



AMPLEFORTH ABBEY

ACTION AND CONTEMPLATION – WITH THANKS TO RICHARD ROHR. I. *Action and Contemplation*. 14.10.23

O God, come to our assistance. O Lord make haste to help us.

Good morning, and welcome to Home Retreats: In this series of retreats, I am drawing on talks by Richard Rohr, who gave a retreat to the WCCM, many years ago, called Action & Contemplation. Richard is speaking out of his experience of 30 years of running the Centre for 'Action and Contemplation', and his presentation is so clear and simple, in the best sense, that I felt it should have a wider audience, especially in these times.

Richard began the series with this title, and felt he needed to justify the naming of his centre, with the word Action first and Contemplation second. His reasoning is simple; *'I chose to put 'action' first. I am still insistent that you don't have anything to contemplate till you have lived a bit, acted a bit, made some mistakes, dived into the mystery of life. Otherwise, you too often, it seems to me, end up contemplating your navel and calling it the great mystery or calling it God.'* But people still insisted on asking the question, which is more important? He replies that this is a foolish question, because the truth is that neither Action nor Contemplation is the important word. 'And' is the important word, because Action and Contemplation are inextricably united in a single dance, which expresses this mystery. How are they put together? Richard has found that this is a life-time's work.

He says, *'It certainly is the great art form, to begin perhaps in **mysticism** and to end in what looks like **politics**. But actually, both of them look different in the final mix.'* This is the art-form, this is the dance, which we will be fashioning during this and future Home Retreats. Richard has found John Main so helpful, although he speaks rarely about social issues or political parties. Instead, he trivialises them, by not giving them his attention. And Richard himself realises that when he emerges from Lent, some years, which he spends in his hermitage, without internet or

media or TV, he finds he has missed nothing of substance in the world. The news we so avidly follow and listen to each day, is mainly manufactured to engage us, grab our attention and draw us into these apparently crucial and important events. And yet, as John Main says, there is *'one mystery, one truth, one sadness, one love, one life'* and it is just showing different forms. He calls it in several places, *'the universal consciousness of the Risen Christ'* which holds this great one picture together. Augustine called this movement the Paschal mystery – the mystery of transformation, the mystery of movement, of life and death, cross and resurrection.

Richard gives his interns, who begin a course at the Centre of Action and Contemplation, a regular talk to try to see the connection between the two realities. This talk focuses on Exodus 3, the story of the burning bush. This is so clearly a theophany – a revelation of God, experienced in nature rather than in a synagogue or temple. Yet, only a few sentences later, God says to Moses, 'I have heard the groaning of my people in Egypt (Ex 3:7).' God does not let Moses sit around for five years contemplating this gooey experience of God's revelation. He focuses it, gives it immediacy and sends Moses into action.

Richard recalls a conference at his Centre, which was concerned with the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and their connection with the Gospel. In the twelfth step it says, 'Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.' Here is a marrying of Contemplation, of a spiritual awakening, and the action required to bring the fullness of healing to its completion.

Richard ends his first talk, by saying that the thing he has learnt most deeply in his time as a priest and Friar, is to let go of what he has been given as gift – in knowing God and in knowing more of himself. Until he then articulates this in teaching and preaching, realising it is Gift and not due to himself, and handing it on to others, then he begins to realise the mystery he is handling and passing on.

He points out to the meditators, whom he is addressing, that they are doing this when they meet in Groups, perhaps unknown to themselves.

Whatever they gain personally, in their daily practice, their discipline, the time they each give to lose themselves in the silence and the focus on their word, is shared with others in the Group and then, mysteriously, with the world.

On a global scale, perhaps this was the role of Contemplative Monasteries, not only in the Christian world, but across the various Religions. These large or small groups, however active or enclosed they may be, are witnessing to this great Mystery of life and death, of Passion and Resurrection. Today, through widespread knowledge and practice of many of the monastic practices – recitation of the Psalms, Lectio Divina, and Meditation, a tipping point could be reached among members of the human race which could move us on beyond some of the negative aspects of our world, the new Nationalism, the Populist Politicians, the ‘strongmen’ leaders and War. The planet itself, our Common Home, is sending us powerful messages to wake up and pay attention. One danger is perhaps, to focus on Climate Change alone, and throw ourselves into action to save the planet, without engaging in the necessary contemplative side of the coin. Hence the need to take note of Richard’s message in this first of eight talks in this series.

I hope that this has been something to ponder, to pray about and to help you in your own Contemplative practice, which, I hope will lead you to whatever action God proposes to you. Thank you for listening, and God bless you all.

Resources:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQWfpOcji6k&t=507s>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpIplIKqo1U&t=23s>

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/action-versus-contemplation/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SXEWHU5jLME>

Suggested Timetable for the Home Retreat Day (But do make your own).

11.00 Home Retreat: Action and Contemplation

11.20 Coffee Break

11.45 Read the Talk again.

12.00 Watch the Video on the Male and Female Monastic Life in two monasteries.

13.00 Lunch break

14.00 Garden/Walk/Sleep

16.00 Read the article on Being vs Doing

16.30 Tea Break

17.00 Watch and listen to Video by Joan Chittester

18.00 Vespers Live Stream

20.00 Compline Live Stream