



The Contemplative Struggle

Radical discipleship
in a broken world

A South African journey

Ian Cowley

The Bible Reading Fellowship

15 The Chambers, Vineyard

Abingdon OX14 3FE

brf.org.uk

The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a Registered Charity (233280)

ISBN 978 0 85746 982 3

First published 2021

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

All rights reserved

Text © Ian Cowley 2021

This edition © The Bible Reading Fellowship 2021

Cover image © Peter Kettle

The author asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work

Acknowledgements

Unless otherwise acknowledged, scripture quotations are taken from The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Anglicised edition, copyright © 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NKJV are taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea...
'Be still, and know that I am God!'

PSALM 46:1-2, 10

He prayeth best, who loveth best.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'

The Contemplative Struggle

Radical discipleship
in a broken world



A South African journey

Ian Cowley



Contents

Introduction	13
Part One – The pearl of great price: seeking the kingdom of God	
1 The contemplative struggle	20
2 Growing up	29
3 The University Christian Movement.....	38
4 Conflict and struggle.....	48
5 In the wilderness	56
6 The fire of love.....	63
Part Two – The eye of the needle: action and contemplation	
7 Christ in you, the hope of glory	74
8 A war of desires	78
9 Fire and rain.....	85
10 Black consciousness and human liberation.....	94
11 Tackling poverty and injustice	100
12 The cost of living	107
13 War and peace.....	117
14 Slowing down in the age of speed	126
15 A people of hope	133
Conclusion.....	140
Appendix: Contemplative practice	143
Notes.....	151

Introduction

Beginning in the late 1960s and through the early 1970s, leading up to the Soweto riots of 1976 and the subsequent clampdown by the state, something remarkable took place in South Africa. A broad base of interlinked progressive activists came together and radically transformed the internal struggle against apartheid. At the heart of this movement were Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement, church leaders and ministers, student activists and university teachers and academics, black and white. By 1978 the very foundation of the internal opposition to apartheid had changed. Now there could be no turning back the clock, no matter how many people were detained or murdered by the state. I was privileged to arrive as a young undergraduate at the University of Natal in February 1969. I lived through those years and was directly involved in much of the student activism of that time.

What happened to me changed my life and the lives of many of my closest friends. We were part of an extraordinary period of history, which indelibly changed South Africa.

It has taken me many years to work through and reflect properly upon the events of that time. At the heart of all this were two key vocations. First, there was a dawning sense of the power of the love of God in Jesus Christ and the hope which this gives to a broken world. Second, I became utterly convinced of the imperative to live and work in whatever way I could to bring about a better, more just and more compassionate world. This vision of life and vocation has guided me and held me firm from those days until now.

I met Steve Biko at a University Christian Movement (UCM) formation school at Redacres, near Pietermaritzburg, in September 1969. This

was probably one of the last UCM events that Steve attended. He was a student at the University of Natal Medical School in Durban and had been active in the multiracial National Union of South African Students (NUSAS) during 1966 and 1967. At the 1968 UCM conference at Stutterheim, Steve Biko and a group of black delegates agreed to set up a new black-led student organisation which would be able to properly understand and advance black aspirations. This led to the founding in 1969 of the South African Students' Organisation (SASO) and the emergence in South Africa of Black Theology and the Black Consciousness Movement. This movement has had an inestimable impact on the history of South Africa and the liberation of South Africa from the evil of apartheid. It also has much to teach us in the contemporary struggle against racism and inequality.

Steve Biko was a man of extraordinary ability, intellect and charisma, surely one of the greatest leaders that South Africa has ever produced. He died on 12 September 1977 after suffering dreadful torture and cruelty and lying on the floor of a police van for 12 hours while being driven from Port Elizabeth to Pretoria. When I heard that Steve had been killed, I was profoundly shocked. I still struggle to comprehend the enormity of the loss of his death. From that moment something in me shattered, and I don't think it will ever be mended. Whatever naive sense I had that the white South African government might be amenable to gradual change disappeared forever on that day.

Steve Biko saw with great clarity the need to directly confront racism, injustice and poverty. He also saw that black people in South Africa were not powerless to bring about change. None of us is powerless. We all have to start rediscovering our own God-given dignity and humanity and our freedom in Christ. We truly discover our vocation in life when we choose to live for the purpose for which God created us and to become the person, and people, that he has intended us to be.

Black consciousness articulated the need for black people to step away from the white liberals in the churches and universities in order to be themselves and to be able to speak freely. They saw 'white

liberals' as people with a sense of guilt or shame over their privileged position but who nonetheless continued to exercise power and control. Barney Pityana, a close friend and colleague of Steve Biko, describes one young white person saying, 'I am so pleased I am no longer a white liberal. I am a radical now.'¹ Pityana says that many young whites who were influenced by Steve Biko were later 'to be found within the trade unions and in legal-aid work or have become academics who use their learning to advance the cause of liberation'.² Some of us also became priests and ministers of the church, as did Pityana and other black consciousness leaders.

Jesus Christ is the true radical. My experience of meeting with black students at UCM and the Anglican Students' Federation (ASF) gatherings enabled me to hear for myself the pain and the oppression of black people in South Africa. This led me directly to the call to follow Jesus Christ in radical discipleship.

The word 'radical' derives from the Latin *radix*, meaning 'root'. To be radical means to go to the root of things and to address the root issues that affect everything else. John the Baptist proclaimed, 'Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown in the fire' (Luke 3:9). Ronald Sider writes:

Radical discipleship means nothing more – and nothing less – than practising what we preach. It means living out the concrete implications of our most basic Christian confession: Jesus of Nazareth is truly Immanuel, God with us. It means surrendering every area of our lives – our security, our economics, even our politics – to the sovereign, unconditional Lordship of the Incarnate One who came and lived among us as the carpenter from Nazareth.³

What I quickly discovered was that radical discipleship means always being to some degree out of step with institutional religion and its power structures. In South Africa, the temptation for white Christians

was to escape into prayer and conventional religion when we ought to have been facing issues and taking action.

If we recognise Jesus as ‘the way, and the truth, and the life’ (John 14:6), we acknowledge him as the source of all truth, righteousness and holiness. To live in the truth is to live as Jesus lived. To know Jesus and to follow him is to be changed into his likeness. This inner transformation leads directly to outward obedience and action. The two must go together. Both spirituality and activism are essential and indispensable components of true Christian discipleship.

In South Africa this has long been a distinguishing feature of the struggle for liberation. Many of the greatest leaders of the liberation struggle were committed Christians, including Albert Luthuli, Robert Sobukwe and Oliver and Adelaide Tambo. It is impossible to fully understand the history of the struggle for justice in South Africa without an understanding of the role of Christian leaders, individuals and organisations. Certainly the Christian church has much in its history which has actively supported and even directly caused the oppression of black people. But alongside this there is the story of leaders like Trevor Huddleston, Beyers Naudé, Desmond Tutu and many, many others, who stood, often at great cost, for truth and for justice.

The importance of holding a depth of Christian spirituality together with radical activism and obedience was recognised by Desmond Tutu when he became archbishop of Cape Town in 1986. Together with Revd Francis Cull, the archbishop set up the Institute for Christian Spirituality, which was based at Bishopscourt, the archbishop’s home in Cape Town. Denise Ackermann was a member of the core team at the Institute, and she describes Desmond Tutu’s rationale for establishing it in these words, ‘If we can only get the clergy back at prayer, we will win the day.’⁴

Ackermann goes on to say that she did not for a moment believe that the archbishop was saying that the clergy had given up on prayer:

What he had in mind was an enduring truth for the life of the church. During the turbulent time of the 80s (and for that matter at all times), the church was/is called to stand for an alternative way of being a human community. As wave upon wave of repression, fuelled by states of emergency, were the order of the day in the 80s, as people's human dignity was trampled on by the forces of the state, the church, as the body of Christ, has a prophetic witness to proclaim tolerance, love, justice and the affirmation of the inviolable worth and dignity of all people. This required people of faith to draw deeply on their spiritual and moral resources. The Arch, with unfaltering wisdom, knew that the church, in order to live up to its prophetic task, needed members who could live creatively between the tension of vital public actions of protest against injustice on the one hand, and times of quiet withdrawal for prayer, on the other.⁵

Archbishop Tutu understood the importance, particularly for clergy and Christian leaders, of both contemplation and the struggle for justice. These are both imperatives of the gospel. The church in every generation needs leaders and people who are able to creatively hold these two together in their own lives. This is what then becomes the contemplative struggle.

Tutu and Cull also recognised the dangers of pursuing one of these and neglecting the other, as Ackermann says:

Both knew that burnout was too easily the lot of political and social activism. Both understood that withdrawal into a privatised world of self-involved spirituality was contrary to the teachings of Jesus Christ. Both knew that activism can be engaged more easily than taking time off to be with God. I believe that what the Arch and Francis had in mind was to assist the church – its clergy and its laity – to find the balance between active participation in the cause of justice and the life of prayer. In other words, we were to engage in the business of nurturing Christian spirituality in the life of the church.⁶

This book is an account of my own experience in responding to the call to radical discipleship. It is also an exploration of how this way of life may be rooted and sustained through an ever-deepening relationship of love with God. The question that many of us are wrestling with is this: what does it mean to be held firm in Christ in the centre of our being and to live with integrity in the 21st century?

In the life of Jesus himself, we see both regular withdrawal into solitude and prayer – the contemplative dimension – and radical action to heal and save people who were suffering and oppressed. This led him directly into conflict and struggle, and to his arrest, trial and death on a cross.

In the first part of this book, I reflect on my experience of growing up in South Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, and then as a student activist in the 1970s. In the second part, I look at the contemplative core of the life of Christian discipleship and also the challenges for radical obedience in our own age. I look in particular at the issues of climate change, racism, poverty and inequality, and war. I also reflect on the pressure that many people are dealing with each day because of digital technology and the age of acceleration. It seems to me that there is much that we can learn in facing the challenges of our own time from the experience of those who have already been through the fire of struggle and testing. The South African struggle for justice and liberation, in particular, has much to teach us as we make our way through the enormous global challenges of life in the 21st century.

NOTES

- 1 Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like* (Penguin, 1988), p. 10.
- 2 Biko, *I Write What I Like*, p. 10.
- 3 Ronald J. Sider, 'Foreword' in Christopher Sugden, *Radical Discipleship* (Marshalls Paperbacks, 1981), p. iv.
- 4 Denise M. Ackermann, from a talk given at the 20-year celebration of the Centre, Stellenbosch, August 2007.
- 5 Ackermann, talk given at the 20-year celebration of the Centre.
- 6 Ackermann, talk given at the 20-year celebration of the Centre.

8

A war of desires

In his letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul spells out the radically transformed way of living that flows from knowing Christ in us, the hope of glory. He says, ‘Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh’ (Galatians 5:16–17). To live by the Spirit is to live a Christ-centred life. If our hearts are ruled by the presence of Christ in us, we will be drawn by his Spirit away from the need to gratify the desires of the flesh, the ‘me-first’ false self.

This is a key issue for disciples of Jesus in our distracted 21st-century culture. I was talking to my son about this, and he recommended I listen to a series of podcasts from KXC (King’s Cross Church) in London, based on their teaching series ‘War of desires’. KXC was planted from St Mary’s Church in Bryanston Square in 2010 and has a large congregation of mainly young adults. The series aimed to address some of the issues young adults are struggling with, particularly in places like London. They say that ‘misdirected loves lead to misdirected lives’. They then look at the pursuit of comfort, self-sufficiency, entitlement and status and the problem of shame, and explore what it means to ‘love Jesus above all else’.³²

To live by the Spirit means to love Jesus above all else and to live according to his will and character. To live by the flesh means to live for ourselves, with self at the centre. The Greek word which is usually translated as ‘flesh’ is *sarx*. *Sarx* is a difficult word for us to understand, as it cannot be translated directly into English: it ‘may simply mean the body’ or ‘the sphere of birth and natural descent’.³³ The word can be used in a number of different ways. It may be used for observable, external things as opposed to spiritual things, or even for the whole

sphere of imperfection and sinfulness. It is important to grasp that, in principle, *sarx* (or flesh) is morally neutral. It is part of the way God has made us. But the flesh is weak, and there is ‘a dynamic hostility between flesh and spirit, set out in Galatians 5:16–23, and more fully in Romans 8:3–14’.³⁴

The flesh is egocentric. It is concerned with self-preservation, self-promotion and self-interest, about how I appear to other people and what they may or may not be thinking of me. The flesh is the ‘me-first’ self, which prioritises my needs and my interests over those of others and is preoccupied with protecting and defending my own ‘safe world’, my material possessions, security and reputation. This is the world where the individual matters far more than the wider community.

Much of our 21st-century culture is geared towards reinforcing this view of life. We are brought up, from an early age, to define our identity as individuals by our own interests and preferences and by our physical space. Even as children, we often have our own bedrooms, with our posters on the wall and our own stuff scattered around us. We feel we have the right to defend and protect what we see as our space. I am aware of my own reaction sometimes when someone is imposing themselves into the space where I want to be comfortable, perhaps in a coffee shop or restaurant or when I am driving. ‘You are impinging on my space’ is my own inner reaction, as though the world belongs to me, and I have the right not to be bothered or upset by other people and their lives. When self-interest is uppermost in our hearts, generosity, patience and gentleness are the losers.

This is the age of the individual. I am conditioned by my culture to constantly assert and protect my personal right, as I perceive it, to live my life in my own way and for my own pleasure and self-fulfilment. Previous generations understood the importance of a sense of duty: the duty which is bestowed upon us as human persons to give ourselves to service, family and community and to work for the greater good of society. In the age of the selfie, this view of life is squeezed to the margins.

The true self and the false self

Thomas Merton, the great teacher and writer on spirituality and prayer, says that the true self is the person God made me to be and is calling me to become in Christ. Merton writes: 'Our vocation is not simply to be, but to work together with God in the creation of our own life, our own identity, our own destiny.'³⁵ Merton also writes about the false self, which is essentially the flesh as the New Testament understands it. This is the egocentric, 'me-first' self, which sees life not as centred on God and on his purposes for us and our world, but on ourselves. To live by the Spirit is to become our true selves in Christ. If instead we live to gratify the desires of the flesh, we are false selves, who have chosen to live with our hearts set not on God but on ourselves. There is then a profound dislocation at the centre of our being.

God is love, and his purposes are entirely loving, just and good. The pursuit and protection of narrow self-interest for myself or 'my group' leads directly to greed, resentment, conflict and exploitation of others. The ways of the Lord are peace, joy, reconciliation, patience, long-suffering, gentleness and self-control. The ways of the flesh may promise security and pleasure, but they never bring lasting peace, satisfaction or contentment. They set us in competition against one another and against God, and this always leads to trouble.

As we look at the world around us now, we see everywhere the rotten fruit of this way of being and living. The planet is burning, and the waters are rising. Global inequality of wealth and income daily grows more stark and serious. Professional footballers in Britain earn £500,000 per week, while across Africa millions live on less than a pound a day. We spend billions on armaments, and we know that a nuclear catastrophe could be just around the corner. Our lives seem to be ever more frantic, as digital devices and social media dominate our every waking hour. We desperately need to find again 'the things that make for peace', as Jesus said as he wept over Jerusalem (Luke 19:42).

For Merton, 'The only true joy on earth is to escape from the prisons of our own false self, and enter by love into union with the Life who dwells and sings within the essence of every creature and in the core of our own souls.'³⁶ This is what it means to become my true self.

When our lives are directed by the false self, we are living lives of sin. We make ourselves the rulers of creation, and then we may even choose to say, 'Of course there is no creator; there is no God.' This is nothing new, despite the recent rise of 'new atheism'; it is as old as human history. In Psalm 14:1, written more than 2,500 years ago, we read, 'Fools say in their hearts, "There is no God."'

Our lives are in God's hands. The whole Bible, and the experience of millions upon millions of people of faith through the ages, tells us that this is the ultimate truth of our life on this earth. Above all, the life and teaching of Jesus Christ reveal to us the love of God our Father and creator. Jesus himself lived on earth a life of perfect love and perfect truth, unlike any other life in the whole of human history. Jesus is utterly unique, in his life, his death and his resurrection. If we are to find a way of hope and healing in these tumultuous times, we must return to the ultimate reality of who we are and what our lives are for.

Contemplation: learn contemplative practice

Why is it that we find ourselves longing for all that God promises us, and yet pursuing endlessly those things which only bring more trouble and strife to our lives and to our world?

We are all caught up in the 'war of desires'. This is the struggle between the true self and the false self, between the call to live by the Spirit and the temptation to gratify the desires of the flesh. There is no easy answer or quick solution here. We live each day making choices. Sometimes we make good choices, and we see the fruit of those. But sometimes we do not. Like Paul we can say:

I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

ROMANS 7:22–25

What I have found, in my own searching and struggling, is that the more I continue in daily contemplative practice, the more my heart is enabled to be ruled and held firm by the peace of God in Christ Jesus. The more that I do this, being still in the presence of God for a set period of time each day, the more I find that God is able, in some mysterious way, to change my heart and draw me to himself. Like Paul, we can say:

This, too, is nothing new. Contemplative prayer is something that has been known and taught as essential to true Christian prayer since the early days of the Christian church. Many of the early church fathers of the first three centuries were contemplatives who were practised in silent prayer and solitude, and who taught this as an essential part of true discipleship. This remains as vitally important today as it has ever been. In fact, it may be that contemplative practice has become an essential discipline for those who are seeking to be faithful disciples of Christ in the 21st century. Rowan Williams, the former archbishop of Canterbury, writes:

Contemplation is very far from being just one kind of thing that Christians do: it is the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics, the key to the essence of a renewed humanity that is capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom – freedom from self-oriented, acquisitive habits and the distorted understanding that comes from these. To put it boldly, contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit. To learn contemplative practice is to learn what we

need to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly. It is a deeply revolutionary matter.³⁷

What does it mean to know and follow Jesus Christ in the ‘unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit’?

The culture of consumerism and self-fulfilment is everywhere around us. It is the air we breathe, the water in which we swim. Many of our fundamental assumptions about who we are and what life is about are now formed by a particular form of capitalism that is relentlessly focused on the desires of the consumer. It is hard to see the wood for the trees, to see the truth that brings peace for the bright and beautiful images with which we are bombarded every day. To return to a life of simple obedience to the teachings and practice of Jesus Christ is immensely challenging. Is this even possible?

All of this takes me back to South Africa in the early 1970s, when those of us who were seen as white Christian liberals in UCM tried to wrestle with the challenge of living with integrity in apartheid South Africa. We were talking about some kind of ‘white consciousness’ which would enable us to live faithfully and truthfully in a society that opposed the ways of Jesus so powerfully and subtly. Our lives were inextricably linked with this alien ideology and culture. Could there be a third way, one that did not involve either collusion with the system or exile and escape?

This seems to me to be much the same dilemma that many are struggling with in our own times. We see young people, many in their teens and early 20s, showing the way and refusing simply to accept that this is the way things are and this is how they must be. They are living and speaking prophetically, because they believe that their own future depends on it. It is essential to believe that we can change things, that indeed we can change the world. This is what Christians have always believed. When Christians have acted upon this belief in obedience to Christ, extraordinary changes have taken place. From

the growth of the early Christian church to the emancipation of slaves and the largely peaceful transition to democracy in South Africa, we can see and know that change is possible and that truth and justice are worth fighting for and, if necessary, dying for.

To follow Christ is to believe that his way is the way of hope and healing for all humankind and for all creation. The contemplative struggle is the way in which we live out this great conviction. This is how we will become part of the new thing which the Lord will do, in our own time, for the salvation and the healing of the nations and our sick and suffering earth.

NOTES

- 32 kxc.org.uk/war-of-desires
- 33 Alan Richardson (ed.), *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (SCM, 1957), pp. 83–84.
- 34 Richardson (ed.), *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, pp. 83–84.
- 35 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New Directions, 1961), p. 32.
- 36 Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 25.
- 37 Rowan Williams, *Holy Living: The Christian tradition for today* (Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 96–97.



Enabling all ages to grow in faith



Anna Chaplaincy
Living Faith
Messy Church
Parenting for Faith

The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a Christian charity that resources individuals and churches. Our vision is to enable people of all ages to grow in faith and understanding of the Bible and to see more people equipped to exercise their gifts in leadership and ministry.

To find out more about our ministries, visit

brf.org.uk

‘Here is a much-needed book: the story of the battle against racism, injustice, poverty, held in tension with the necessity of time for contemplation. We need to hear it – there is much here that applies to our world today.’

Esther de Waal, writer and scholar

How do we embrace and work out our call to be disciples in a broken world? In *The Contemplative Struggle*, Ian Cowley draws on his experience of living in his native South Africa during the apartheid era to challenge understandings of contemplative prayer and spirituality as essentially inward-looking. In doing so, he highlights the urgent need for Christians to be active in bringing transformation to a suffering world and paints a compelling picture of radical discipleship for today.



Ian Cowley is an Anglican priest who has served in parish ministry in South Africa, Sheffield, Cambridge and Peterborough. From 2008 to 2016 he was Coordinator of Vocations and Spirituality in the Diocese of Salisbury, where he set up and developed the Contemplative Minister programme. He is the author of five books on spirituality, discipleship and the local church.



brf.org.uk

Cover artwork © Peter Kettle

The Bible Reading Fellowship is a Registered Charity (233280)