

☯ LIVING THE HOURS ☯

NEWS FROM THE SPIRITUALITY CENTRE

The seasons of the year, and of the church's year, seem very evident here in these last few months. We have alternated between trying to cool the house on 40 degree plus days to noticing that retreatants are shivering as they sit on the verandah! And from enrolling people for our Advent retreats to setting up for the Lent retreat so ably led by Lynona Hawkins of our Ministry Team.

In May the first session of our new three year spiritual directors' formation program begins, with 12 participants, and planning is under-way for our five day retreat in May. This year most of the time will be spent in silence, a request we are more than happy to respond to as Uniting people become more comfortable with the retreat tradition.

Many conversations at Stillpoint revolve around the struggle to attend to the inner journey amidst the pressures of the outer journey. We experience this struggle at the Centre, too, moving from our silent meditation before mid-week Holy Communion to bringing in the garbage bins, and from deep listening to juggling space for the increased number of bookings!

It seems to me that what really matters is cultivating the art of paying attention in a way that catches the moments of ordinary days and acknowledges the sacred that is always trying to catch our attention. The fruit of annual retreats, and spiritual direction conversations, easily becomes buried if we do not catch ourselves in time and pause, look, listen, feel, and, in a sense, bow before what is before our very eyes.

And in terms of spiritual practice, I am grateful to John Cassian for the thought that sometimes simply living through a set of circumstances, with attention to God, becomes a spiritual discipline in itself and it may be unwise to try to add more practices at such a time.

This year will see a process of re-structure taking place at Stillpoint, as Uniting Foundation grants expire, and as I retire from the end of December. A review of the Synod's Mission Resourcing Network and Centres such as ours is also under-way, so please pray for us as we discern and plan our way into the future.



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PRAYING THE DAILY OFFICE

by Gary Stuckey

I will never forget the first time I participated in praying the Daily Office, also called Liturgy of the Hours, Divine Hours, Fixed Hour Prayers, Divine Office, Praying the Hours or Daily Prayer. It was at the monastery which is home to the monastic community in which I am a brother, the Brothers and Sisters of Charity. I had arrived at the Monastery just before evening prayer, was given a two minute introduction on how the Daily Office worked and sat in a chair in the Chapel with a prayer book that seemed to have a dozen ribbons marking various pages. As best I could I tried to keep on the right page, which is not easy to do when you've never done it before, especially when you are trying to chant the Psalms - another new experience. I was all over the place. Just when I found the right spot the Community seemed to move on. I was always playing catch up. It was annoying and frustrating - and I had another three weeks of it in front of me! Quite frankly I didn't see the point and wondered why anyone bothered.

Nevertheless I was a brother in this Community so it would have looked a bit off if I didn't attend Chapel for the Daily Office. But then something happened. I learnt how to navigate the pages with all the ribbons and even made a passable effort at Psalm Chanting. With that new sense of ease, I began to appreciate the Daily Office and then to really look forward to it. Finally, I grew to love it. When I returned to spend time with the Community four years later, praying the Daily Office was one of the practices I looked forward to.

There is something beautiful and significant in a day which is ordered around a rhythm of prayer. A day in which prayer is the first activity slotted in to the schedule (several times), rather than left to occupy whatever space may open up, is a very different day.

For thousands of years this pattern of daily prayer has been the primary way in which people have drawn themselves into closer communion with the One who made them. Regular fixed times of prayer were the way Jesus, as a faithful Jew, prayed. It is a way to sanctify our days, our hours, our work, our life itself. Personally I like to think that in praying the Daily Office I am participating in a devotion that is as ancient as time itself, that I am sharing in a spiritual practice that nurtured Jesus, and using the same prayer book, i.e. the Psalms, as he used. I like to recall that I am joining with countless others around the world, some in monastic communities, some not, in the prayers. Finally, I like what St. Benedict said about the Daily Office; *"We believe that the Divine presence is everywhere but beyond the least doubt we should believe this to be especially true when we celebrate the divine office."* Having experienced it, I do believe it.

The Daily Office, my "daily offering of fresh flowers to the Beloved Spouse" as Charles de Foucauld called it, snuck up on me 12 years ago in the monastery and took me by surprise. And I'm glad it did, for it has enriched my life and brought me into a deeper union with God in a way I thought unimaginable.

So, if you'll excuse me now, I need to conclude my day with Compline. To end the day as it began - in prayer.

PRAYING THE HOURS

by Julie Cridland

I attended Stillpoint's Residential Retreat last year without any idea of what to expect.

In the silence and solitude of my retreat time I discovered the Liturgy of the Hours and a profound experience of the spirit of God in silent prayer. This ancient, eternal, life-giving presence that we call God seemed to enfold me in his love and peace that made every other experience secondary.

I left the retreat with a deep desire to practice this form of prayer and continue on the path to seek God in this way.

I found a daily prayer breviary, 'Benedictine Daily Prayer', and endeavoured to follow in the path of hundreds of years' of wisdom of those gone before me and join with the many millions of people around the world who wrap the globe with this form of praise and intercession to God.

I find praying the hours enriching and vital. It is an honour to share in praising and sometimes lamenting to our God through these psalms written by great men such as David.

Although I am not a Catholic I appreciate being led by the breviary through the seasons of the life of the church and the relevance of reciting specific prayers and scripture that relate to Lent or Easter, for example.

Praying the office often leads me into a time of reflection - a space within me becomes quiet and for precious moments silence reigns in my mind and in my heart. What I can only describe as the divine presence of love and peace fills my innermost being.

These disciplines are not without struggle and mirror the ebbs and flows of everyday life but through them, and the lingering enrichment that continues with me as I make space for the sacred in my day, I would like to think that I am becoming more like the person God intended me to be. For we are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works that God prepared in advance for us to do.

I am most grateful for the existence of the house of prayer and silence that is Stillpoint.

ON RETREAT AT JAMBEROO ABBEY

by Abi Thonemann

In September 2009, I travelled to Jamberoo Abbey, NSW, to spend a week on retreat. There are 30 Benedictine nuns that live an enclosed life at the Abbey, dedicated to seeking God 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Their rhythm of life is centred around the Liturgy of the Hours, praying seven times a day. Retreatants like me can stay for a maximum of a week, either in shared accommodation with other retreatants, or in complete solitude in one of the hermitages, of which there are two. Both types of accommodation for visitors are outside the quarters within which the nuns live. One can only imagine their lifestyle. Judging by their adherence to the rhythm of the hours and the air of reverence in the beautiful chapel (in which they spend so much time), it is my guess that the unseen movement of the nuns is a life largely animated by a sense of constant awe in God and creation. This, along with the nuns' quiet cheerfulness, made me feel right at home.

As I donned a medallion symbolising my intent to spend the week in silence, I looked at the timetable for the week and remembered the women who had appeared in the TV series "The Abbey". Their schedule was much busier than mine but mine still looked quite full with prayer four times a day! Retreatants cannot share in the same number of prayer times as the nuns. My first prayer was at 4.30am, then 9am, then 12pm, then 4pm, every day. Prayers usually lasted 45 minutes. In between I could pray, write, read, sleep, walk and eat (the nuns provide a midday meal but morning and evening meals are DIY in the shared kitchens). Apart from speaking to Sister Magdalene, once a day if I wished, I would speak to nobody else and this would be respected by others who knew the meaning of the medallion.

The first thing I noticed rising at 4am for the first days' prayers is how God helps those who are committed to hearing His voice. I also noticed how tired I was after breakfast and barely made it to the 9am prayer because I had stayed awake to journal after the first prayers at 4.30am.



The nuns prepare the prayer books according to the liturgy for the hour so as you enter the chapel you just pick them up and open them to the correct page. Watching the nuns enter and take their seat, and then begin, after a time of silence, to chant the psalms and pray for the world, was a joy that often brought tears. Sometimes I just listened, other times I chanted too and tried not to stare at the nuns and give away how nosy I was about them. They wore blue habits and big crosses and walked in and out of the chapel past a fountain from which the sound of trickling water could always be heard. As I watched them walk slowly in and out day after day, sometimes I thought I saw humility in their very steps. The way they moved spoke to me of an unhurried inner quality, yet it seemed to say "not a moment to waste, life is precious".

After a few days I experienced what was perhaps the most memorable experience of the Abbey. Getting up early and walking to the chapel for vigils had become pleasant after the initial bodily resistance to getting out of bed. It was nice to enjoy the cool, dark mornings and prepare myself for the word of God. In my journaling, some questions had floated to the surface, one of them quite uncomfortable, and as I journalled and walked and prayed over the days, the question began to dominate me. I spoke to Sister Magdalene about it and we talked about understanding God's will through deep centring. We seemed to keep coming back to "listen to what comes from the centre". One morning at vigils one of the nuns was singing a psalm, her voice so eerily probing and adoring at the same time, that it penetrated my heart. Such was its beauty that my heart seemed to expand into every corner of the room. The answer to my question had come not in a sentence, or in a phrase, but in a musical note. When she sang the note it seemed to fill a previously closed chamber of my heart with love. How could I feel known sitting in the darkened chapel listening to this mysterious nightingale? I don't know but God does! God will send His Word to those who listen. Praise the Lord for He is good!

BE STILL AND KNOW - THE ART OF CENTRING PRAYER

by Gary Stuckey

One of my new best friends is St John of the Cross, a 16th century Spanish mystic. One of the lines he is well known for uttering is, *"Silence is God's first language."* In this I think he reflects the Psalmist who said, *"For God alone my soul waits in silence"*. (Psalm 62:1) As God is everywhere we can encounter God anywhere. However, do we not sometimes, perhaps often, find ourselves busy, rushed or surrounded by noise where it is hard to think, let alone be aware of God in any meaningful way?

Centring Prayer is a prayer of intentional silence. It is carving out a space in our lives for prayer in which we experience God's presence deep within us. As Meister Eckhart, a 14th century mystic said, *"There is nothing so much like God as silence."* Even Mother Teresa, who is well known for her works of charity and compassion, instructed the sisters of her order to take two hours a day in silent prayer because, *"Silence is God speaking to us."*

Centring Prayer is an approach to prayer that comes from the ancient Christian tradition. It brings us into the presence of God and nurtures a contemplative attitude and approach to life. Centring Prayer can benefit all those who aspire to a deeper spiritual life. Centring Prayer practiced regularly will enhance your overall wellbeing - body, mind and spirit.

So what is Centring Prayer? It is a form of meditation designed to help us enter the silence where we are encountered by God. As a type of meditation it is simple but not easy. Not easy because the busyness, the noise, the distractions around us and within us all seem to get in the way of our practice. Simple, because the practice is not terribly involved.

To engage in Centring Prayer all a person needs to do is follow four simple guidelines.

1. Choose a sacred word that you gently repeat over and over in your mind. Words like Jesus, God, Love or Peace are often used, but choose your own. The saying of this word helps free us from distractions and symbolises that nothing is going to impinge upon this time which we have set aside for God alone.
 2. Find a quiet, comfortable place where you are unlikely to be interrupted and begin repeating it in your mind.
 3. When distractions come that take our minds away to another place, simply return to saying the word.
- After your time of Centring Prayer, remain in silence for a short while before resuming your daily activities.

St Benedict (another of my new best friends) used two words that can be translated as silence. The first was *'quies'* which means the absence of noise, silence, or physical stillness. The other was *'silentium'*, which is not so much the absence of noise but an attitude or state of mind that is turned toward God.

Centring Prayer leads us into this second silence.

One of the early monks was a fellow by the name of Abba Arsenius. He was a wealthy Roman senator who abandoned his social and political prominence to become a monk. The story is told that one day when he prayed *"Lord lead me into the way of salvation"* he heard a voice saying *"Be silent"*.

Do you sometimes struggle to connect with God?

Do you desire to deepen your relationship with God?

Do you long for some silence in your life?

Then perhaps Centring Prayer is for you.



To introduce people to and help them establish a practice of Centring Prayer in their lives, there will be an introductory day on May 15th which will be followed by six evening sessions on a Tuesday night commencing June 1st. These sessions will run from 7.00pm - 8.30pm and will include a time of Centring Prayer, a time for you to ask questions about your practice and view a 30min DVD of Fr Thomas Keating (the founder of the Centring Prayer Movement) giving a deeper teaching on the practice.

Cost for the program is \$40 / \$30 Conc. Please phone 8178 0048 or email stillpoint@internode.on.net to enrol.

BOOK REVIEW ~

Oasis of wisdom: the worlds of the desert fathers and mothers

by David Keller, published Liturgical Press, 2005

I came across this in my research into the tradition of the Desert Elders, and quickly realized it was one of the best books on Christian spirituality that I had read for a few years.

The Rev. David Keller leads contemplative retreats in California and before retirement was the steward of an Episcopalian house of prayer. His book is both an introduction to what has been described as a "formative period" in Christianity, the world of the Desert Elders, and an important and in-depth discussion of the Christian spiritual journey.

Between the second and fifth centuries thousands of women and men abandoned the society of the Roman Empire and went to live in the deserts of Arabia, Egypt, Palestine and Syria. They believed Christianity was becoming increasingly secularized and sought a life of "prayer, self-knowledge, humble dependence on God, and love of neighbour."

Their lives, traditions, practices and wisdom became the foundation of Eastern and Western monasticism. What to many might seem like an escape was instead a rigorous embracing of the Way of Jesus Christ; what appears to be severe deprivation was to them a spacious freedom.

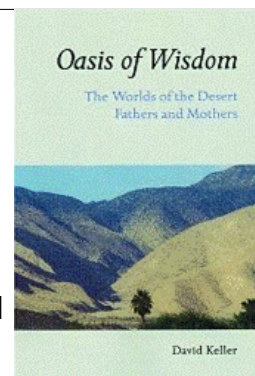
The Desert Elders would be the last to say that their way of life is for everyone. Yet it is as if that way of life, of radical availability to God, produced a significant gift of spiritual wisdom, as well as practice, for the formation of the Christian church.

The struggles of the spiritual life they encountered are the same struggles (couched perhaps in a different language) that we experience today; for example, envy, greed, attachment, pride. The values they adhered to are still counter-cultural – stability of life, humility, simplicity, compassion.

David Keller's own words are rich in wisdom. There are quotes worthy of a day's contemplation, such as: "The vulnerability of stillness becomes an environment for incarnation", and "I am convinced that some of the greatest needs of twenty-first century societies are the recovery of the desire to listen to each other, the practice of civility in conversations and relationships, a sharing of resources and wealth prompted by genuine compassion, and seeking the wisdom of the major world religious traditions. " "These virtues will help us discern between the two deserts. The life of the world depends on which desert we inhabit. One desert lacks water. The other leads to an oasis of wisdom."

Ann Siddall

(P.S. I am happy to e-mail a copy of my first paper on the Desert Elders to anyone who would like to read it.)



☞ NEW RESOURCES FROM THE STILLPOINT CENTRE ☛

Stillpoint now has a collection of exciting new resources available for individuals and congregations, drawing on the wealth of knowledge and experience of Ann, Gary and our Ministry Team.

Christian Meditation CDs: Inner Freedom, Inner Peace and Wholeness, available to be purchased individually or as a set and all designed to provide a complete Christian Meditation experience

Creating Contemplative Worship DVD and Guide: The DVD provides an example of contemplative worship as it takes place in the Stillpoint Faith Community and the guide runs through the steps to setting up this style of worship in a local congregation/faith community environment

Finding the Still Points - "At Home" Retreat: Offers the opportunity for retreat and a deepening of prayer and contemplation at home, over a five or ten day period.

Choosing for life: a guide to personal discernment: A guide to being more in touch with God, life and yourself and to put into place ways of "Staying awake" to the Spirit

Listening to God together: working with discernment in church committees and communities: A guide for Christian communities and congregations wishing to use discernment principles of decision-making in their meetings

Transition Retreat: For those facing significant change as they move from one phase of life to another - from study to work, from work to retirement, from one job to another, a minister moving congregations, or some other noteworthy transition in life

The Stillpoint Experience: Stillpoint will come to you and lead a retreat or workshop on a topic of your choosing, including some exploration of the spiritual life within the relevant context.

Our Continuing Program for 2010

Residential Retreats

"Praying the Hours" 23rd - 27th May (Sunday to Thursday)

Silence, prayer, reflections. (Leaders: Rev Gary Stuckey and Ann Siddall) Cost: \$420/\$370 conc

"A weekend with the poets and mystics" 3rd - 5th September (Friday night to Sunday night)

(Leader: Ann Siddall) Cost TBA

Both at Nunyara Conference Centre and Stillpoint Spirituality Centre.

Be Still and Know

A monthly gathering for prayer and reflection at the Stillpoint Spirituality Centre.

May 11, June 8, July 6, August 10, September 14, October 12, November 16.

Tuesdays 1pm - .2.45 pm. No registration required. All welcome. Gold coin donation.

Advent Retreat Days

"As Breezes Flapped Their Wings - Angelic Encounters in Advent".

26th November, 2nd & 11th December, 9.30am - 4pm. Self-led retreats using material prepared by Rev Alan Biglow.

Spiritual direction available if requested at time of booking. Up to six people per day. Cost: \$25 full day / \$15 half day.

Take Five Groups at Stillpoint Centre

Creating the Space, led by artist Beth Chandler. Dates & Cost TBA

"All Creation Groaning in Travail - Women Mystics doing Justice" led by Rev Alan Biglow. Registration essential.

October 18, 25, November 1, 8 and 15. 1pm - 3pm at Stillpoint. Cost \$60/Conc \$50. Groups limited to 12 participants.

Mid-Week Meditation

Each Tuesday at 11.30am we say the Office of Sext and spend 20 minutes in quiet meditation. Open to all.

Mid Week Holy Communion

At 12 noon on Tuesdays we gather around the kitchen table for Holy Communion. All welcome to join us.

~ STILLPOINT FAITH COMMUNITY ~

Contemplative Worship

6.30pm in Nunyara Chapel (unless otherwise indicated):

March 28 (Pilgrim UC, 12 Flinders St), April 4 (Easter Day, in Stillpoint Centre followed by breakfast) & 18, May 9 & 23 (23rd at 7 pm); June 13 & 27; July 11 (location t.b.a) & 25, August 8 & 22 (22nd in the Turkindi Room), September 12 (at 7pm) & 26, October 10 & 24 (24th at 7 pm), November 14 & 28, December 12 & 24 (Stillpoint Centre.)

Centring Prayer Group

Saturday May 15th - one-day introduction, then six weeks commencing Tuesday June 1st (7pm - 8.30pm) at Stillpoint.

Reflection Group

Based on the writings of Thomas Merton: At Stillpoint, Mondays 7pm - 8.30pm.

19th July - 6th September. "Entering the School of your experience"

Benedictine Days

A Saturday spent in the rhythm of a Benedictine community: July 31, October 16.

Community Gathering - 4th June at 4.00pm in the Stillpoint Centre, followed by dinner at a Chinese Restaurant

Stillpoint Spirituality Centre & Faith Community

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Office Hours: Mon - Thurs, 9.30am - 1.30pm

Centre Director: Ann Siddall

Minister of the Community: Rev Gary Stuckey