



THE RHYTHM OF DISCIPLESHIP

Jill Baker

VICE-PRESIDENT OF CONFERENCE, JILL BAKER, ASKS HOW DISCOVERING AND SUSTAINING A RHYTHM OF SPIRITUALITY MIGHT HELP US IN OUR JOURNEY OF DISCIPLESHIP.

Spending eight years as a mission partner in the Caribbean was a great introduction to rhythm! Hymns which we had been singing all our lives sounded very different when accompanied not by the organ but by young members of the church on drums or, if no drums were available, someone beating a wooden chair. The singing was transformed as people caught the beat and clapped along; spirits were lifted, worship was raised, we left still humming or tapping. Rhythm is powerful.

Rhythm is all around us – breathing out and breathing in is the most basic (and essential) rhythm, a rhythm we engage with automatically most of the time. In August, I travelled to Ethiopia to see some of the work of 'All We Can'. Several of our visits were to farmers high up in the mountains; as I walked uphill at heights nearing 3000 metres I was suddenly very conscious of my breathing; the thin air at that altitude didn't seem to be sustaining me adequately. The words used for 'breath' in Scripture are the same as the words for Spirit; 'ruach' in Hebrew, 'pneuma' in Greek. As we seek to be filled with God, we adopt the natural rhythm of breathing in the Holy

Spirit of God and breathing out the love and compassion of Christ. This kind of breathing will sustain our walk with God; without this regular, constant breath of life our discipleship soon dies.

OUR DAILY PILGRIMAGE

In recent years, pilgrimage has played an increasingly important part in my own spiritual life. Pilgrimage does not have to be physical, but it very often is and there is something special about walking in the open air (rain or shine) along an ancient path in the company of others. Over time, the body adopts its own rhythm of walking, sometimes enabling the pilgrim to achieve a greater distance than they had anticipated, or to keep going in poor weather or difficult terrain. Left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot... the longest and hardest journeys are only negotiated by allowing that simple rhythm to take over and even to carry us. It is so obvious, but so true that every destination is only reached by taking those small repeated steps. If sainthood and perfection are the goals we would like to reach in our Christian journey, it is what we do in the next few minutes, and the ones after that, and tomorrow and next week which shape our pilgrimage and take us closer to those destinations (or not).

OUR SPIRITUAL FIVE-A-DAY

During this year, Loraine (Mellor) and I are encouraging the discovery – or rediscovery – of a daily rhythm of spirituality. We have been inspired by the

account in Acts 2:42-47 of the earliest Christian gatherings and their emphasis on daily rhythm. 'Day by day' they met together for prayer and fellowship; 'day by day' they grew – it sounds as natural as breathing or walking. So, we are suggesting a 'Spiritual Five-A-Day' which might give health and strength to our discipleship, just as our five portions of fruit and vegetables keep our bodies in good condition. The five disciplines are: Give Thanks, Pray, Keep Silence, Act, Read & Reflect. We hope and pray that as each of us (and we too are learning) try to build these practices into our daily lives, we will be refreshed by the Holy Spirit and will overflow with a faith which is renewed and enthusiastic and attractive.

Writing this, however, I am aware of two possible dangers in this approach. Firstly, I know that there are times in our lives when rhythm can become menacing, threatening, or deadening. The fourth century desert fathers and mothers had an understanding of what they called 'acedia', a deep inner listlessness, even apathy, where the idea of doing the same things every day, day in day out, can be oppressive to the point of destruction. (To hear my address on this subject at the Methodist Conference on 24 June 2017, visit: methodist.org.uk/conference/conference-2017.) If our discovery of rhythm is to be life-giving, perhaps we need to recognise that there is also a greater rhythm at work in our lives, which means that we will all pass through times of struggle and barrenness. Some days we can't 'get



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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION | GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Breathe deeply in, breathe deeply out. Still your mind to focus on the way in which our lives are constantly surrounded by the Spirit of God and give thanks.
2. Are you aware of a rhythm of spirituality in your own life? Has it changed over the years?
3. Have there been times in your life when you have needed to focus on each breath, each step? Can you share these times with anyone?
4. How might you go about discovering, or rediscovering, the rhythm of spirituality in your own discipleship and within your church or fellowship group?



going'; that's okay. Some days we can't pray, or open our bibles or give thanks; that's okay too - the rhythms of joy and sorrow, laughter and lament, peace and pain are natural rhythms too. They do not mean that God is absent or that we have failed God and are being punished. At times like these we fall back to that most basic of rhythms, where I began, we just keep breathing and try to hold onto the hope that things will change again.

Secondly, I don't want to suggest that in our search for a rhythm of discipleship 'one-size-fits-all'. Rhythms vary - the strong reggae beat with which we were joyously surrounded in the Caribbean is very different from the delicate, lilting

rhythm of Scottish folk songs, or the haunting, compelling patterns in some classical music. The worlds of music and poetry and literature, as well as the worlds of sport and risk and adventure, or the worlds of design and style and art are all full of rhythms and each of us is on a journey to discover the unique rhythm of our own life lived in harmony with God's Spirit. That is a tune worth hearing and one which only we can play.

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