



Listening to the Daily News with a Contemplative Heart

REV GLENDA MEAKIN



Much of the daily news in the commercial media describes a world bent on self-destruction. How do we open our hearts and minds to mostly tragic situations – war, poverty, greed, unemployment? The daily practice of meditation helps us to hear and be empowered by another vision, of a world created, redeemed and sustained by Divine Love. We listen with compassion, and find the courage and humility to offer our limited resources and talents in service towards the healing of God’s world. Rev Glenda Meakin is a retired Anglican priest. A meditator since 1985, she leads retreats across Canada, and the US. She has served the Canadian Christian Meditation Community as a Regional Coordinator and National School Coordinator. She also serves on the International and Canadian School Resource Teams.

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The Daily News

“Listening to the daily news with a contemplative heart”. The title points to a tension you and I experience in daily life. We all live bombarded with various forms of media and the news, information, images, and advertising it brings. It is so much a part of our daily life. In fact the media is now so omnipresent in your life and mine that it has become the verbal and pictorial equivalent of Muzak.

It is like Muzak in the background all the time. If you stop and think for a moment, how many places do you go now where you have the daily news put before you? How many places do you go where it is right in front of you? You go for an x-ray in the hospital and in the waiting-room there it is, always tuned in to CNN or whatever, telling you the daily news. You go to the airport and it is in every waiting - room. And like Muzak in the background, the daily news can set our mood, determine our outlook, lead us to action, or anaesthetise us.

At the other end of the spectrum, as meditators, as people seeking to live a contemplative life, you and I are trying to seek to live out of a place of silence and stillness, because you and I know from experience that it is in the silence, in the poverty of the one word. that we find our equilibrium, our vision, our calling. We know it is the silence which gives words their meaning and power.

To reflect on the daily news is also to open our hearts and minds to mostly tragic human situations – war, poverty, greed, unemployment; the list goes on and it's everywhere. I know it is not *all* the news, but it is the majority of the news we hear by the commercial media. And the daily news seems to convey a story of a world bent on self-destruction. In the silence, in the poverty of the one word, I hope what you will hear and be empowered by is another vision of a world created, redeemed and sustained by divine love.

A short quotation from John Main:

I think what all of us have to learn is that we do not have to create silence. The silence is there within us. What we have to do is to enter into it, to become silent, to become the silence.

The purpose of meditation and the challenge of meditation is to allow ourselves to become silent enough to allow this interior silence to emerge.

Silence is the language of the spirit.

Cleansing the Temple

From the Gospel of John Chapter 2:

The Passover of the Jews was near and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple, he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and the moneychangers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords Jesus drove all of them out of the temple -- both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, 'Take these things out of here, stop making my Father's house a marketplace.'

Well, the Passover of the Jews was near, John writes. The writer wants you and me to perk up, pay attention, because the word "passover" means your redemption is near.

And this is not a story about long ago and far away. Right now, the Gospel story says to you and me: Listen up! Your redemption, your salvation, your healing your wholeness, however you want to talk about that, is near. Are you ready?

And the story says Jesus went up to Jerusalem. Remember Jerusalem signifies the place where God dwells, the holy of holies in the temple. And if you want to be with God, you make that journey to Jerusalem, to the temple. And what this says to you and me is that the Gospel is inviting us to go into the temple of our own heart, and there we will find Jesus.

But what's he doing there? We might not want to know that part, because he says: My word! There is a lot of clutter in your heart! In my heart! There is so much clutter there. What is that clutter all about? Well the reason those animals were sold in the temple was so that you could make first a sacrifice to God, so that you could make amends, so that you could get to God, because you needed to

acknowledge what you had done that has kept you apart, distant, away from God. So you paid your money and your ordinary money isn't good enough; you had to first change it for temple money.

So Jesus and the Gospel is inviting you and me to move into this space within where he dwells, and to help us let go of all of those ways we think we have to get God, all those ways we think we have to do something in exchange before God will even look at us, let alone love us. And it is cleared out by the presence of Christ. You and I don't do it. That is the wonderful thing about meditation. We simply come into the silence and be attentive to the Spirit within.

The story continues. People around say to Jesus: what sign can you show us for doing this? And that is so much what we all look for before we are willing to move and to trust God, and to believe we don't have to be in control, *doing* something to get something, but that this is all grace. We think, better have a sign here. And Jesus says I am not about signs; indeed this temple could be destroyed and in three days I will raise it up.

Of course Jesus is talking about the temple of himself where the Spirit of God dwells in union with him. Of course people say: I don't see how that can happen; this temple has been under construction for 46 years.

There is a lot about how you and I have difficulty moving into this interior space where all of the ways we analyse and figure things out and find our security don't work, aren't needed, aren't necessary. We don't need to figure it out; we simply need to move into it and to trust. But Jesus was speaking of the temple of his body: "In three days I will raise it up." And after he was raised from the dead his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

The Gospel writer wants you and me to hear that the way into a deep loving relationship of union with God is through Christ and through our being willing to trust the Spirit of Christ within. Being willing to go into the temple, and allowing that clutter to be cleaned out, is what Jesus is talking about. "In three days I will raise it up."

The Gospel writer wants you and me to hear about new life, about

being transformed by entering into the temple of our own heart. There we find, Christ shows us, we *already* dwell in God. We don't have to get God. There are no obstacles to God. None, only the ones you and I make. We are already immersed in God. And if we are willing to allow the Spirit of Christ to cleanse the temple of our hearts, we then become present to and participate in that divine love. The only thing you and I need to do is to become attentive; to let go of all the words and move in to the poverty of the one word.

What Jesus tells us, if we will trust him and trust the silence of a de-cluttered temple, is that nothing can destroy that love, nothing can separate us from that love.

The Power of the Word

I want to talk about the power of the Word. Words matter. What we say, what we listen to, has great effect on us and on our life. Words do wound, sometimes very deeply. Words can exclude, words can diminish, words can trivialise. Just as words can also heal, restore, comfort, empower. Words have power.

You might know the story of Don Quixote, Man of La Mancha. That story illustrates the power of words to tear down and to raise up. This funny knight, Don Quixote, decides to be a knight, long after the days of knighthood and chivalry have died; but never mind, he's going to be a knight. And he gets this very beaten-up horse, and off he goes to save damsels in distress and doing deeds of great importance with his sidekick Sancho Panza.

Don Quixote knows that being a knight means that you must have a fair lady for whom you do these deeds of honour. So he finds his fair lady. Unfortunately she is the most unlikely fair lady, because she is the village prostitute, Aldonza. Never mind. Don Quixote begins to court her, to woo her with words of love, telling her how beautiful she is, how fair, how lovely, how good.

Well Aldonza will have none of it. She just shoos him away with his words of love. In truth on the outside Aldonza is anything but beautiful, fair or lovely, but Don Quixote is determined that Aldonza be his fair lady. He believes she is worth more than anything he could do to win her over, and so his courtship of loving words continues. He will not give up uttering words of love to his sweet lady whom he renames Dulcinea which means, "My sweet little one".

And finally Aldonza has had enough of his nonsense. She storms out of the kitchen and begins a tirade of self-deprecating words. She speaks of the way she sees herself. She is a prostitute of doubtful parentage. She is a common, dirty, worthless person in her own eyes.

And Aldonza tells Don Quixote she cannot bear his words of love. She says: "Blows and abuse I can take and give back again, but tenderness I cannot bear." But Don Quixote does not give up. He continues his courtship as if Aldonza, Dulcinea, has never spoken these words about herself. He continues to tell her because he sees her as lovely, as worthy of everything he might do for her and more.

Over time as Aldonza listens to this funny knight, she begins to realise who she truly is. And in the play, claims her true identity as Dulcinea. She says, "From this moment I am no longer Aldonza, but I am Dulcinea." She has been transformed by love. By loving, healing words.

Words matter. What we say, what we listen to, has great effect on us and on our life. As Christians you and I know the power of words very well. And by "know" I am not talking so much about intellectually, but I am talking about knowing as participation in. So this is about the head coming into the heart and knowing in a very deep way. And what you and I know in a very deep way is that the world, all of creation is an expression, a Word, an utterance of the Divine creator. God said: "Let there be light." And God said: "Let there be a space between the firmament, with the heavens above and the earth beneath." And God said: "Let there be creeping things, let there be green things." And God said: "Let there be human beings made in my image." All of creation is an utterance, a word from God. That is why you and I are able to say everything I look at, and everyone I look at in all of creation, I can see something of the Divine.

Sister Eileen O'Hea used to remind us of that – that when we look at one another, see another person, we can see the Divine within. She used to look at you and say: "Remember who you are. You are a manifestation of infinite love in finite form." So you and I look and see and hear the Word of God in all of creation.

God speaks us into being. Words matter. You and I also know, as people of faith, the power of the word to shape our relationships with God, with one another, with creation. You and I have heard: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength, and love your neighbour as yourself." And they

have shaped our outlook and our actions. Even the fact that you and I are aware of not always loving God, not always loving our neighbour, speaks to the power of these words, because they call us back into the relationships for which we were created.

Finally you and I know, that the ultimate Word of God has been spoken to us in the person of Jesus. The Word made flesh: Jesus, the Word. The word, the expression of God, telling us who God is, and how we come to God. The Word made in human form. And you and I know that Word. The true meaning of know: we participate in that Word as the Spirit of Christ in our hearts. Jesus is the fullest expression of Divine love in human form, in his life, death and resurrection. These are all words that are God's utterance to you and me. We are invited into a story that is so powerfully spoken in love that Christ brings light into the darkness, healing to our brokenness, sight to our blindness, and freedom from our captivity.

In all that is not of God, by the power of the Word of God in Christ, human life has been transformed, human life has returned to its meaning, its source. So these words of the Christian faith offer you and me not only a certain perspective on the world, but they are the words that have formed us, shaped us, directed us through our lives.

The Words of the Daily News

I want to shift now to the words of the daily news. They too offer us a certain perspective on the world. They too form us, shape us, and direct our life.

So you and I as people of faith might ask ourselves: How is my understanding of creation, as an expression of the Divine, shaped by the constant references in the daily news to scarcity of water, food; to the constant references to global warming, famine, pollution, earthquakes, devastation, tsunamis? How is my understanding of creation shaped by the daily news?

We might also ask ourselves how do we hold the power of the words: "Love God and love your neighbour" alongside the words and images of daily news that are filled with reports of murder, rape, bombings, pornography. How do you and I hear, let alone respond, to the prophetic word of God calling us back to God when so many references to the Church in the daily news are about our shortcomings, our divisions, clergy scandals, and our imminent demise which, I have to say, I have been reading about for so many years and not seeing.

But how do we hear God calling us back as God's people, as the body of Christ when the daily news reports our shortcomings, our divisions our scandals. How do you and I hear the Word made flesh inviting us into the light of God's love when the news is filled with the darkness of corporate greed, fraud, unemployment, recession, foreclosures? Well if this short overview of the daily news has depressed you, heightened your anxiety, that's the way many of us spend our days. The omnipresent daily news can keep you and me in a state of perpetual anxiety and worry about what is happening in the world. It can keep us in a state of doubt or cynicism or fear. Where is God? What can one person do in the face of such tragedy, injustice,

inhumanity? Is there any hope, we ask ourselves? And how do you and I, as people of faith, hold on to the alternative vision of human life and liberation that Jesus proclaims and lives. How do we hang on to that vision and live it?

The starting point, I believe, is the gospel story of the cleansing of the temple. You and I are called, invited, to clear the clutter from our hearts. And we are invited to do that by simply moving into the silence of our own hearts through the poverty of the single word. And to come into the silence and become grounded and shaped by the love of God through Christ. Become grounded, rooted in God. It's that experience of the love of God in silence that moves us out of all division, all polarities, including the polarity of either a faith perspective or daily-news perspective.

Instead, the silence, the experience, the knowledge, the participation in the love of God moves you and me to begin looking for the presence of God in every situation. It is what Jesus tells his disciples when they come into the village and see the man born blind, in John Chapter 9. The first thing the disciples asked Jesus is: Whose fault is it that this man is blind? Who did something wrong? Was it his parents, or was it the man himself? And Jesus says: You know, it's not about looking for fault; it's not about assigning blame. The question we are to ask is: Where is God in the midst of this situation? Jesus says what you look for is: Where is God? And then: How is the love of God being made manifest in this situation?

The Power of Silence

I'd like to reflect with you on what silence does for our vision, what sitting in the temple of our hearts when we allow Christ to clear out the clutter by the Spirit of Christ, what the silence does for our vision; what it enables us to see of God being made manifest in every situation.

First of all the silence helps you and me realise the extent to which we do live in a time of information overload. We're sinking under the weight of all this information. We have far more information than we can bear. It is estimated that if you and I read only the weekend edition of a city newspaper, if that is all we read, we will have taken in as many images, ideas, and as much information, as a person in the middle ages would have taken in during a lifetime. What the silence of meditation does is cleanse our perceptions and help us to see more clearly the degree to which we are inundated by the daily news. So we are able to name – that great Biblical word of importance – *name* what is going on. Only then can we respond and decide what to do about that information overload.

And it is the silence that sets up that understanding, that perception of just how much information – notice I didn't use the word knowledge or wisdom but information – is coming at us. I think too that the gentleness of our meditation practice helps us to realise there are no spaces in the daily news. So many of our images and ideas come through the hot medium of television. Television just keeps adding on the images and words one after another versus the cool medium of print where you and I can read a line or a paragraph, and stop and reflect and ask ourselves: What is that saying to me? What is that calling me to do? Where am I to be? In television there are no spaces for reflection; no spaces for pondering, for holding the weight of the thought, of the words; no spaces for pondering what we

have seen and heard, before any response can take place. And what meditation does in its gentleness is remind us of space, breath, openness, weight.

You and I often speak about the ways in which Christian meditation creates community. In sharing the silence you and I experience a deep connectedness to one another. Yet so often the daily news gives us horrifying images of bombings and body parts lying in the streets, and then it juxtaposes these images with commercials for shiny hair and laundry soap. What do these images do to our hearts and minds, and sense of human connectedness?

We need the silence so that we not only feel our connectedness but we live from that sense that we are all one, brothers and sisters in Christ. The more you and I meditate, the more we become aware of the silence opening our hearts to the gentleness of God towards us. God comes in Word made flesh as a child so that you and I can first receive and then grow into his likeness. There is no manipulation, no forcing of God's self upon us. No coercion. And that is so true in meditation. You and I in trust open our hearts to the silence to the presence of the Spirit of Christ, and there we are given the freedom to respond and the spaciousness we need to grow. In silence, you and I are called to a deeper, richer life, not to spin, nor to management of the news we receive, and not to a dumbing down of life.

And one of the gifts of silence is that it restores for us paradoxically the importance and the power of words, and especially of God's Word to us in scripture, in Christ. And in those words you and I are presented with an alternative vision for human life, for all creation. The more you and I enter into the silence, the more powerfully those words speak to us and empower us. There are so many ways the silence drives you and me deeper and deeper into life. Not just for our own life but so that you and I are empowered to bring the healing words of love to the Aldonzas of this world. So that you and I not only speak about the alternative vision Jesus teaches and lives, but that we do our part to make it real. We have to first have the vision before we can offer it to others.

It is paradoxically the silence of meditation that enables you and me to assess the words, and the meaning of the words we hear and the images we see in the daily news. It is also because of the silence of meditation that you and I learn how and when to respond to the daily news with compassion and action. I'd like to end this session with a quotation from John Main's *Moment of Christ*:

The words we use in trying to communicate the Christian message in the Christian experience have to be charged with strength and power, but they can only be charged with strength and power if they spring from the spirit of our inner being. Learning to say your mantra, leaving behind other words, ideas, imaginations and fantasies is learning to enter into the presence of the Spirit who dwells in your inner heart, who dwells there in love. The spirit of God dwells in our hearts in silence, and it is in humility and faith that we must enter into that silent presence.

Poverty and Redemption

From Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*:

The more we are content with our own poverty, the closer we are to God. For then, we accept our poverty in peace, expecting nothing from ourselves and everything from God.

Poverty is the door to freedom. Not because we remain imprisoned in the anxiety and constraint which poverty of itself implies, but because finding nothing in ourselves that is the source of hope – we know there is nothing in ourselves worth defending, there is nothing special in ourselves to love – we go out of ourselves therefore and rest in Him in whom alone is our hope.

Our own life is so often a microcosm of the daily news – our own unfaithfulness, pride, hypocrisy, dishonesty, injustice, prejudice, envy, waste, pollution. We become so aware of our own poverty, our need and longing, that we are so thankful to move to the words of Psalm 51 and so anxious that they become real for us:

Create in me a clean heart, oh God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Give me the joy of your saving help again and sustain me with your bountiful spirit.

Listen to those verbs which signify God's action in our life: *create, renew, cast me not away, keep me with your Holy Spirit, give me the joy, sustain me.*

“Prayer,” says John Main, “is the experience of our own poverty and our own redemption.” I want to say that again because it is such an important teaching that John Main gives us: “Prayer is the

experience of our own poverty and our own redemption.”

Our prayer is not a rejection of the world, the world within us, the daily news within us and outside of us. It is not a turning away from the daily news and the pain of the world. In meditation, says John Main, we do not reject the world or construct a false opposition to it. So we are not saying that's a very bad world out there and we're going to make another one. That is not what meditation is about and Jesus reminds us that God so loves the world; God does not condemn the world.

I think that you and I are able to acknowledge our own poverty and need for God because in the silence of meditation we first come to the realisation that it is first made real for you and me, the depth of God's love, the extent to which you and I are enveloped, immersed in the love of God. And it is in the light of that love that you and I have the courage to acknowledge our own poverty, our own part in the daily news, and our inability to do what is good without God. In the light of God's love you and I have the courage to recognise the illusory nature of so much of our daily life. How we place so much importance on the shifting sands of personal autonomy, independence, of popularity and of power.

It is only in the silence of meditation that you and I realise how poor we are. The experience of poverty we come to in the silence of meditation is the condition of spiritual development, says John Main. We need that understanding, the experience of our own poverty if we are going to grow, for it is there in our poverty that we turn to God.

There is a wonderful bible story that I think illustrates that so well. In Luke Chapter 8, the story of Simon, a good, religious Pharisee invites Jesus to dinner. And I think Simon is very open to Jesus. He wants to know more about him. And so he asks Jesus to dinner and invites some of his friends as well. And an uninvited guest turns up, and this is the woman whose name we don't know. She is only called by Simon and his guests as a sinner. She comes uninvited to the dinner party and stands behind Jesus and begins to weep, because in his presence she is aware of her own poverty. But she is also aware, in being in his presence, of the love that is coming towards

her, of the total acceptance. So she bends down to kiss his feet. She returns the love. And then she takes probably the one thing of value that she owns, this jar of ointment, and she anoints Jesus with it. And you know Simon and his guest are sort of clucking away and saying, well what is he doing having anything to do with her. And Jesus asks Simon: You know Simon, if someone owes you \$500 and someone owes you \$50 and neither one pays you, which one owes you the greater debt? Well of course the one who owes so much. And Jesus says, and you know Simon, I entered your house, you did not give me water for my feet, you did not greet me with a kiss. Yet this woman who so recognises her own poverty and her own need for God, is able to give me her penitence in her tears. In fact she washed my feet with her tears; she is able to give me her affection with her kisses; and she is able to acknowledge me with that anointing. And Jesus turns to the woman and says, "Go in peace."

The story invites us to see the way in which when you and I acknowledge our poverty in the silence of our hearts, when we acknowledge our need for God, how we are so much more open to the love of God, to God's compassion, to God's goodness towards us. If we are the self-sufficient Pharisee, and he is a good man, the story is not trying to set up good and bad but just helping you and me to see the ways in which we can ignore the need to acknowledge our own poverty and therefore the condition for our own spiritual growth, and our growth into the fullness of our own life. It is in our poverty that we are turned to God, what we call conversion. It is there we begin the lifelong journey of discovering that everything is found in God. In God is our joy, our happiness. And what the silence of meditation teaches you and me is it makes this truth real.

Guarding the Heart

There is so much that pulls us away from God, not least of which is the daily news with this picture of a world which makes one doubt God even exists let alone cares for the world. Because our hearts and minds are daily invaded by the news, we do need to guard the heart. But guarding the heart, I think, is not a reaction to something outside of us but a response to something within. In the silence of meditation, as you and I are drawn more and more deeply into the love of God and as we seek to live our life in response to that love, to keeping God at the centre, we begin to realize that we have this great treasure in this earthen vessel of our body. So we want to keep this treasure, we want to guard it. But not so much in the sense of setting a fence around our heart to keep something out, but rather guarding the heart as St Simeon, Orthodox theologian, says "so that Christ may be set as a seal on our mind". In the silence of meditation the spirit of Christ leads us to the truth that we are hidden in the heart of God. As St Paul says, you and I are hidden in the heart of God as are all people, and we're bound by love to the source of all life. We are sealed in God's heart, secured, rooted, grounded, enveloped in a love which is paradoxically perfect freedom and yet whose seal cannot be broken even by death.

Guarding the heart is what Christ does and the discipline part of guarding the heart for us is to be to present to Christ through our twice-daily meditation practice. And through that period of silence and stillness, I think our response to the guarding of our heart is to value more dearly the treasure within.

Our daily meditation becomes more important in our life. We seek out those people and places who strengthen our life in God. We find the faithfulness to the daily meditation practice encouraged by being with the weekly group together in silence, and come away

strengthened by the bonds of love we share. We have maybe a new longing or a first longing to read scripture, and want more and more to be able to hear it as God's word to us, guiding and directing and enlightening and challenging our daily life. We have a greater desire to share the ways in which God is present in all of life with others, and we seek out the wisdom of those who have walked the contemplative path before us like John Main and those who walk it now like Father Laurence, our present teacher for the World Community.

You and I can finally begin to listen to the daily news with a contemplative heart. We have to, first accept that gospel invitation into the temple of our own heart. And through the poverty of the mantra be able to allow Christ to be present and to clear all the clutter and obstacles that we have put there that impede our way home to God.

John Main writes:

Just as the centre of Jesus' consciousness is his Father, so our centre of consciousness must be Jesus. When we have turned wholly towards him as the central reality of our life to which everything else is relative, then his full unified consciousness dawns within us. In our loving union with Christ at the centre and consequently at all levels of our being, we know him as the one teacher. We know it though it is beyond knowledge, because as St Paul proclaims to us we have the mind of Christ. There is the one Lord, and he is the only teacher.

A Contemplative Heart

The word *contemplative* literally means *being in the temple*. And a contemplative life is one which is lived rooted in God; a life centred in God through Christ.

John Main says this brings a great transformation in us. And of course that is what our Christian faith is about, being transformed by love so that we can bring about that same transformation, not we but the Spirit in us, in the world.

Father Laurence in his talks on loving the world says that we cannot pray to change the world unless we ourselves are willing to be changed. And John Main writes that this transformation that takes place when you and I come into the silence and stillness of Christian meditation is not just some beautiful theory. It is the most practical consequence of a very practical practice: the practice of meditating every day of our lives, every morning and every evening. He writes:

For that half an hour every morning and every evening, we are focused beyond ourselves. Our spirit is expanding, our heart is enlarging, we are becoming more generous. And the change in us comes about because in meditation we encounter the power to make this change possible. All of us would like to be more kind, more understanding, more selfless, more sympathetic, more compassionate and so on. But at the same time we recognise ourselves as weak, mortal, fallible human beings. What we discover in meditation is the power source to enable us to live this way. We discover that this power source is established right at the centre of our own being, in our own hearts.

In the silence of meditation you and I can finally begin to be open to the reality of God's love for us. And it is in the silence that the

power of God's word becomes real for us. It is in the silence that you and I are bound and rooted and grounded by Christ to and in the love of God. And that's what makes us a contemplative. That's what makes a contemplative heart, one who is rooted and grounded in God. We are beginning to put on the mind of Christ and so have something to offer the world.

A Contemplative Response to The Daily News

I want to look at the ways a contemplative life informs and guides our response to the daily news. And I am using that metaphor of the daily news for just what goes on in the world all the time. And I'd like to begin once again with a gospel story. It's from Luke Chapter 10, and it's the parable of the Good Samaritan.

It begins with someone asking Jesus a question: "How do I get eternal life?" As Jesus so often does, he replies with another question: "What does the Law say?" This is a Jewish person, so knows the Torah because that's your guide for daily living. Jesus says, "Well what does the Torah say?" And the man replies right away: "Love God with all your being and love your neighbour as yourself."

And Jesus says to the man: "You have answered rightly. Do this and you will live." But the lawyer isn't satisfied and so he asks Jesus a question: "Who is my neighbour?"

Jesus tells a story. A man was going from Jerusalem to Jericho and he was attacked by a group of robbers. They robbed him, they beat him up quite badly, so much so that he was left lying on the side of the road in very bad condition. And who comes by? A priest first of all comes by. And what is his response to the man on the side of the road? He goes by on the other side. He sees him and he goes by on the other side.

Some time later a Levite comes by, part of the Jewish tribe of Levites whose responsibility was firstly to keep the law before the people. So he would be a teacher of the law steeped in Torah and so he would be very much a leader in his community. So what does he do when he sees this man? He also walks by on the other side.

Then finally comes a Samaritan. He is a Jew for sure so he's part

of Palestinian life and belongs there but he is not quite kosher because Samaritans intermarried, they did not consider Jerusalem to be the centre of their faith. In terms of the place, they had their own temple in Samaria where they worshipped. For Orthodox Jews they were seen to be on the outside. And so it is an outsider in a way who comes along the road. And what is his first reaction? He sees the man, he was moved with pity. He had compassion and out of that compassion he stopped, he dressed his wounds, he bound up his wounds after washing them with oil and wine. He put him on his own animal and he took him to an inn. And then the scripture says there he cared for him. But he had to leave the next day, so what did he say to the innkeeper? He knew clearly that the man would not be able to travel for some time, and so he said to the innkeeper, "I will pay you whatever it costs for him to stay here under your care until I come back."

And then Jesus asks the lawyer, Who do you think was the neighbour to this man? And the lawyer says: Well the one who helped him – the Samaritan, the one who showed him mercy. The one who showed him mercy. And Jesus said to him "Go and do likewise."

So the Samaritan would be the outsider in the eyes of the lawyer who asks Jesus the question. And some people try to explain why the priest and the Levite did not stop and help the man. The text does not tell us. We cannot know what prompted the priest and the Levite to ignore the wounded man. But what we do know is why the Samaritan stopped to help because Jesus tells us. And when he saw him he was moved with pity, with compassion. That's why the Samaritan stopped. He bandaged his wounds after cleaning them with oil and wine. So the Samaritan is not only compassionate. He is practical. He makes real what he believes he is called to do. And that is to assist, to help, to heal. He does what needs to be done. Then he puts the wounded man on his own animal which means he walks while the wounded man is on the animal. He brings him to an inn, a place for food and rest. And he takes care of him, Jesus says.

So the Samaritan is not only compassionate, hands-on. He is generous. Look at what he gives. And the next day he took out some

money and paid the innkeeper to care for the man until the Samaritan could return. He is gracious. He doesn't come in with the man and say to the innkeeper, "You have to take him and you can't charge because I found him on the side of the road and he has no money." He pays for the care of this wounded man. He is gracious, freely giving all that he can. "Take care of him and when I return I will repay you whatever more you spend." The Samaritan is steadfast. He is going to see this man through.

It may be reading into the text to say the Samaritan has an interior freedom, meaning he doesn't live by what others think of Samaritans, and he doesn't hesitate to help the person. So he is not seeing a Levite, a lawyer, a priest; he is seeing a person in need. No divisions, no exclusions.

If you and I wanted to describe the contemplative heart, a heart rooted and grounded in God, the Samaritan would be as good a description as any – compassionate, generous, gracious, steadfast, incarnational, hands-on, fleshy, earthy, touching, operating out of his freedom in God.

And you and I can see in this story how he is manifesting love of God and love of neighbour. And I think Jesus wants us and the lawyer who asks the question to see, as he tells the Pharisees often in the gospels, that religion will only take us so far just as morality, keeping the rules will only take us so far. We need to be open to the Spirit. And the Spirit cannot be bound by human religious ideas nor constrained by human devised laws and rules. We cannot box-in the Spirit.

Being religious, being moral can blind us to the need to acknowledge our own poverty and turn to God. Because of that blindness we do not come to know our true self as rooted and grounded in Divine love. John Main says you and I cannot give away what we don't have.

The priest and the Levite remind us of all those conversations Jesus had with religious people, the Pharisees, the scribes. He is always calling them to go deeper. Neither the priest nor the Levite were living the basic law they ascribed to follow: Love God and love

your neighbour. This is not an either or imperative; it is both love of God *and* love your neighbour. They go together.

Love of God has to be manifested in love of neighbour. Otherwise you and I are, as the old saying goes, "Too heavenly-minded to be any earthly good." These two commandments are bound together.

Loving God has to be shown in earthy, fleshy, incarnational, loving action in the world. And we can do that and that's what John Main means: that we can give that compassion, that generosity, that kindness, that caring because we have it within us and we have been and are in contact with it every time we go into the silence and experience the compassion and mercy and love and caring and healing of God within our life. That's how we can give it away, because we have been given it, we have it.

A Radical Optimism

With daily meditation keeping us in our centre who is God, with our lives rooted in God, we can respond to the daily news from a different perspective

Much of the world would say that we look at the world from an insane perspective. How can you and I insist on the essential goodness of life in the face of so much suffering, devastation and injustice in the world? It is because we know from our own experience the power of God's love to transform, heal and redeem that we can see beneath the daily news, and know in our hearts that this is God's world, created, redeemed and sustained by God's love. Life is good because God created it and sustains it. And even in the darkness of the daily news you and I can keep a radical optimism. Radical because it is rooted in God. We are rooted in the love of God and we have optimism because Jesus our teacher has overcome the world.

Fear not, says Jesus, I have overcome the world. In other words there is no darkness which the light of his love cannot overcome. And so when we see the world we see it through the mind of Christ as the mind of Christ resides in our hearts and sees the world through us.

That does not mean you and I do not lament over the world as Jesus lamented over Jerusalem. We will weep often over what we see, read and experience in the daily news but we will keep looking to Christ, to Jesus our teacher within to guide our response to the daily news. And from him we lean to look at the needs put before us in daily life. We do not cross over to the other side because we have moved beyond the structures of religion and morality.

So from Jesus you and I learn to look at the needs put before us. And a few things I think that help us as we look at Jesus is to remember Jesus was a local. He was a local. Jesus was a local who responded to the needs he met daily in a very small geographical

space. Palestine at the time of Jesus was only about 70 miles long and only 28 miles wide and most of Jesus' life was spent up in Galilee in the north part and occasionally coming down to the south to Jerusalem. He was a local and it says something to you and me that we need to be where we are in terms of where God has put us and in terms of responding to what is before us.

That doesn't mean we don't respond to the world disasters in whatever way we can but most of us are not going to be able to go to Haiti and spend years there rebuilding. We can help in small ways but mostly, I think we are called to respond exactly to what comes before us each day. The person on the side of the road who could be someone in our own family, and we miss it because we think we have to be doing something grand or big.

Jesus responded to people mostly one at a time. Yes, he did feed the hungry crowds but most of the gospel stories are one person: Jairus' daughter, the woman with the haemorrhages, the blind man, the man with palsy. Story after story, one at a time.

And it is good for you and me to remember that as we go back out and try to respond to the daily news one at a time. It was Mother Teresa's way too when someone asked her why wasn't she totally overwhelmed by the numbers of people in need and the constant requirements that came at her each day. She says I am not overwhelmed because I just take one at a time. One at a time. You and I are not being asked by God to fix the world. The world has already been redeemed.

All you and I are asked to do is to witness through our life, through our actions to that redemption, to that light that is already in the world, to that new life that the world is being offered but we are just asked to witness to that, to respond to it one at a time

Remember Jesus had help, gathered his disciples around him and he sent them out two by two. So we need one another, to encourage, support and help us in whatever ways we are called to respond to the wounded around us. Jesus also shows us something really important about balancing our life in terms of the great needs around us and living fully into the joy of our own life.

Jesus was always criticised by the religious people for having too much fun going to too many parties and going out with the wrong people. But you see we are being taught, that we have been invited by God to the banquet of life. Life is meant to be rich and full. "I have come that you might have life in all its abundance." Life is not meant to be scarcity and misery. And so you and I by witnessing to that balanced life which acknowledges the needs of the world and yet living into the fullness of our life, we show people what God calls everyone to and we share that abundant life with others.

I'd like to end with John Main, from *The Hunger for Depth and Meaning*.

The clear message of the New Testament is that Jesus Christ is essential, and that what he communicates to us is his own being. As Christians we must be utterly serious in our commitment to the gift that is given us, the gift of our life and the gift of our redemption, that we are made one with God in Jesus. As Christians, we should be proclaiming this gospel to the whole world saying that each of us is made for this destiny of oneness, of fullness of life. That is the essence of the Christian proclamation. We must understand that this is now accomplished in Jesus, if only we will realise it. Meditation is our acceptance of the gift, the gift of our life, the gift of Jesus and the gift of his Spirit. Because the gift is infinite, it requires our full attention, our full concentration. This is what Christianity is about: the full acceptance of that gift of liberty, that we are made free in Christ Jesus. Christianity is not so much obeying this law or that law, fulfilling this obligation or that obligation; it is coming to the whole of our life with our hearts filled with wonder at what is, and what has been achieved in Jesus.