

The University Sermon
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Restful and Restless Heart

It is an enormous honour to stand before you today in this special Church. I am humbled by and grateful for this gift of offering a sermon. My special thanks to the Revd Canon Jutta Brueck, Mr Timothy Milner and Ms Alison Daniels for their guidance in preparation for this service.

The title of this sermon is 'Restful and Restless Heart'.

Are you feeling tired right now? If you are not, I hope you will not feel so by the end of the sermon. On the other hand, if you are tired, you might discover that feeling tired can be redemptive.

Peter Handke (the 2019 Winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature) ends his essay 'On Tiredness' with the image of 'ultimate' or 'cosmic tiredness' which pictures humankind and the entire universe 'reconciled in its very last moments, in cosmic tiredness'¹.

Earlier in his essay, Handke talks about a wide range of tiredness: tiredness as boredom; tiredness associated with a feeling of guilt ('feeling of a steel band tightened around one's temples'); tiredness associated with shame (even if others no longer remember one's shameful behaviour); tiredness as anger and rebellion in his student days, leading to paralysis and insomnia and causing embarrassment in front of others. He even discusses tiredness as leading to violence and divisive tiredness. Handke offers a moral evaluation of tiredness when he distinguishes between malignant and non-malignant tiredness, or heartless bad tiredness versus non-malignant good tiredness. He comments that good tiredness can be pleasant even delightful especially when it is shared with others as after a job done well, when it involves a collective effort - he calls this type of tiredness 'we-tiredness', tiredness as bonding the group. He also talks about 'isolating tiredness', mostly associated with the drudgery of work; when one goes to bed tired and wakes up feeling more tired (a feeling most of us know too well). For Handke, tiredness can be a friend; there is such a thing as creative, transformative, 'clear-sighted tiredness' in which 'the world tells its own story without words, in utter silence'. Without using the term, Handke attaches a contemplative quality to this kind of tiredness. He says 'here I have an image of true human tiredness: it creates openings, making room for an epic that will encompass all beings, now including the animals'. As someone living with a rabbit, I am particularly pleased to read about the animals being part of this picture. Handke calls this kind of tiredness 'healthy tiredness' which in itself is a recovery².

A South Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han in his book *The Burnout Society* takes the theme of tiredness in a slightly different direction. For Han, tiredness is not just an aspect of our life, it is a descriptor of the whole of life today. We are a society of burnt out people. Why? Because our society is an 'achievement society' as opposed to 'disciplinary society' of the previous era: 'disciplinary society is a society of negativity. It is defined by the 'negativity of prohibition' governed by *May Not*³: you may not do this or that. 'Achievement society' is governed by 'Yes, we can': '[p]rohibitions, commandments, and the law are replaced by projects, [targets], initiatives, and motivation'⁴. Han suggests that the pressure

¹ Peter Handke, 'On Tiredness' in *The Jukebox and Other Essays on Storytelling*. Translated by Ralph Manheim and Krishna Winston (New York: Picador 1994), pp.1-44.

² Handke, 'On Tiredness', p.37

³ Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*. Translated by Erik Butler (Stanford University Press, 2015), p.8

⁴ Han, *The Burnout Society*, p.10 ('targets' is my addition)

to achieve causes exhaustive depression. We are not just exhausted. We have burnt our souls out⁵. The 'imperative to achieve is the new commandment'; 'excess work and performance escalate into auto-exploitation'; 'the exploiter is simultaneously the exploited'⁶. It is not the excessive negativity associated with the previous era but 'excessive positivity' of our society that drives our exhaustion. Excessive positivity 'expresses itself as an excess of stimuli, information, and impulses. [...] Perception and awareness become fragmented and scattered'⁷. Unlike Handke who believes in the transformative power of healthy tiredness, Han observes that our society is incapable of contemplative attention; the hyperactive ego doesn't understand what contemplation involves. It exploits itself until it burns out. In the process 'it develops auto-aggression that often escalates into the violence of self-destruction'; it takes 'livingness' out of life: 'all that remains is the body of the ego, which is to be kept healthy at any cost'⁸. 'Health is the new goddess' [...] the bare life is holy'⁹. Even if there are positive sides to the achievement society, at its core it is a burnout society, generating what Handke calls 'malignant tiredness'. Han ends his book by observing that people in the burnout society are 'too alive to die, and too dead to live'¹⁰ (last sentence of the book).

What are we to make of these observations by Handke and Han in the light of Jesus' offer in today's reading and the hymn we have just sung? 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest' or in the third verse of the hymn 'Come unto me, ye fainting, and I will give you life'. Can we come to him with all the burdens of the achievement society, with our malignant, isolated tiredness? Can Jesus help us to recover? What kind of rest are we promised? What is he offering to the fainting one or, as Han put it, to the one 'too dead to live'?

In today's reading, Jesus invites us to learn from him.

But, what exactly are we to learn from him? What can he teach us about preventing burnout, reducing our need to achieve, addressing our perfectionistic tendencies? The Gospels offer us some insights into Jesus's character and his approach to work and rest. In short, he did both. He worked and he rested. He even worked on the sabbath for which he was reprimanded. Was it an auto-exploitation? He certainly had goals to achieve, initiatives to make, strategies to implement. It is hard to say whether Jesus experienced or was even close to burnout or whether he ever felt the malignant type of tiredness. But, we do know that while on his mission, he took time to be silent, to pray, perhaps to check in with himself. He would leave his fellow workers to themselves so that he could rest and get ready for his next task.

Restlessness and restfulness are complex.

I have found no better study of these themes than in St Augustine's *Confessions*. Even if as a woman and an ethicist, I don't find everything in this text appealing or easy to read, especially in relation to his

⁵ See Han, *The Burnout Society*, p.10

⁶ Han, *The Burnout Society*, p.11

⁷ Han, *The Burnout Society* p.12

⁸ Han, *The Burnout Society*, p.50

⁹ Han, *The Burnout Society*, p.51

¹⁰ Han, *The Burnout Society*, p.51

approach to women, as a theologian and a fellow restless human being, I find his self-reflection deeply moving and insightful. Each time I read the *Confessions*¹¹ I discover something new, especially about myself.

Let us note first that the Latin word Augustine uses to describe his searching heart is *inquietum* (non-quietness) which can be translated as disquiet, disorientation or disturbance. What does keep Augustine restless? In short, it is his disordered desires and attachments or what he calls the 'lower goods'. He talks about his resistance towards the restful heart. It seems that there is something in us that resists rest and prefers to remain restless.

Augustine is tired of his restlessness and longs for rest and freedom. He envies his friend Victorinus who seems to possess rest and freedom that Augustine sees in himself as lacking. He says: 'I sighed after such freedom but was bound not by an iron imposed by anyone else but by the iron of my own choice'. Is this a sign of auto-exploitation that Han is talking about?

It is worth noting that Augustine writes about his restlessness when he is in his forties, from the position of the Bishop of (Hippo - today Annaba, Algeria). Richard Lischner in his book *Our Hearts are Restless: The Art of Spiritual Memoir* points out that for Augustine, restless doesn't mean lost. For him, restless can mean miserable, agitated, being torn between competing visions of his own humanity, but never lost. 'Unlike the Prodigal Son, he will not "come to himself" surrounded by pigs. His story will not conform to the Puritan template of depravity'. [...] We will never see him fail professionally. He will never lack for friends or financial resources. He will never blaspheme or shake fist at God. Of course, he will weep, but his weeping will be the retrospective weeping of a forty-three-year-old man looking back on a foolish boy¹².

By writing about his restlessness, Augustine makes himself controversial and probably unpopular in his ecclesial circles. Nobody before him and probably nobody after him wrote about their imperfections and the dynamics of their inner life in the way Augustine did – a real *tour de force* of psychoanalysis. How many bishops today would be prepared to write like this about their own restless hearts and imperfections. But, crucially, Augustine tells us that the real battlefield is not the world. The real battlefield is human heart and until we identify the roots of our restlessness and turn to the Source of Rest, we won't be free. 'Our hearts are restless till they find rest in you', says Augustine.

An episode in Milan illustrates this further. Augustine, a well-established orator is getting ready to speak in honour of Emperor Valentinian the Second. He later reflects on how he was preparing to deliver a eulogy upon the emperor in which he would 'tell plenty of lies with the object of winning favour with the well informed by my lying'. Just before Augustine enters the palace he encounters a drunk man on the street and envies his carefree existence: when the drunk man wakes up the following morning, he will be sober while Augustine will be drunk on his fame¹³.

Lischner comments that 'being a highly paid public flatterer has been bothering Augustine's conscience for some time'. Augustine longs for restful heart. He tried everything: Stoicism, astrology, Manicheism, Platonism. All these schools probably helped him to gain a better self-understanding but have not made his heart restful. It is the discovery that while he was searching, he was also sought and then found that

¹¹ See *Saint Augustine Confessions: A New Translation by Henry Chadwick* (OUP 1998)

¹² Richard Lischner, *Our Hearts are Restless: The Art of Spiritual Memoir* (OUP 2023), p.21

¹³ See *Saint Augustine Confessions*, Book VI

makes the difference to him and changes everything: 'Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and new, late have I loved you'.

A similar message is conveyed by our local heroine, known as Julian of Norwich (not her real name) or Mother Julian. Almost 1000 years after Augustine, Julian (another restless searcher) finds restful heart in the same Source as Augustine did and decides to share her findings (revelations) from the tiniest of places: a room with a window or two, fifteen feet by ten feet, in which she spends forty years. She ends her *Revelations of Divine Love* by saying that she learned that, in all things, love, was God's meaning. She didn't believe that it was possible to have a restful heart once and for all: God did not say 'you will not be assailed, you will not be disquieted', but God did say 'you will not be overcome' [...] He loves us and delights in us and wishes us to delight in Him and trust greatly in Him, and all shall be well' and 'all manner of things shall be well'¹⁴.

Julian's mission (as Augustine's) was to tell others what finding rest in God means. Their message is that God's search for our tired selves is tireless. We are accompanied by God in both restlessness and restfulness. Peter Handke and Byung-Chul Han have helpfully diagnosed some of the current ills in our world, our self-destructive tendencies in the name of achievement, the burnout society dynamics and so on. Augustine has shed light on the roots of our restlessness and causes of malignant tiredness. Both Augustine and Julian of Norwich have shown us a way forward to the Source of Rest. The way forward involves a journey inward in order to move outward, beyond ourselves but without the loss of self, without auto-exploitation or self-annihilation. It involves community in which we-tiredness or collective tiredness is not a threat but can be a gift towards a greater transformation of the world.

As someone who is more familiar with feelings of restlessness than restfulness, I have been looking for a compelling account or a theory of rest. I have not found one. What I found are words of Wisdom from the sources I mentioned. Perhaps, after all, we don't need a theory of rest because we all recognise rest when we experience it.

Ultimately, rest is a gift. We can only receive it.

So, let's hear it again: 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest'.

¹⁴ *Revelations of Divine Love*. Recorded by Julian, anchoress at Norwich. Anno domini 1373. Edited by Grace Warrack Methuen & Company (London, 1901), See Chapter XXVII
https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/52958/pg52958-images.html#REVELATIONS_OF_DIVINE_LOVE