



In this previously unpublished extract from lectures he gave while he was teaching at Harvard Divinity School, and wrestling with his own vocation, **Henri Nouwen** seeks to rediscover the heart of the Gospel. Less than four months after giving these talks, he left academic life to join a l'Arche community in Toronto – one of the communities founded by Jean Vanier for and with people with learning disabilities

Leaving it all to God

How do we practise the presence of God? Through prayer and service.

Service is being involved in something that is for the people of God.

At times, we might be involved in larger things – clothing the naked, sheltering the poor, helping the refugees, visiting the sick or imprisoned, but it is always small to begin with. It begins with small gestures. Being kind to your family and the people you work with, saying a patient word, writing a card, sending a flower.

Be attentive. Be attentive. Be attentive.

When we pray frequently and know that God is in us here and now, we are very attentive to others because we are less preoccupied with ourselves. We are less worried about ourselves and if we are not very worried about ourselves we see other people more clearly. We see their struggle. We see their beauty. We see their kindness. We see that they are not trying to hurt us but that they have their own problems. We are much gentler, because we are in the presence of the Spirit. We realise these people are also struggling.

This is one of the greatest and first rewards of following Jesus. Suddenly, the Spirit in you sees the Spirit in them. The Christ in you sees the Christ in them. The heart of God in you sees the heart of God in them. Spirit speaks to Spirit, heart speaks to heart, and Christ speaks to Christ. You cannot see Christ in the world, but the Christ in you can see Christ in the world. You cannot see God in the world, but God in you can see God in the world. The spiritual life is the recognition of the Spirit, in the Spirit, for the Spirit. It is the mutuality of the Spirit seeing the Spirit. It is the mutuality of God praising God.

We begin to see how good people are underneath all their violence, their hatred, their revenge, their illusions, and their aspirations. We realize they are people of God and that the Spirit of God also blows through them and breathes in them. We realize that people are wonderful, that they are beautiful, that they are persons sounding through the love of God. We see it and are glad. We can say, "It is good to be with you, because you remind me even more of God's love." Community starts forming. New life starts taking place.

We do not do service to earn anything. It is not an anxious need to save the world. We don't act on the condition that change will take place. No. You can see how intense that might become. If our only concern is "I better help him or her," or to do things to change a person or the world, or the country, or the politics, or the social condition – if change is the condition of service – we are going to be very bitter and very soon. But if service is an expression of gratitude for the love we have already experienced then we can be free and engage in change without trying so hard. Service is an expression of the gift you have within you that you want to share with others.

In a way, service is an act of gratitude. We are so full of God's presence, we are so aware of God's promise, that we don't want to hold it back. We want to share it. The disciples went around the world to announce that God is with us and that we can already now enjoy his presence. The disciples' concern for the poor, the hungry, the sick, and the dying was an expression of a deep faith in God's presence. "What you do for the least of mine, you do for me" (Matthew 25:40).

When you practise the presence of God,

you will find yourself drawn to the poor, to people who are struggling, to places where people are in pain. You want other people to realize that God is with them. Service means to simply bear witness to that new life in you.

The Spirit in you will draw you closer to those who suffer or to those in pain, because you will see there the presence of God. We want to be there with the people and reveal to them that God has not left them alone. We want to tell the world that something great is happening and that the Spirit is not just for us but for them too. We want to call forth. We want to say, "Trust that the Spirit of God is within you and live according to that Spirit. It will make all things new."

"You will have more energy than you thought. You thought you were broken, and you are, but in the midst of your brokenness and poverty there is something in you. You have a gift. Let that gift come to fruition in you."

All the little actions that you do are actions of gratitude. Human service, action for your neighbour, whether it is small or large, whether it involves individuals, communities, or countries, actions of service are to be done out of gratitude.

They have to be acts of *eukharistia* (eucharist, gratitude).

Acts of service have to be an expression of the fact that God has come to us and dwells in us, and that God has already given us a life eternal because he has already given us his breath. We are already in God. We have already overcome in principle death and evil, and therefore can be free to live gratefully and to manifest our gratitude through our care for the neighbour, the people of God, and for the world. It is very freeing to know that the presence of God is practised by acts of grateful service. It makes all the difference. Prayer and service are what life is about. It is how the Spirit of God reveals God to you. Prayer and service are at the heart of following Jesus.

Following Jesus by Henri Nouwen, edited by Gabrielle Earnshaw, is published this week by SPCK at £12.99 (Tablet bookshop price, £11.69).



PRIME CHURCH OF THE ANGLICAN COMMUNION
FARM STREET
EVENTS

Blind Man's Brexit

Ed Stourton will discuss his latest book which provides a unique insight into the extraordinary story of how and where the Brexit negotiations went so spectacularly wrong
Tuesday 5 November (evening)

What makes for a successful Catholic education in the modern world?

Tuesday 26 November, 17.45

Farm St Church Hall, 114 Mount St, London W1K 3AH
For more information please visit: www.thetablet.co.uk/events