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ANDREW LORD

# Spirituality of Time: Reflections on a Hospice Placement

**Andrew Lord writes this theological reflection out of his experiences in a local hospice as part of ordination training. The particular limitations on time in a hospice, for those coming to the end of life and for those who are carers, result in an openness to the present. Creation and life are seen in small things. He critiques different approaches to time in the thinking of Augustine and Barth, and offers a variety of models of prayer related to different theological understandings of God and time.**

The pressure and opportunities that time provides has long been a challenge in ministry. How in the midst of multiple demands can time be found to listen deeply to others and to God? How can I recognise the ‘significant times’ that occur in the ordinary of daily life and best make use of their opportunities? These questions struck me afresh as I immersed myself in the life of a local Hospice in Cambridge as part of ordination training.<sup>1</sup> For the patients time can become focused on what is to come: “I know I’m on the way out. I know what is going to happen” was said to me almost by way of introduction by one patient. For the carers there is the importance of giving people time and yet the pressure of what Tim Hunt, the founding consultant of a local hospice, calls “watch time”.<sup>2</sup> Carers can become too busy to care, given the other pressures on them. For patients and carers this time may be just filled with anxieties, but it can also be a special time when people grow, families are brought together and God is encountered afresh. It is these special times that live on in the memories of those involved in the Hospice. Yet giving space to enable such special times is increasingly difficult in a post-modern world characterised by “time-compression.”<sup>3</sup>

The aim of this essay is to try and outline the elements of a Christian spirituality that might enable space for the special times. By *spirituality* in this essay I am considering the way in which *experience*, *theology* and *prayer* are brought together around the theme of ‘time.’ My starting point is a particular hospice experience from which I will draw out some of the things learnt from patients, carers and trainers. From there I will move onto examining a Christian theology of time,

1 The Arthur Rank Hospice in Cambridge. I have changed the names of patients mentioned in this article.  
2 Equivalent to the “clock time” expounded well by Henri J.M. Nouwen, Donald P. McNeill, and Douglas A. Morrison, *Compassion*, DLT, London 1982, p 97f.

3 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Blackwells, Oxford, 1989, quoted by Jeremy S. Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine, no. 4, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, p 74.

identifying the key issues involved. Finally I turn to prayer to ask what forms of prayer are suggested by experience and theology, and which may provide the heartbeat of a new way of approaching time in a way that gives life and hope.

There are two aspects of experience, theology and prayer that stood out in my reflections and these will provide the heart of the spirituality I'm proposing. First, there is a sense of "interconnected unity" – the sense that all people, creation, thoughts and time are connected in some kind of unity. Secondly, there is also a sense of "focused diversity" – the sense that life becomes more focused, finding greater depth in each individual thing, and a fresh appreciation of the diversity of life that is to be appreciated. These two aspects are explored through this essay and brought together in the conclusion.

### Hospice Experience of Time

There was much in my experience that pointed to the time of dying as a time when relationships between people become more important. My time began with a staff meeting where staff shared their experience of the previous week when five people had died, and felt they needed more time to come to terms with this. Here were a multi-disciplinary staff brought together by common experiences, and struggling with them. The discussion moved on, and often seemed to focus on patients and how best to care amidst sometimes difficult family relationships. A story was told of how a former patient had, before his death, re-established a relationship with his brother from whom he had been estranged for nearly 15 years. This provided the encouragement to face a patient about to arrive whose family situation was known to be difficult. Tim Hunt spoke of the very common desire patients have to make peace before they die, and how there is often a movement outwards from the patient towards others. However, sometimes this desire to re-build relationships has to start from a very desolate point, where the patient has few or no family and friends. It was noticeable how some patients had many visitors, whereas others were always alone. Here the care for the individual and the desire to integrate them into at least the 'family' of the Hospice is seen. It was such a desire that motivated many of the founders of the modern hospice movement. Cicely Saunders was motivated through her relationship with David Tasma, a Polish patient, dying virtually alone from cancer.<sup>4</sup> Sheila Cassidy notes that "the spirituality of those who care for the dying must be the spirituality of the companion, of the friend who walks alongside."<sup>5</sup> The importance of companionship, of community, of relationships is key to caring for the dying. This needs to be a priority, especially since the post-modern outlook of fragmentation works against this.<sup>6</sup>

This desire for 'interconnection' is also found in more abstract ways. I think of Stan, aged 56, facing gastric cancer and the need to part from his wife and two young children. He wanted a single room and space to himself – seemingly wanting to be alone. And yet he was thinking much, and I wonder if he needed to find a bigger 'unity of thoughts' that encompassed the sufferings as well as the joys of

4 Shirley Du Boulay, *Cicely Saunders: The Founder of the Modern Hospice Movement*, Hodder and Stoughton, London 1987, p 57.

5 Sheila Cassidy, *Sharing the Darkness: The Spirituality of Caring*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London 1988, p 5.

6 Paul Goodliff, *Care in a Confused Climate*, DLT, London 1998, p 140.

life. Being brought face-to-face with the certainty of death can bring thoughts and feelings that upset the equilibrium. There is a need to integrate the shock with our past worldview, to take time to find a bigger unity that betters enables people to re-engage with life. Important in this is 'space' and also 'relaxation.' A number of staff noted how massage or relaxation exercises enabled people to bring to the surface things hidden. The process of working things through perhaps only occasionally breaks through into words, but it a vital part of coming to terms with the new reality.

There is an interconnected unity of relationships, of thoughts, and also, somehow, of time. For patients, and staff as they care, the *future* of death seems to come up close to the *present*. Also the *past* can often come a source of present reflection. Perhaps sometimes there is a confused mix for patients, maybe as their thinking is affected by their condition. But often I found conversations mixing past and present together in the clear light of the future, although that future was often hard to talk about. This change of time seems impossible to explain, but its effects are seen in many ways. From my perspective, the most obvious way the way in which I tend to "plan time." Jonathan, the chaplain, spoke of how we have to let go of an over-structured, over-organised approach to life and ministry. Rather than planning we need openness to the opportunities God will give. 'Hospice time' is almost unplannable, and openness to the 'present' is the key through which also the past and future are faced and progress made.

Having outlined the experiences of 'interconnected unity' I now want to turn to a diverse number of things that seemed to become a focus for people living and serving in the Hospice. In very broad terms there often, in conversations and discussions, seemed to be a focus on creation, on anxieties, on 'god' and on 'the future.' For me, it seems one of those paradoxes that the best way to celebrate life is through death. Somehow death brings a focus on life which can go much deeper than we have yet experienced. For patients and relatives the remembrance of the past brings a greater appreciation of the life that has been. I think of Ben who was asleep, deteriorating fast, when two relatives visited. He had been at the Sunday service and someone commented on his singing. The relatives began to remember his years in the choir at an Abbey church, and the desire he had for a family Bible to be bound which they we now arranging to be done. Images of life coming near a time of death. As a carer, Cassidy notes:

"It is difficult to explain that working day by day with the dying makes one acutely conscious that life is a gift and one cannot count on receiving it tomorrow"<sup>7</sup>

Sometimes this sense of life comes through touch, and Tim Hunt encouraged us not to be embarrassed about touch but always, as appropriate, to encourage and embrace patients. Touch somehow speaks of life that is shared. I wonder also if this sense of life even embraces the cause of suffering: staff prefer to talk about "living with cancer" rather than "dying of cancer." Somehow even suffering is embraced in life, in way that for me cannot but point to Jesus.

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<sup>7</sup> Cassidy, *Sharing*, p 123.

The focus on individual life spills into a focus on creation as a whole. The hospice I visited has a fountain in the middle of a small courtyard. The weather was very cold and there was frozen water all round the sides of the fountain, dripping down towards the ground. Yet at the same time a small fountain was still going, pouring water out over the ice. For a couple of days that fountain became a focus of conversation and wonder – a special sight not seen before. Effort has been put into making the Hospice as ‘homely’ as possible, and this is often expressed through creativity: pictures, flowers, colours, images and so on. This creative focus cannot be separated from a focus on *place* – the hospice is important as a place people can come, a homely place of care and perhaps space. Cicely Saunders was part motivated by a desire to find a place for people to die, a place that was positive rather than the “hospital slums” that a 1961 medical report talked of.<sup>8</sup>

This general focus on creation and life is also seen in the doing of small things. I have an image in my mind of Edmund, walking round the Hospice looking for a needle and thread and then sitting down to mend his dressing gown. Something very simple and ordinary, and yet of significance to him. I think of Sam who was suffering memory loss, and to whom I listened and chatted in the knowledge that an hour later he would have probably forgotten the conversation. Here, doing the small thing of talking when you might say it was going to be lost, was the important thing. Listening is of vital importance, something that focuses us on the present moment and the life before us.

The focus so far has been on things that are positive, yet it is important not to overlook the difficulties. One patient spoke of the difficulty of having a lot of time but seemingly little to fill it with. Some patients just lie down for hours with only occasional contact with others. In such an atmosphere, alongside the realities of illness, anxieties begin to grow. At the extreme, a research study in a palliative care hospital in New York found that the desire for a hastened death is not uncommon amongst terminally ill cancer patients. This is most commonly due to depression and hopelessness, rather than pain.<sup>9</sup> More commonly there may be the anxiety of wanting to care for a spouse or family, but being unable to. Anxiety affects also those who care for the dying. I remember Tony and his wife sitting ‘watching’ the TV in the sitting room. Tony had fallen asleep and his wife was sitting there, physically very tense as I stopped by to say hello. Gradually, as we talked about life, families and holidays she unwound. Like many, the hope for something better for her husband put against the reality of the present left her anxious without a solution. For others it is the practicalities that seem to become an increased focus for anxiety. Patients coming for respite care, and the staff that care for them, find the process of sorting out the correct social service (and other) support for when they go home often a very difficult task filled with frustration.

It is perhaps in the context of such feelings that we find a focus on ‘god’ and ‘the future.’ This can be a time of religious questioning. I think of Fred who came along to the day centre for ‘Thought for the day’ thinking he was going to lunch!

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8 Du Boulay, *Cicely Saunders*, p 82.

9 William Breitbart, et al., “Depression, Hopelessness, and Desire for Hastened Death in Terminally Ill Patients with Cancer,” *JAMA* 284, no. 22 (2000): pp 2907–10.

He opened up and spoke of how the cancer had led him to think again about a lot of things. He remembered the time 60 years ago at a scout camp when they were having a service in the open air with the bird and trees around. He remembered a special encounter with God at that time, and reflected that such encounters had become more frequent since the cancer had been discovered. Jonathan, the chaplain, spoke of his thrill and amazement that people sense the presence of God in the Hospice. This fits with a view of the chaplain as someone offering 'spiritual care' rather than just carrying out a 'religious function.' The focus points for God's presence can become openings for spiritual growth.

Tim Hunt said that for many people it is not the experience of God's presence, but a patient's personal experience in the light of their understanding of God that comes into focus. In particular he suggests that it is common for people to think that they are being punished for the things they have done earlier in life. They may feel 'justly damned' because of past sins, and expect that they will always be in pain because of them. They may even expect punishment to continue after death. However, there is a shift towards younger patients feeling that their illness is wrong because they feel they have done everything right in life. In both these cases the focus is on sin, or right and wrongs – there is perhaps a lingering understanding that doing good leads to good, and going wrong leads to bad. For other patients it is the more practical questions about the future that occupy them. As one person bluntly asked Jonathan, "So what *will* happen when I die?"

So far I have outlined some of my experiences at a local Hospice in a way that shows the themes of 'interconnected unity' and 'focused diversity.' Before moving on to look at theological themes, it is important to note that these themes do not form a static picture, but are part of a dynamic movement for patients and carers. As Cassidy puts it, "the dying...are essentially people on a journey."<sup>10</sup> She sees this journey as one of "travelling fearfully into the unknown" as patients move towards death. It is a journey on which carers such as nurses and doctors are continually asking how they can help make things better. Yet it is a journey Tim Hunt described as one of impotence, where there is movement but often carers are left with little or nothing to offer. Alongside this rather bleak picture it is important to stress the possibility of this journey as being one of wholeness – where life can be brought into a more peaceful unity, and where the individual aspects of life can be appreciated in a deeper way. This stress is the motivation for this essay, but it is a stress of the possibilities that is always pushing beyond the general realities.

## Theology of Time

This discussion of the nature of the journey that the dying and their carers are on illustrates the Christian perspective on life and death. Christian life and theology is thoroughly eschatological in the sense that it links the present with the future. It is worth noting a number of themes that are relevant in this regard drawing particularly on Pauline theology, although it is not possible here to enter into all the theological background.<sup>11</sup> Firstly, all humans are seen as being on a journey

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10 Cassidy, *Sharing*, p 4.

11 For relevant passages see: 1 Thes 4:13-18; 2 Thes 1:5-12; 1 Cor 15; Rom 8.

towards God which will involve death and judgment. Secondly, the hope that is held out to all people in Jesus Christ is of an eternal life after death, whatever we have done in the past. Thirdly, eternal life involves 'heaven' coming down to 'earth', i.e. is world-affirming.<sup>12</sup> Finally, in the present we can have the Holy Spirit who brings us a foretaste of the world to come. For the Christian, this dynamic journey is one of hope within which it is possible to see God at work.

One of the key theological questions concerning the future 'eternal life' which affects our view of the present is regarding the nature of *time*: Is time good or bad? The approach I have taken through this article has been based on the essential goodness of time. Time gives the opportunity for people to discover a greater unity in life and to discover depth in the individual aspects of life. In doing so, it can often seem that time itself is being stretched and deepened. These themes of stretching and deepening will become important in our consideration of prayer. In particular we need to ask the question as to whether time stretches so far as to become 'timeless.' In more concrete terms we might note that an experience of 'interconnected unity' may sometimes leave us feeling that what matters is, say, all the people, friends, family being together, relating together, in a way that makes time irrelevant. Sometimes we just want to 'be' together with others, irrelevant of what we are now able to 'do', irrelevant of what might happen in the future. We might also observe that after death we usually don't expect time to be relevant any more – it can be seen as an escape from time. If this is so then 'timelessness' is the enduring good and 'time' is not so good.

This kind of questioning leads us into a theological debate over the nature of time, which Begbie illustrates by contrasting the thinking of Augustine and Barth. Augustine contrasts "the created, transient temporal order which is never still, in which we experience the acute dispersal of past, present and future events, and on the other hand, eternity, which is still and free from any such dispersal."<sup>13</sup> He argues that "the soul is fallen from the restful contemplation of eternal truth, into the busy-ness of temporal activity"<sup>14</sup> In this argument Augustine was affected by neo-platonic metaphysics which states that 'true' existence is immutable existence. Thinking of temporal existence, Augustine proposed the idea of the three-fold present: only the present *is*, but the past and future are present to the mind in memory and expectation respectively. This suggests the need for a focus on the eternal present which contains within it both past, present and future – such as is found in the music of Taverner. Such a focus offers an alternative to the destructive busyness that affects much of life, and perhaps gives a useful link with the life in the Hospice we have been examining.

However, Begbie sees two significant problems with the outlook of Augustine: its tendency to link temporality and fallenness; and the limited extent to which his three-fold understanding is linked with God. In contrast Begbie draws on Barth and on an appreciation of music, to stress the positive nature of time: "Time is divinely *created* – there is no other time."<sup>15</sup> Time gives space for change, which can be good and need not imply chaos; time gives awareness of our life-span and

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12 N.T. Wright, *New Heavens, New Earth: The Biblical Picture of Christian Hope*, Grove Biblical Series, no. B11 Grove Books, Cambridge 1999.

13 Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, p 76.

14 Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, p 82.

15 Bart, quoted in Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, p 93.

marks our dependence on God's grace<sup>16</sup>; being subject to time can be profitable and enriching and not something to be fought again; there are a diversity of "time-structures appropriate to different created entities" which illustrates the diversity of creation.<sup>17</sup> Begbie argues for a very positive view of time, ultimately derived from the incarnation within which we see "Jesus Christ and the Spirit's direction of all temporal things to their eschatological fulfillment."<sup>18</sup> He thus stresses the "risen Christ's time" which is time healed of fallenness. Turning to eternity, Begbie summarises Barth to suggest that "Temporal distinctions are not conceived as being absent from eternity, but rather as being present with a simultaneity that does not efface their sequence."<sup>19</sup>

This debate does delve into metaphysics somewhat beyond this essay! We now turn briefly to some of the biblical material. The Greek used for the New Testament differentiates between two kinds of time: *cronos*~ which refers to a general period of time; and *kairos*~ which refers to a specific time, a decisive point, a divinely allotted time. The latter is used by the Gospel writers to refer to the decisive time of Jesus' death, e.g. Luke 21:8, John 7:6. Time has both a general aspect, but times of specific focus. This fits with the sense of 'focused diversity' I have been exploring, supporting the idea of focus points of particular significance if we have our eyes open to see them. Alongside this we can put the well known Old Testament passage from Ecclesiastes:

"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance" (Ecc 3:1-4)

Time contains a diversity of events and emotions, each of which finds a focus at particular times. Yet somehow these times can act as a pointer to a wider understanding of the eternal God. And so the writer of Ecclesiastes continues:

"He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end...That which is, already has been; that which is to be, already is" (Ecc 3:11,15)

Here the author jumps from the human perspective to God's perspective and discovers a kind of 'eternal present' within which time has little meaning. God both stands over time and yet is involved in it, as we see from Revelation:

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." (Rev 1:8)

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16 See Job 7:6, 14:2; Psalm 39:5.

17 Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, p 89. Here I am summarising the four main positive arguments for time that Begbie derives from a study of music. He suggests the music of

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James MacMillan as a counter-example to John Taverner.

18 Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, p 97.

19 Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time*, p 153.



Paul's argument to the Romans starts with the assertion that God's nature, particularly His moral nature, has been revealed to all people since the creation of the world (Rom 1:20). God's nature is unchanging and yet revealed into time.<sup>20</sup>

Concluding this theological section, what I want to draw out is the distinction between a 'timeless eternity' suggested by the work of Augustine, and the 'diverse time-filled present' suggested by Barth and Begbie. Begbie places these two approaches in direct opposition, whereas I want to suggest that they can be partly held together. In support of this I would first draw on my Hospice experience which does stress the possible positive nature of time, and so fits well with the "risen Christ time" of Begbie. But it also suggests that there is some kind of 'interconnected unity' that is sought in a way that is timeless. Although I would not want to go along with an overly negative Augustinian approach, it does seem to include a positive view of timelessness that Begbie doesn't allow for. This approach seems to fit with the biblical material explored.

## Prayer and Time

I have briefly sketched out a theological backdrop to my 'spirituality of time' based on the themes of 'interconnected unity' and 'focused diversity' held together on an eschatological journey. Now I want to turn to prayer, a study of which brings to light these same two themes. Turning to prayer is vital because it links with the experience of the presence of God that Hospice patients have experienced, and because the process of dying is one in which prayer can seem so difficult for patients and carers. In considering my experience at the Hospice, I started with the importance of relationships, community and the sense of 'interconnected unity.' Communion with God is key to contemplative prayer, with "unity with God" the goal of prayer in many of the standard treatments. Rather than consider contemplative prayer as a whole, it is useful here to consider some of its aspects in relation to the community of humankind. In our experience we often seem, as Simon Barrington-Ward suggests, to find ourselves as part of "some kind of universal struggle" that links humankind together.<sup>21</sup> This can lead some to an activist mission to overcome suffering and bring people together. It can also lead to an activist approach to intercession, almost demanding that God bring healing and wholeness to people and communities. The difficulty with activist approaches is that they can lead to burn out and they can leave us disillusioned when healing and wholeness does not come. However, there has been significant moves to bring intercession and contemplation back together. From an evangelical viewpoint Gillet notes the vital contribution that evangelical spirituality makes in terms of intercession that moves us outwards in mission. But he argues for it to be integrated with contemplative spirituality for it to be better linked with the power of God.<sup>22</sup> He argues for an understanding of prayer that is linked with the eternal communion between Father and Son by the Spirit: "Praying in that Spirit, the Christian's prayer

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20 There is something of God that is unchanging, perhaps His essential nature rather than His will as seen on earth. Appropriate biblical verses are: Num 23:19; Mal 3:6; compare with Ex 32:12; Jer 18:10; Jonah 3:9.

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21 Simon Barrington-Ward, *The Jesus Prayer*, Bible Reading Fellowship, Oxford 1996, p 7.

22 David Gillet, *Trust and Obey*, DLT, London 1993, p 193-94.

is immersed in the ocean of the Son's communion with the Father."<sup>23</sup> For Taylor, stillness, listening and 'sudden annunciations' are the entry points into this kind of prayer and the Little Sisters and Brothers of Jesus are the prime examples of people practicing this kind of prayer and mission. The 'sudden annunciations' are those particular experiences of God's presence that we have noted are not unusual in a Hospice environment. Prayer can involve using these as a springboard into a fuller communion with God, helping people to move from particular experiences to an experience of the Trinity. This experience cannot be separated from knowledge of the Trinity – prayer and theology need to go hand-in-hand.

Stillness and silence are often needed to help jump into this kind of prayer, but are often difficult. Even for people with time on their hands, seeing this as a positive aid to prayer may seem beyond their grasp. Yet as Picard notes, "Silence is nothing merely negative; it is not the mere absence of speech. It is a positive, a complete world in itself."<sup>24</sup> He argues that on the one hand silence is often viewed as 'useless' because it seems to have no other purpose, it does not fit into a world of profit and utility. Yet "Time is accompanied by silence, determined by silence... Without the silence that is in time, there would be no forgetting and no forgiving... man is led by the silence which is in time to forgetting and forgiving."<sup>25</sup> Silence can give the opening to the gift of forgetting and forgiving that comes from God and is essential to the healing and wholeness of families and communities that is often sought by those who are dying. The need may be to help patients see the value of silence as an entry into prayer, and to enable carers to make space for silence within which to discover the movings of the Spirit.<sup>26</sup>

A difficulty with silence is that it often confronts us with our fears and inadequacies, but it is only the discovery of God within silence that offers the hope of trust and grace to replace these. Sometimes this may mean trust that comes from God even as God remains beyond human knowing, and the 'apophatic' side of contemplative prayer is important here.<sup>27</sup> In this the difficult practice of surrender is vital, as De Caussade states: "the sure and solid foundation of our spiritual life is to give ourselves to God and put ourselves entirely in his hands, body and soul"<sup>28</sup> The context for surrender is often one of affliction and the "darkness which surrounds the throne" of God.<sup>29</sup> Although I would not want to go as far as De Caussade who seems at times to long for suffering in order to better discover God, within a Hospice environment it seems that he has much to teach us about approaching God without manipulation. I would only want to balance his presentation out with the conviction that God will act in response to our faltering acts of surrender and can bring change into the situations we often despair of.

So far I have been reflecting on some of the 'universal' aspects of prayer based on the experience of the eternal Triune God. But true Christian prayer brings together the universal and the particular. Somehow in the presence of the eternal God we

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23 John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God: The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission*, SCM, London 1972, p 226.

24 Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, Gateway, Indiana 1952), p 17.

25 Picard, *The World of Silence*, pp 116–17.

26 Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, DLT, London 1969, p 50.

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27 Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology*, Trinity & Truth Series, DLT, London 1998, p 24.

28 Jean-Pierre De Caussade, *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*, translated by Kitty Muggidge, reprint, 1966 Collins, Fount, London 1981, p 67.

29 De Caussade, *Sacrament of the Present*, p 116.

discover not a Presence that gives an escape from the world, but a Presence within which the pains of the world are held. We gain a vision of what Barrington-Ward calls “the wounded Man in the heavens.”<sup>30</sup> Christ is the one who rose with wounds still visible, the wounded Lamb in the heavens (Rev 5). Prayer teaches us that communion with the eternal cannot be separated from the physical, and that the general cannot be separated from the particular. Barrington-Ward quotes the experience of St Silouan, an orthodox monk, whose prayed for a young man called Nicholas:

“In the beginning I prayed with tears of compassion for Nicholas... But as I was praying the sense of the divine presence began to grow on me, and at a certain moment grew so powerful that I lost sight of Nicholas... and I could only be aware of God. And I was drawn by the sense of the divine presence deeper and deeper until all of a sudden at the heart of this presence I met the divine love holding Nicholas.”<sup>31</sup>

This alternation between the universal (the divine presence) and the particular (the suffering man) reflects the alternation between the ‘interconnected unity’ and the ‘focused diversity’ that has been the study of this essay. For Barrington-Ward this alternation has been deepened through the practice of the Jesus Prayer. This is at one level a very simple prayer, usually comprising of the words “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” And yet it is also one of the most profound prayers that when prayed as part of the community of Christ can open up for us the riches of God. The main point here is that prayer links the general and the particular, unity and diversity.

Returning to De Caussade, we can see something of the same dynamic. He moves quickly from the need for surrender to the eternal God into an appreciation of the present moment:

“The present moment holds infinite riches beyond your wildest dreams but you will only enjoy them to the extent of your faith and love...The will of God is manifest in each moment, an immense ocean which the heart only fathoms in so far as it overflows with faith, trust and love.”<sup>32</sup>

“To discover God in the smallest and most ordinary things, as well as in the greatest, is to possess a rare and sublime faith.”<sup>33</sup>

Here we have the focused diversity: a diversity of ordinary things which are seen in great depth with God at their heart. Henri Nouwen suggests that a way into this appreciation of the present is through the discipline of *patience*: “Patience is the capacity to see, hear, touch, taste, and smell as fully as possible the inner and outer events of our lives.”<sup>34</sup> What works against patience is the pressure of “clock time” which has a “hard, merciless objectivity to it.”<sup>35</sup> But patience can link us with the salvation that comes through Christ:

“Patience dispels clock time and reveals a new time, the time of salvation... the time lived from within and experienced as full time...in and through Christ

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30 Simon Barrington-Ward, *Love Will Out*, Marshall Morgan and Scott, Basingstoke 1988, p 17.

31 Barrington-Ward, *The Jesus Prayer*, p 74.

32 De Caussade, *Sacrament of the Present*, p 82.

33 De Caussade, *Sacrament of the Present*, p 84.

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34 Nouwen, McNeill, and Morrison, *Compassion*, p 93.

35 Nouwen, McNeill, and Morrison, *Compassion*, p 97.

all human events can become divine events in which we discover the compassionate presence of God.”<sup>36</sup>

In the exercise of patience prayer becomes that effort to allow the Holy Spirit to speak and do his re-creating work in us. The Spirit will draw us to the compassionate Christ and so provide the energy and direction for offering compassion to others.

In this discussion on prayer we have noted the importance of stillness, silence, surrender, patience, intercession and compassion as a part of prayer that involves communion with the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The sensitive question then arises about those patients and carers who are not Christian. This is not a question that this essay aims to address, but given the common experience of the Presence of God and the fact that some people turn to ‘faith’ as death becomes close, it is an important question to consider.<sup>37</sup> Our discussion has suggested that the experience of dying can, for both patients and carers, be a time when prayer can be deepened and in doing so a greater experience of the Christian God can be discovered. But the way to a deepening faith does not need to come through activist suggestions that many find difficult: you must read this Gospel; you must pray this prayer; you must repent of this sin; you must turn to this system of belief. Rather it can come through a patient surrender to the One who is above all and yet in all. Such surrender does need some content: we can’t easily surrender to one we know nothing about. For the Christian, our basic outlook is that the One above is known uniquely in Jesus Christ and so surrender to God involves surrender to the One revealed through Jesus. Thus the Gospels are of prime importance, but not as laws to be obeyed as much as stories about the nature of God which we are called to enter into. We cannot force anyone to surrender. We cannot force people to know God. But surrender to the One revealed in Jesus is possible by the Holy Spirit who draws people into communion with God and at the same time deeper into the world. Not to encourage people in this direction is, for me, to deny them the opportunity of greater life in the present as well as the future.

## Conclusion

Having thus considered experience, theology and prayer I want to draw to a conclusion. There is much to draw out from my time at the Hospice and the related training sessions, but above all I have found a fresh understanding of *time* and of *life*. In particular the challenge to allow time to be stretched to encompass an ‘interconnected unity’ of people and creation; and to allow time to be deepened so as to appreciate the depth that exists in the ‘focused diversity’ of life. This article has explored these challenges in terms of experience, theology and prayer in an attempt to bring them together into a ‘Spirituality of Time.’ There is much more to reflect upon, but I hope that the things I’ve outlined will stimulate us onwards in the exciting journey with God, which at the same time is a journey with all creation.

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36 Nouwen, McNeill, and Morrison, *Compassion*, p 99–100.

37 Here I talk of people turning to ‘faith’ rather than to ‘religion’, something that gives a

sense of the *personal* commitment that such turning involves, and that it is not usually a turning to a ‘system of religion’.