

PRACTICAL THEOLOGY FROM THE HEART

Becoming Children of God

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Practical theology, like worn shoes, carries the memories of our daily lives, giving opportunities for the movement of God's word to resonate from the heart (Matt 18:35). In this article, I want to suggest that the markings we make on the road to 'the paradise of God' (Rev 2:7) reflect opportunities and capacities for growth to become children of God. This entails a difficult or even a vexing adventure of faith. For 'the children of your Father in heaven' are challenged to find meaning and truth through encounters and memories like loving 'your enemies' or praying 'for those who persecute you' (Matt 5:44).

So where the heart matures into becoming curious about God who makes the 'sun rise on the evil and on the good' (Matt 5:45), practical theology nurtures a place for 'joy and gladness' (Ps 45:15) even amongst life's disappointments and catastrophes. In effect, practical theology moves forward to invite a reflection upon discerning God's movement into our personal stories so that our loving and knowing from the heart may reveal the joy and gladness of becoming children of God 'today'.

A compelling trait of the children of God is knowing what it means to abide in God. They are drawn 'to walk just as he walked' (1 Jn 2:6), as in the Garden of the Lord (Gen 3:8). Such walking with God may even take the path of mourning and weeping like David on the way to the Mount of Olives (2 Sam 15:30) or grieving and praying like Jesus in

the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt 26:36-44). The children of God possess the courage and confidence to traverse the path to God, to become holy people of God, because they know the Father (1 Jn 2:14) who is the place of joy and gladness. Abiding in God, the children of God discover forgiveness through 'Jesus Christ the righteous' (1 Jn 2:2), and await in hope to enter the Father's Kingdom through being born of the Spirit (Jn 3:5). Essentially, the children of God reveal that this hope for the glory of the Kingdom of God (1 Thess 2:12) is deeply personal. For such intimacy of hope can be born out of transformative and dramatic events like the collision between loving and knowing.

Loving and knowing

The American-Jewish author, Chaim Potok, writes in his book, *The Book of Lights*: 'How do you live almost a lifetime with two people, and love them, and really not know about them? What sort of energy or accident brings together loving and knowing?' (1981, 240) Existence with another may appear somewhat disjointed where opportunities or capacities for growth are lost in the mundane of everyday living. However, where bursts of energies or accidents (risks and crises) of the heart suddenly emerge to give voice to emotions and yearnings of the soul, transformation may yield itself into the scene of human relations. Potok's questions help

us to envision that a transformative, dramatic event—an 'energy or accident' uniting 'loving and knowing'—has taken place in the lives of the children of God. Such transforming events are inherently personal and relational. And importantly, these events lead to much good like the peacemaking (Matt 5:9) of healing and forgiving. The collision between loving and knowing expresses then the good truth of the risen Jesus: that God's grace and presence (Gal 1:16) is a personal and intimate encounter of the nearness (Matt 4:17, 10:7) and newness (Matt 9:17; Jn 3:3) of the Kingdom of God.

Moments of peacemaking, such as the loving-kindness of forgiveness and mercy, invite a personal 'yes' of faith in the risen Jesus. This is all the more compelling due to our vulnerable human condition. Even the glance of another's needs and desires may touch upon our strivings and put into question our conscience and self-image. Or the look of a stranger in our midst may suddenly dislocate our everyday perception and harmony. Practical theology from the heart takes seriously these wounding and stirring connections between loving and knowing. This is because it cultivates a spiritual and inter-personal lens for the imagination to grow spontaneously towards an outpouring of faith in God's Son. Such imagination exemplifies a radical choice of the children of God: to discern and integrate the enigmatic movements of God's word in our relations with others so that all may be one in Jesus Christ (Gal 3:25-28).

Back in 2005, Australian theologian, Terry Veling, wrote a book on practical theology, entitled, *Practical Theology: On Earth as It Is in Heaven*. The title is a clue to its creative and personal sensibility to Jesus' witness to his Father's kingdom. In the book, he draws together a number of definitions of practical theology not only from various scholars around the world, but also from sayings of Jesus from the Gospels of Mathew, Luke and John.



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One provocative saying of Jesus stands out especially as it seems to guide the sense of loving and knowing from the heart - Luke 12:56: 'You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?' (Veling 2005, 20) Jesus' words are compelling as much as they provoke the heart to be open to the gifts of the Holy Spirit such as wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles and prophecy (1 Cor 12:4-11). Moreover, the more we listen attentively from the heart to Jesus' words, they become through time an invitation to become children of God, that is to say, to give time to walk with God humbly in the garden of our daily, ordered and disordered, lives.

To love in truth and action

In the act of discernment, of loving and knowing from the heart, we are invited to take up the vocation of what the children of God know well from the heart: to 'love ... in truth and action' (1 Jn 3:18).

Something of this message, of learning how to love in 'truth' as much as in 'action', was pressed home to me several years ago when I taught practical theology to a group of teachers including many pre-primary school teachers. I never forget the vibrant energy and hospitality of the class; they were eager to learn with 'joy and gladness' (Ps 45:15; Isa 51:3) and 'the voice of song' (Isa 51:3). When speaking with the students, joyous and inviting laughter would naturally flow into the

conversation. I sensed that something of the charism or playfulness of little children had instilled itself in the consciousness of my students. The students were at play in learning, testifying to the value of listening and sharing together.

Where learning takes on the state of internal enjoyment, a heartfelt commitment emerges. Yet, I noticed something more, like the dynamic energy of loving and knowing coming together. The love of learning was expressed in the action of participation, reflection, humility and mutuality.

The truth of the face of learning even began to unveil itself especially in moments of the students' seminars. Listening to one seminar, the whole class heard 'the voice of song'. It seemed that the joy in the student's presentation needed an action of song at the end to bless the class with 'the oil of gladness' (Ps 45:7). The 'earth and sky' of the students emotional being suddenly became alive. It struck me that the student had extended the mode of reflection to an outpouring of heartfelt discernment: to offer and reveal an intimacy of life in regards to signifying the present time as moments of connection not only with the class, but also with the Father's kingdom.

Such sacred moments become instrumental for discernment because they help to identify which Edenic fruits of the spirit are ripe in our life, such as love, joy and gentleness (Gal 5:22-23); for they lead us a little closer to inherit the Kingdom of God.

Moreover, many of the students in the class, by virtue of the working of grace in their lives as teachers, gave witness to the hope and calling to become children of God. The students elicited the charism of playfulness and intimacy inasmuch as a window into the vulnerability of truth. As a result, the joy and fun of learning nurtured hospitality and intimacy to form together into expressions of faith. On the faces of the students—who spent much of their time teaching children—I seem to hear the words

of 1 John 2:28 resounding: 'And now, little children, abide in him'.

We can begin to imagine the joy and hope of the children of God to love in truth and action. In theological terms, the joy and hope that brings loving and knowing ever closer together point to an evocative conversion to the Kingdom of God: adoring the Father 'with the voice of song' (Isa 51:3), walking in the light of the risen Jesus 'with the oil of gladness' (Ps 45:7) and rejoicing in the joy of the Holy Spirit (Lk 10:21).

Knowing the depths of our being made in the image of the Triune God unveils the energy of loving: the 'joy and gladness' (Isa 51:3) of being a gift of oneself for another. What lies at our depths is so precious, so sensitive and so wounding which Triune love exalts in the Edenic, paradisaical existence of the children of God, of knowing the Father's love and forgiveness (1 Jn 2:12-14) from the heart.

We can begin to discern that practical theology takes hold of opportunities and nurtures them into capacities for growth to live from the heart. In this way, a spiritual sense takes hold of raw experiences, 'energies and accidents', in the hope of finding some attunement between loving and knowing, and truth and action.

The idea of having a spiritual sense takes one beyond oneself into the realm of transformation and transcendence. This is the realm of the children of God because they live from the heart, forgiving (Matt 18:35) and keeping 'God's decrees' (Psalm 119:2). Indeed, the children of God know to be vigilant regarding matters of the heart (Prov 4:23) lest anxieties and troubles overwhelm the mind and body (Eccles 11:10). In a word, the lived experience of the children of God speaks of 'holiness'—of living out a personal expression of faith, charity and prayer in relation to Christ.

The Holy People of God

Lumen Gentium (the 'Dogmatic Constitution

on the Church'), No. 12 sheds some light into the ideal of holiness:

The holy people of God shares also in Christ's prophetic office; it spreads abroad a living witness to Him, especially by means of a life of faith and charity and by offering to God a sacrifice of praise, the tribute of lips which give praise to His name.

Practical theology, aspiring towards a prayerful and joyful habitus of faith, signifies, as it were, a liturgy of becoming holy people of God; children of God eager to partake of the table of the risen Lord. Where our language matures into acts of prayer, faith and love, an ideal of holiness come to mind, particularly through mercy, forgiveness and peacemaking. 'The holy people of God' learn to take up the calling to become the children of God.

In this way, the person of faith moves towards sharing in 'Christ's prophetic office'. Essentially, this infers a hospitable, hopeful and intimate life of conversion to Christ, giving the confidence and courage to seek to know 'how to interpret the present time' (Lk 12:56) through 'the tribute of [our] lips': 'See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!' (2 Cor 6:2)

The Pauline sense of the 'now' touches upon the imagination of faith. The children of God, called to the ideal of holiness, are led to hope for the fullness of salvation and the coming of the Father's Kingdom. Such hope stirs as a call and vocation to become 'pilgrim people immersed in the drama of struggling humanity' (Thornhill 1988, 194, 196).

And altogether, the very 'now' of the day of salvation stirs as the work of God in the soul instilling an Edenic-like brightness to the soul. St. Paul, a robust apostle of faith, testifies to this brightness or outburst of the soul. He proclaims, in vivid language, how the 'now' of the 'the day of salvation' comes at the cost of discipleship: '... but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings,

imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger...' (2 Cor 6:4-5). Developing a prayerful sense of the work of God, St. Paul explains how, 'by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God,' (2 Cor 6:6-7), 'the day of salvation' carries the assurance of hope that 'the Lord's Spirit' is working in us.

St. Paul's message echoes forth, as it were, in *Gaudium et Spes* (the 'Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World'), No. 11, which alerts us to appreciate the Holy Spirit's gift of faith as the foundation of our 'total vocation' as 'People [and indeed children] of God':

The People of God believes that it is led by the Lord's Spirit, Who fills the earth. Motivated by this faith, it labors to decipher authentic signs of God's presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires in which this People has a part along with other [people] of our age. For faith throws a new light on everything, manifests God's design for [humanity's] total vocation, and thus directs the mind to solutions which are fully human.

Our vocation itself would seem to possess an evangelical or Pauline quality about it, namely witnessing to Christ's resurrection and gift of salvation in the tapestry of our daily lives. Such testimony draws near to the heart of a practical theology grounded in being children of God.

For keeping in mind the stirring definition of practical theology from Luke 12:56, 'You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time,' we may suggest that a challenge for practical theology is to foster a prayerful and joyful sense of 'the paradise of God' in our daily lives.

Where the 'total vocation' of prayer, mercy and loving-kindness come together in the 'now' of the joy and hope for salvation, we may realise that we are called to be 'People of God,' people of 'the Lord's Spirit', people of the heart, that is to say, children of God who

vigilantly and spontaneously learn to 'decipher', for example, the other's spiritual poverty by offering the friendship of the risen Jesus (Pope Francis 2013, No. 200). Is not this a time and place of peacemaking and forgiving where loving and knowing come together!

*Today we are called to become
Children of God*

I want to suggest that a key aim of practical theology from the heart is to share the friendship of Jesus 'today', especially by welcoming 'those who hunger and thirst for righteousness' (Matt 5:6). With this in mind, the gift of friendship speaks of a heartfelt truth of the mystical body of Christ: that we are called to be the children of God, sharing in the neighbour's life, joys and struggles 'from your heart' (Matt 18:35).

Accordingly, practical theology guides our desire for intimacy by offering the friendship of Jesus the messiah—a pathway to 'know how to interpret the present time'. Such heightened intimacy evokes a spiritual gift of being animated by 'the Lord's Spirit' to partake of a liturgy of joy, gladness and the voice of song, a work oriented towards Christ's prophetic

office of redemption for the world.

The Lord's Spirit may well import the hope and faith that now, today, resounds with the gift and promise of salvation. Every small goodness that we can find today—every act of peacemaking, mercy and loving kindness from the heart—unveils the joy of contemplating the Father's Kingdom, discovering the word of the risen Jesus in the depths of the neighbour's poverty and suffering, and giving oneself as a child of God over to the hope for the 'paradise of God' guided and sustained by the Holy Spirit.

Waiting to 'know how to interpret the present time' may well seem like asking, 'When will the Messiah come?' or rather, 'When will Jesus the Messiah return?' For St. Paul, following the Jewish tradition, the answer is 'today' ['now is the day of salvation' (2 Cor 6:2)], 'that is as soon as possible, if the people obey God' (Pearl 1997, 147). And so where the markings on the road to the 'paradise of God' become entrenched in the capacities, gifts and joys of 'genuine love' (2 Cor 6:6), practical theology may find an opportune time to rouse and waken the heart to know that 'today' we are called to become children of God.

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