

Retreat: A Time to Listen to the Groans

BY TREVOR HUDSON

On a spiritual retreat we slow down our busy lives to listen deeply to those things we so often do not hear. We listen to God by praying the Scriptures. We also listen to the groans of creation, of our own lives, and of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

One of the most special gifts of being on retreat is that it gives us space to listen deeply. In the silence and the solitude we are able to slow down, quieten ourselves and hear those things that we so often do not hear. While the primary way we listen to God on retreat is usually through praying the Scriptures, I want to complement this traditional emphasis with another kind of listening. A way of listening that gradually draws us out of our self-absorption and egocentricity into a deeper participation in God's dream of mending our broken world. Retreat, I would like to suggest, is also a time to "listen to the groans."¹

In order for us to explore what it may mean on retreat to listen to the groans, I want to look at Paul's remarkable passage in Romans 8:22-27. These verses come midway between two other popular biblical passages. At the beginning of the eighth chapter there is a wonderful verse, a favorite of evangelicals, declaring that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. At the end of the chapter there is the magnificent statement, a favorite of universalists, that neither death nor life, nor anything else in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The passage about the groans falls between these two statements. There is no shortcut from the first part of the chapter to the last part. We cannot bypass the groans—especially when we are on retreat. As New Testament

scholar Tom Wright has pointed out, verses 22-27 are the means by which these two great affirmations are grounded in theological and practical reality.² Retreatants need to heed these words. Otherwise it is very easy for our retreat experience to become other-worldly, abstract, and irrelevant to the world in which we are called to live out our faith.

These verses tell us that three voices are groaning at the same time. They groan all around us, as well as within us, all the time. If we listen deeply, we can hear each one. Listening to these voices together helps us to find our way into God's purposes for our lives. As we listen to these groans we are drawn into a deeper faithfulness, both in our personal discipleship and in our life together as God's people. Most importantly, when we listen to these groans, we begin to have a much clearer understanding of how we can play our part in God's healing of our fractured world.

CREATION GROANS

First of all, when we are on retreat, we can listen more deeply to the groans of creation. In verse 22 Paul writes, "We know that that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now." This powerful image makes it clear that God is passionately concerned about the whole world. When we are on retreat our hearts and minds need to be deeply grasped by this reality. Too often our retreat experiences encourage a false individualism that results in us turning our backs on the world that God has made and loves and wants to save.

It is so easy for this to happen. I remember being taught songs soon after my conversion as a teenager that encouraged me to view the world as an enemy to the saving work of Christ. I sang, "The world behind me, the Cross before me...."³ Yet the cross is in the world. Christ gets crucified there, before our eyes and our ears, every day of our lives. Did he not say, "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40)?

Another song I sang went like this: "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of the earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace."⁴ Although I think I can understand what the songwriter intended by this, I have found that the things of the world grow strangely clear in the light of Jesus Christ. Surely, since Jesus Christ is the light of the world, we can see its beauty and pain even more clearly, and hear its laughter and cries more deeply. When we open our hearts and minds to Jesus in our moments of retreat, we are drawn more deeply into the world that he loves so much and for which he died.

Songs like these often betray God's fierce love for the healing of the whole world. "For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son...." Paul knew this, and so his concerns were always cosmic in scale. This also needs to be part of our awareness when we retreat to be with God in silence. We must know that God's loving arms wrap around the globe and embrace

every human being. They embrace every aspect of what it means to be human—the world of arts and music, and finance and economics and education and medicine and politics and sport. God’s arms embrace the trees and mountains and forests and rivers and every other living thing. God longs to put the whole world right. As Hans Kung has written, “God’s kingdom is creation healed.”⁵

Now, if our retreat experience is going to help us play our part in God’s story of mending our world, we need to hear in the silence the groans around us. This is what happened to Desmond Tutu when he was on a five-day silent retreat in May 1976. According to his biographer, John Allen, he entered the retreat with his emotions in turmoil.⁶ While sitting in his cell-like retreat room, the groans of the oppressed pierced his heart. He felt himself called to write immediately to the then President of South Africa, John Vorster. “I felt this pressure. I had to do this, and just sat at my desk. The letter more or less wrote itself.”

In the letter he pleaded for the President to do something “because I have a growing nightmarish fear that unless something drastic is done very soon, then bloodshed and violence are going to happen in South Africa almost inevitably.” Tutu’s letter was dismissed out of hand. As we all know, one month later, the Soweto uprising exploded. In the ten months following June 16, 2006, at least 660 people were killed, most of them under the age of twenty-four. Our history could have been so wonderfully different had our President taken seriously the way God had spoken to Desmond through the groans of the nation.

Retreat is a time for us to listen to the groans around us. In the silence we can begin to think and reflect around questions like: What are the human cries that surround me? At home? At work? In the community? To which one is God calling me to respond? Which are those that frighten me and from which I want to flee? What is God saying to me through these cries? Questions like these can so often deepen our capacity to listen and to respond to the groans in our midst.

WE GROAN

Secondly, when we are on retreat, we can listen more deeply to our own groans. Paul vividly captures the tension in which we as followers of Christ live: “Not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly” (Romans 8:23a). On the one hand, we experience the joy of the Spirit at work in our lives, the joy of being called God’s beloved children, the joy of knowing that our sins have been forgiven, the joy of being bonded together with brothers and sisters in the faith from every tribe and nation and tongue, the joy of knowing that we are living an indestructible life with an eternal future in God’s great universe. Through his life, death, and resurrection Jesus has made all this possible and we celebrate it joyfully.

Yet, on the other hand, we who are part of God's family also groan and we need to listen and attend to our own groans. In 1978 I had the opportunity of working in a small, ecumenical inner-city congregation in Washington, called the Church of the Saviour. One day just before I came back to South Africa, I was having a cup of coffee with the pastor of this remarkable congregation, a man by the name of Gordon Cosby. I asked him a question I sometimes ask people I respect. "If you could say one thing to me, what would it be?" He was quiet for a few moments, and then he answered, "When you go back to South Africa, and minister in your congregation, remember always that each person sits next to their own pool of tears."

Retreat, I want to suggest, is a time to listen to these tears. In this respect another New Testament image speaks to me powerfully. It is the picture of the risen Christ coming to Mary as she weeps outside the empty tomb. He asks her, "Why are you crying?" Jesus' question invites Mary, and us too, to face the story behind our tears. Like Mary we are invited to examine our pain, to put words to our sorrow, to allow our tears to find their voice. We could be crying for any number of reasons – because I am missing my loved one so much, because my marriage is in trouble and I cannot see a way forward, because my divorce has ripped my life apart, because I am in the dark and do not know what to do, because my body is in pain and I cannot seem to find relief, because of the deep guilt I feel for something I did in the past, because God seems so far away and I do not know where to find him.

On our retreat we can share these tears with God. Many of the Psalms teach us to do this. They show us how to talk simply and honestly to God about the deep groanings of our hearts and lives. Too often we only think about our pain in God's presence. We need to tell God about it.

The psalmist repeatedly encourages us to speak

aloud to God about the painful things we are going through. Think for a moment about some of the sentences we come across when we read the Psalms. Sentences like, "I cried out to the Lord," "Hear my prayer, O Lord, listen to my cry for help," "How long, O Lord, how long?" Befriending our tears like this connects us deeply with God, opens our hearts to healing grace and enables us to be more present to the tears of others.

In the silence of retreat we can reflect on questions like: What are the human cries that surround me? At home? At work? In the community? To which one is God calling me to respond? What is God saying to me through these cries?

THE SPIRIT GROANS

Lastly, when we are on retreat, we can also listen to the deepest groan of all, the groan of the Spirit. As Paul points out in this passage from Romans, not only are we prayed *for* by the ascended Christ, we are also prayed *in* by the indwelling Spirit. “We do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (Romans 8:26). This groan of God’s Spirit is the groan of deep intercession. Often when we open ourselves to the pain of our world, and our own pain too, we come to the end of words. But the good news is that, in those moments when we do not know how or what to pray, the Spirit of God is taking the prayer of Jesus and praying it in our own depths.

Think about this profound mystery with me for a moment. There is a continual prayer meeting going on in our hearts 24/7. We are never prayerless! We carry prayer around with us all the time. As we have seen, the Spirit is doing the praying that we cannot do. God the Spirit, who shares in the groaning of creation and in our own groaning, is calling out to God the creator, praying the prayer that resonates in Jesus’ own heart for the healing of the whole world. There is always, as Tom Wright reminds us again, a deeply Trinitarian shape to Christian prayer.⁷

Retreat is a time for us to listen deeply to the groaning of the Spirit who intercedes for us right here, right now. We do not need to get too mystical about this. We are not left clueless about what the Spirit may be praying. We know that the Spirit does not talk on the Spirit’s own authority. Rather, the Spirit takes the prayer of Jesus and prays it within our own hearts. It is the prayer for the coming of God’s kingdom into our midst, a prayer for God’s will to be done, a prayer for heaven to come to earth, a prayer for the mending of our broken world. Retreat gives us a wonderful opportunity to listen carefully to the particular way in which the Spirit may be praying the prayer of Jesus within our own personal lives.

Here is a story that means a lot to me. There was a certain monk who was to an extraordinary degree a man of prayer, someone absolutely carried away by prayer, which was his constant occupation.⁸ He was asked once how he had reached that state. He replied that he found it hard to explain. “Looking back,” he said, “my impression is that for many, many years I was carrying prayer within my heart, but did not know it at the time. It was like a spring, but one covered by a stone. Then at a certain moment Jesus took the stone away. At that, the spring began to flow and has been flowing ever since.” On retreat we ask Jesus to take away the stone from our hearts, so that the prayer which lies there like a hidden spring may begin to overflow throughout our lives and our congregations and our ministries and throughout God’s world.

RESPONDING TO THE GROANS

As we listen to the groans, we will want to respond. Retreat experiences

often water our desires to participate in some practical way in God's dream for a healed world. But where do we begin? Very simply, we can ask God – "What particular groan has my name written on it?" This is what all the great Christ-followers have done – people like Dorothy Day, Jean Vanier, Mother Theresa, Desmond Tutu, and others – by listening deeply to that groan on which their name was written, they sought to discern their own unique call to live out some little piece of God's dream within God's world. This can happen on retreat for you and me too. Such a question, when accompanied by deep reflection, wrestling prayer and planned action, draws us out of our small world of self and ego into the larger more spacious world of God and our suffering neighbor. In this way our retreat experience serves to carry forward God's purposes both for our lives and for our world.

NOTES

1 This article appeared in *Conversations*, 7:1L (Atlanta, GA: Richmond Graduate University, Spring/Summer 2009), available online at www.conversationsjournal.com. This material is excerpted from *Listening to the Groans: A Spirituality for Ministry and Mission* by Trevor Hudson with Stephen Bryant. Copyright 2007 by Upper Room Books®. Used by permission from Upper Room Books®. To order, phone 1-800-972-0433 or www.upperroom.org/bookstore.

2 N.T. Wright, *The Crown and the Fire: Meditations on the Cross and the Life of the Spirit* (London, UK: SPCK Publishing, 1992), 68.

3 "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus," lyrics attributed to Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889-c.1929).

4 Helen H. Lemmel, "Turn Your Eyes upon Jesus," (1922).

5 Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian*, translated by Edward Quinn (London, UK: William Collins, 1977), 231.

6 John Allen, *Rabble-Rouser for Peace: The Authorized Biography of Desmond Tutu* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 153-155.

7 N.T. Wright, 76.

8 André Louf, *Teach Us to Pray: Learning a Little about Prayer*, translated by Hubert Hoskyns (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1991), 21.



TREVOR HUDSON

is a member of the pastoral team at Northfield Methodist Church in Benoni, South Africa.