

Being Disciples, Essentials of the Christian Life

Rowan Williams

Ch 6: Life in the Spirit

When I read that list of works of the flesh from Galatians, I can be tempted to think that I'm doing quite well. Fornication? No. Sorcery? No. Drunkenness? No. But then if I look a bit more carefully: what about anger? jealousy? factions? I'm not always doing so well on those.

Rowan Williams begins today's chapter by saying that he doesn't believe that there is a part of our lives that we can conveniently label: "spiritual" like other parts of ourselves such as physical, mental or emotional. In view of this, he says that he wants to talk about what it means to "Stay alive in the Spirit".

Sometimes we can think of spirituality as something very lofty and exciting but essentially those lists in Galatians are very down to earth and if we are serious about our spiritual life, we will be trying to move from the works of the flesh to the fruits of the spirit a bit at a time, day by day. *He suggests that in order to remind ourselves of where we are going and to keep our feet on the ground, we could use the list of the fruits of the spirit as a kind of mantra.*

So, how do we negotiate the challenges? Williams suggests 4 dimensions which all cooperate to a maturing Christian life.



A good question to ask ourselves according to Williams is: *what is keeping me human in my discipleship and my ministry?*

Sometimes, usually at a time of crisis, we are forced to take a long hard look at ourselves. Williams is suggesting that we don't just do this kind of analysis at crisis times but that it becomes part of our normal routine.

There is an exercise called the Examen which was originally practised by St Ignatius of Loyola and taught to the Jesuits. It's simply about taking some time during the day or just before bed to look over the last 24 hours, event by event, asking God to show you where you have lived in the fruits of the spirit and where you have not.

We are all passionate human beings and we all have things that we feel very deeply about. This dimension is about trying to step back from powerful feelings to gradually become people who don't just react but think first. We will all be at different points on the reaction scale.

Williams suggests that when we are able to achieve this distance from powerful feelings, we begin to hear God's voice: his comment on what is happening. In situations of conflict, we are often being told who we are by other people. It is not about what others think of us or even what we think of ourselves. It is about what God thinks of us. Prayer is about quarrying down to a level where God is creating new bits of us here and now and bringing us to more life.

Stillness



This dimension is related to self-knowledge because to hear anything from God we need some stillness in our body and mind. Ps 46:10 says "Be still and know that I am God". Williams asks: what is the impression we give to others: are we always running around trying to accomplish something, always busy, always driven? Or do other people want to be with us because we have a stillness of body and spirit which attracts them? *Perhaps something to think about.*

Williams suggests that *one way of developing this stillness is to repeat a short phrase at regular intervals to keep us calm and centred.* One that's been used over the centuries is: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner" but we could use a phrase from a hymn or a psalm. Sometimes when we have too much going on, we can feel that God is absent in our prayer times. Williams suggests that it isn't God who is absent. We are the ones who are absent because our thoughts and feelings are taking us away into other places.



We as disciples naturally look for ways of praying and worshipping which we feel comfortable with. We look for a church where we feel that we belong. We attend those types of services which uplift our spirits. But we should never settle down and think we have arrived. God calls us to grow in our relationship with him and others and to a life of challenge. Williams asks an interesting question: *"Do I expect there to be a bit more of me at the end of a period of prayer or worship than there was at the beginning?"* I have spent some time with that question this week! Or another one; *"Will God have cleared away some of the clutter during that time, and created a little more space there for his life?"*

Over time we can see it happening or not happening perhaps. *It's sometimes good to take a half day or day away from normal activity for prayer and seeking God. We can then reflect on whether we are growing or just staying still or even slipping back. Some people keep a journal of what is happening in their prayer times.* This again helps us to reflect on where God is moving in our lives. It is a two-way process. We are stretching forward to God and he is in turn drawing us out to him.



Williams says that this is both the easiest and most difficult dimension to talk about. We are not looking for happiness in our relationship with God. We are searching for something much deeper. Williams calls it "the sense that we are connected with something so real that it will break every boundary or container we try to confine it in, a sense of something overflowing, pushing outwards."

We can have that feeling in whatever tradition we come from. It happens when we are suddenly transported to a new depth of experience in prayer or worship. It can happen in a time of charismatic worship when the worshippers have their hands raised and powerful emotions are being expressed . It can happen as we enter a tiny village church and feel the atmosphere of centuries of prayer oozing from the walls. It can come in an Easter hymn with organist and choir. It can come as we hum a tune as we go about our day to day lives. It is a sense of otherness and a sense of something bigger than ourselves. We call it joy because that's the nearest we can get to describing what is more than a human experience.

Williams ends with some questions:

How much of ourselves are we ready to know?

What helps us be still?

Are we prepared to be quietly and positively willing to move on?

Are we ready for the overflow, the excess of joy that can come with that?

** the passages in blue are ideas for things you can try or further questions to ask yourself: some from Rowan Williams, some from me!