



Nazareth Letter August 2023

Dear Nazareth Community

And I said to them as they passed: 'Where are you going?' And they said only one thing: 'This is our home. This is where we are going to learn of the love of Jesus Christ ... this is where all peace lies.

Dick Sheppard 1914¹

Your love is more than enough for me
It is all that I am and all that I long for
There is nothing else
No extra
All is here
As deep as an ocean
As expansive as the sky
As miraculous as a new-born child
Or the sun rising
In loving Christ
I love the smallest creature
And a universe far beyond my knowledge or understanding
And I see your face in the face of my brother and sister and in your creation
Each day of my life Lord
Give me the grace to let your love grow.
Richard Carter, *Letters from Nazareth*

When I wrote my new book *Letters from Nazareth*- I reflected for a long time what the subtitle should be and finally in prayer it came to me
Letters from Nazareth: A Contemplative Journey Home.

I believe in Nazareth we are on a journey home. A place without walls. A place without clinging or possessiveness. But a place of belonging. Nazareth is the place of Christ's home. It is God's home. Nazareth is sharing space with God. God becomes our home and we become God's home in us. Nazareth is not just a chance meeting, or a layby, or comfort break on the road. It is a relationship – a journey with God through the many years of our lives that continues to grow and change us. It's the place where we become what we are. It's the place of familiarity and intimacy but also the place of longing and challenge, because Nazareth is somehow always beyond us. It's also a place we cannot cling to but must be ready to share and give away again and again.

¹ R. J. Northcott, *Dick Sheppard and St Martin's*, Longmans Green and Co, 1937, p. ix.

For me it is wonderful to be part of a community where its edges are its centre, where we do not reject because we too have known rejection, where in the pain of our own not belonging we have found a story that includes us all. Jesus' story in Nazareth makes room for us all to belong; belong, without mask, without shape-shifting or pretence. He is the one who reaches out to enfold the whole of us, and in the diversity of this community we see Christ's face – Christ, who shows us the way out of the church into the street where his life is shared with all those looking for home.

I want in this letter to explore three circles of our connection, relationship and belonging. This idea comes from my drama background and the teaching of Patsy Rodenburg.² She talks of three circles through which your spirit moves and you relate to the world around you. And each one of us moves through various circles, often in the same day, though each one of us has a circle in which they feel most comfortable. I am going to write about the first circle, then the third circle and then come back to the second circle.

First Circle

In this circle the focus is inwards. You hold your energy within. It is the place of self-examination and reflection. It is the place of stepping aside from the public and centring ones life. It can be the place of restoration and self-discovery- the place of rest, and sleep. Meditation often begins in this first circle for when we step aside from the busyness of our outward lives we are often confronted with self- what is within us, what is in our minds, our own hearts and bodies. Without this first circle we can feel we are losing our identity and groundedness- our uniqueness and sense of who we are. The first circle provides solitude, silence, rest replenishment. Many of us need the first circle to recharge.

Yet like all the circles of the first circle has its dangers. In the first circle we can become too bent over ourselves. Sometimes too introspective. Our stepping aside can become a hiding or an avoiding of interaction and our minds instead of becoming stiller or more at peace can become more tangled up in self. You will know this in yourself when the self begins to trap and confine you rather than allowing you to find spaciousness and peace.

The Third Circle

In this circle your energy is moving outwards. Your attention is outside yourself. In this circle you are projecting yourself to face the world. The third circle requires a confidence, an assertiveness- you are in many ways performing a role. Bearing witness. Putting on a way of being in order to amplify or communicate what is within you. The third circle is a way of being in public where you are defended. This circle helps us to operate in public- to meet the crowd, to face a difficult meeting, to speak in public, to address an audience- to face the world. This circle of connection may require a mask, a costume, a persona which we consciously put on to face the day. At times we all need this circle and we see many who operate out of this circle- politicians, priests, those in public services, in the work-place and in fulfilling professional positions or roles we take on. We need this circle to be decisive and get things done.

The danger of the third circle is that what you projecting outwardly may have little correlation to the reality within you. So that it becomes a performance. And the audience to whom you perform are like an audience in the darkness of an auditorium. You are projecting out but not able to receive. So this circle is less focused- more like an address system addressing others

² Patsy Rodenburg, *The Second Circle*, W W Norton, New York, London 2008

rather than genuinely responding or interacting. You attract attention. You make an impression. You engage with the group. You may feel in control. But you take very little back in and can be left feeling empty or hollow and disconnect from your inner being: a need to control, to assert, to get across, but also no real affirmation or reciprocity. And there can be a division within too: the sense you are pretending or playing a part that is taking you over. And of course the danger is that you begin to believe you are the image you are playing or fabricating so the pretend becomes your reality.

The Second Circle

This is the energy that moves both outwards and inwards. An energy that gives but also receives. When you are in this second circle you experience an openness- a readiness both to share but also to listen and be receptive: a too and fro, a dialogue... a symphony. In this second circle of being we experience an openness to other and an intuitive responsiveness that comes from being present. Within us there is a greater transparency and truthfulness. WE are not putting on a mask we are taking off the mask to be true to self and the person or world we are interacting with. We lose our self-consciousness. In this second circle we both give and receive the gift of presence. We open up to an energy and a life beyond ourselves which we are not in competition with but fills us with wonder. Meditation itself can move from first circle to second circle and when it does we find the presence of God both within us and beyond us. We experience being awake.

The danger of the second circle- we become more open, more vulnerable, more open to relationship and also the possibility of trust but also hurt. We are more unprotected in this second circle. Less in control. More empathetic but also thus more longing. More open to love and truth but that is not always an easy place to be. In the second circle we feel the beauty but also the pain of the world

I believe that in our lives we live in all these three circles of connection but Christ calls us into this second circle- the place of listening and openness. It is a spacious and generous place. It needs the first circle to be grounded and centred. It needs the third circle to have the confidence and faith to believe. But it needs the second circle- to become true and to trust: for the me to become us; for territory to become the space for sharing; to let go of control and to become the recipients and the sharers of grace. Christ above us, Christ within us, Christ beside - Christ to share.

Nazareth

Nazareth of course involves all these three circles but our place of sharing is the second circle. Community is formed in this circle. When we take our promise to join the Nazareth Community this is our prayer: 'I want to live the Gospel, O Lord, give me grace.' Nazareth is the place of connection with God. With self. With neighbour. With the wonder of the world. It is the place of presence. It is not the place for competition, fame, jealousy, or selfish pride. And neither is it private property. It belongs to all. It is a journey home – without delusion, without pretence, just as we are. As Charles de Foucauld wrote: 'Let Nazareth be your model, in all its simplicity and breadth ... like Jesus in Nazareth; have no cloister ... In a word, in all things: live like Jesus in Nazareth ... The life of Nazareth can be lived anywhere: live it where it is most useful for your neighbour.'³ We aim to be brothers and sisters to all. It is not a soft romantic faith, for

³ Cathy Wright LSJ, *Saint Charles de Foucauld: His Life and Spirituality*, Pauline Books & Media, 2022, p. 111.

it will have to be strong and courageous if it is to survive the onslaught and suspicions of the modern world. But its strength will be its simplicity, its genuine love, its kindness, its listening. By their fruits you will know them.

Wonderings

Read the letter again and identify in your own life those three circles

I wonder in which circle of connection you feel most comfortable.

I wonder when you experience the second circle.

I wonder what Nazareth means to you.

I wonder if our lives with Christ are a journey home- what that home is like.

Now read the story of the woman who meets Jesus by the well. I wonder if you can identify three circles of connection. How does Jesus move you into the second circle.

John 4

Jesus and the Woman of Samaria

He came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!' The woman said to him, 'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do you want?' or, 'Why are you speaking with her?' Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, 'Rabbi, eat something.' But he said to them, 'I have food to eat that you do not know about.' So the disciples said to one another, 'Surely no one has brought him something to eat?' Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, "Four months more, then comes the harvest"? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, "One sows and another reaps." I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour.'

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.' So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world

