering oneself. Jesus lays down his life for his friends. He expects his friends to lay down their lives for each other and for God. This is the nature of leadership, a leadership one accepts because of a sense of trust and confidence in God. It is an acceptance of the power of God.[5]

It is worth noting in this context the words of Anthony Bloom:

> Surrender means such an act of trust and confidence that you can put yourself unreservedly, joyfully, by an act of freedom, into the hand of God, whatever, because you are sure of Him, more than you are sure of anything else … these are the words of Jesus, 'No one is taking my life from me, I give it freely.' This is surrender.[6]

The essence of Bloom's words is echoed in the Covenant Prayer of the Methodist Church, which will be looked at in more detail later.

M. Craig Barnes' words in *The Pastor as a Minor Poet* resonate with this concept of clergy as 'pain-bearers' who grow resilient through adversity. Clergy can

empathise with those who suffer because they have 'seen' suffering up close in their own lives. Barnes believes that pastors as poets 'see the despair and heartache as well as the beauty and miracle that lie beneath the thin veneer of the ordinary, and they describe this in ways that are recognised not only in the mind, but more profoundly in the soul'.[7] It seems, then, that pastors who act as poets 'feel' as well as 'think' their way through life and ministry.

Methodology

I have deliberately made these studies multidisciplinary in nature. Wesley Carr concurs with this approach when he states that 'The amalgam of life, belief and pastoral practice requires interdisciplinary effort on the part of any writers.'[8] This means that I have looked at a variety of academic sources to inform my thinking and writing. These sources include church history, linguistics (Greek, Latin and Hebrew), theology, philosophy, sociology and psychology, among others.

From the start, we need to recognise difficulties in writing theology because of its multidisciplinary nature; 'it is like trying to paint a bird mid-flight', says Karl Barth. Moreover, writing practical theology also brings with it several interesting challenges. Esther Acolatse of Duke University Divinity School explores the multi-textured nature of practical theology in her article, 'What is Theological about Practical Theology? Toward a Pastoral Hermeneutic of Primal Speech', where she quotes John Swinton and Harriet Mowat:

> It is hermeneutical because it recognises the centrality of interpretation in the way that human beings encounter the world and try to 'read' the texts of that encounter. It is correlational because it necessarily tries to hold together and correlate at least three different perspectives – the situation, the Christian tradition and another source of knowledge that is intended to enable deeper insight and understanding. It is a critical discipline because it approaches both the world and our interpretations of Christian tradition with a hermeneutic of suspicion, always aware of the reality of human fallenness and the complexity of forces which shape and structure our encounters with the world.[9]

Whatever complexities we face in exploring the realms of practical theology it is not a journey we can or should try to avoid. Ballard and Pritchard support this determination to engage theology with praxis:

> Christian theology has never been simply a speculative enquiry but a practical one. Theology is 'faith seeking understanding'. It arises from the experience of the life of discipleship and seeks to reflect on and serve the faith commitment. The root of all theology is the witness of the Christian community in worship, proclamation, service, and daily living.[10]

There are other related challenge issues in attempting writing this type of practical theology, objectivity and bias in the study of history being a prime example. Voltaire says that 'history is a pack of tricks we play upon the dead'. So, one must tread carefully here. The 'present' can and does influence our knowledge of the past – 'an element of subjectivity enters at every step in the process of investigation', there is no such thing as 'value-free historical investigation'.[11]

The literary critic and author Susan Sontag helpfully cites Nietzsche's comment in the context of 'interpretation'. She notes Nietzsche's words, 'There are no facts, only interpretations.'[12]

The specific problem is that we are not only dealing with the problems of 'factual objectivity' in doing historical research, we are also dealing with issues relating to objectivity in psychological research. Acedia, after all, is primarily a psychological affliction. The danger here would be to read modern understandings of mental health back into the fourth-century setting. The crucial point is the danger of what we might call 'psychological eisegesis' – reading into a primitive psychological and behaviour pattern our own thoughts and understanding of what is being presented.

Finally, there is the problem of objectivity in the way we use language to describe metaphysical issues. If we are not careful, we will get caught 'under the net' of language – 'the web of words that divides us from the unutterable particularity of the world and the immediacy of our experience'.[13] This 'net' was what certain early twentieth-century philosophers attempted to break free of. The so-called 'logical positivists', among whose number was the British philosopher A. J. Ayer (a member of the Vienna Circle), believed that unless something could be verified empirically, it was in philosophical and scientific

terms 'non-sense'. Religious language and ethical statements fell into this category of being non-verifiable.[14] The major problem for Ayer and those who called themselves logical positivists was that the very statement upon which their approach was built was not itself verifiable. Later, Ayer had to come up with a softer or weaker version of the verification argument; having said that, there are still several difficulties when it comes to using language about God, the soul and, indeed, human emotions.

Rowan Williams, in his excellent book *The Edge of Words*, attempts to tackle the limitations of language in his usual academic yet accessible style. We realise that whether we are talking about God, the soul or even the psychological impact of acedia, we are restricted to the realm of metaphor. On metaphor, Williams, reflecting on the work of Cornelius Ernst, writes:

> This may entail looking very critically at the usual way in which we distinguish 'literal' and 'metaphorical' language: to think of language about God (or other metaphysical issues) as 'metaphorical' is not to abandon truth claims nor to suggest that such language is the cosmic elaboration of a simpler and more 'secular' literal truth. It is more like putting the question, 'What sort of truth can be told only by abandoning most of the norms of routine description?[15]

The British essayist and novelist George Orwell, in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, states that 'words are such feeble things'.[16] While recognising the fragility of language, we are not in a position here to expound upon the strengths or shortcomings of language itself. We will just note that when it comes to metaphysical statements in their various forms, an apophatic (*via negativa*) approach, not saying anything in case we are in error, is not one open to us. We must say something kataphatic (*via positiva*), however tentative we are about the language used to describe the psyche and the impact acedia makes upon it.

Style

In terms of style, I have tried to make this research as accessible as possible. I have also used extensive quotations. These extended quotations are to encourage further reflection and maybe to prompt an interest in wider reading on the topic referred to.

Painful process

Finally, in terms of writing these articles let me briefly reflect on the process. Bernard Crick's words are helpful here: 'Like Aristotle's good rhetorician, the essayist must know not just the subject and have something to say about it, but must know an audience and how to reach it.'[17] I believe I know my audience, having been a minister for nearly 25 years, and therefore can speak helpfully in this context. The ability to do so, however, has not been painless. The American author Annie Dillard describes the activity of writing in this way: 'The line of words is a fibre optic, flexible as wire; it illuminates the path just before its fragile tip.'[18] I have found this writing process to be like crawling along inside a dark tunnel with only the aid of a flickering candle to light my way. I have felt that any moment the light might dim even further or be extinguished altogether. The result would be that I might be plunged back into the darkness of acedia or its related maladies myself.

Personally, the topics dealt with here, such as burnout and depression, are still raw in my memory. In Dillard's work *Holy the Firm*, she talks about one of her writing projects in these quite startling terms: 'Nothing is going to happen in this book. There is only a little violence here and there in the language, at the corner where eternity clips time.'[19] Again, the words I have written are much more than academic; they are in places frightening because they deal with 'eternity clipping' my own soul and mind. Some parts are just too impactful on my psyche, yet they are important and need to be addressed for the sake of others who share my vocation.

Dillard quips in her brilliant work *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, 'We are here on the planet only once, and might as well get a feel for the place.'[20] Dillard's words may well be true, but for many clergy the 'feel of the place' when it comes to pastoral ministry can be an extremely painful experience. In the article by Richard J. Foster published in 2016, 'Embracing Suffering', the author cites the words of C. S. Lewis which are apposite in this context: 'God's work in our lives can be painful, but his ultimate goal is to transform us into something better.'[21] This sentiment of Lewis's was personalised by Henri Nouwen, who experienced the 'dark side' of both life and ministry. His biographer Michael Ford writes of a comparison of the lives and struggles of Nouwen and his fellow Dutchman Vincent van Gough:

> The writings of Henri J. Nouwen, like the paintings of fellow Dutchman Vincent van Gough, emerged from an intense vision

> which captured the imagination of people the world over. Much of his genius was shaped by loneliness and anguish which also afflicted van Gough whose art Nouwen greatly admired. Constantly fearing solitude and rejection, especially by those they loved, both men sank at times into deep depression yet, at their lowest ebb, managed to create some of their most inspiring and memorable work.[22]

The ancient 'demon' of acedia can be countered, through resilience; that is, through a process of often painful growth. Perhaps true ministry is always the result of unavoidable personal suffering on the part of the clergy. Justin Lewis-Anthony asks a pertinent and probing question in this context:

> Can we be strong in Christ's weakness? Can we remember that Christian vocation in the words of Rowan Williams is to live out the weakness of Christ in our material lives so that the power which depends on nothing but its own glorious integrity can appear?[23]

In our weakness, we learn to lean hard on our sense of calling and our faith in God. Paul's words echo the need for both resilience and dependence:

> Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. (Rom 5:4)

> But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. (2 Cor 12:9)

Mark Craig Barnes is surely correct when he writes, 'But when we are on a journey through a hard place with God, there are no short cuts.'[24]

In the following articles we will look at the history and development of the concept of acedia and then consider what I have called the 'echoes of acedia' in the life and ministry of twentieth-century clergy. Over all, I have tried to analyse the main causes of 'pastoral depletion' (ie, draining the 'reservoir of resilience') and recommend a variety of ways to 'replenish' stocks of resilience.

I will reflect upon the following, which will be published in this and subsequent issues of *Holiness*:

- Acedia, its history and development
- Echoes of acedia: introverts in the Church
- Echoes of acedia: perfectionists in the Church
- Echoes of acedia: depression in the Church
- Echoes of acedia: compassion fatigue in the Church
- Echoes of acedia: 'burnout' in the Church
- A new paradigm: healthy Church
- Dealing with the echoes of acedia: pastoral resilience.

Notes

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