

Silent Reflections
Tuesday 28 October 2025
A Fine Balance



Introduction

On retreat this year, I was privileged to be guided in a small group by the Episcopal priest and Franciscan, Andrew Mayes, who challenged us to contemplate the power of paradox in our lives, especially the creative role it plays in our Christian faith.

Contradictory terms tend to make us think of either/or, but to maintain a balance in our lives we may need to regard them more often as both/and. Sometimes an extreme opposite can even help us to appreciate something that before we had taken for granted. Remember the delight and relief when the lights suddenly return on a dark winter's evening after a power cut, or the joy seeing the return of lush, green lawns after a long, dry summer. In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Dickens muses on the fact that *the peace of a simple village* had moved little Nell *more strongly because of the dark and troubled ways that lay beyond and through which she has journeyed with such failing feet...Everything in our lives, he wrote, whether of good or evil, affects us most by contrast.*



The presence of contrary elements are not only necessary in maintaining balance, but sometimes even essential as in the creation of a rainbow, which cannot exist unless the two elements of water vapour and sunlight are present simultaneously. Looking at a simple colour wheel reminds us that red and blue are needed to create purple, red and yellow to create orange and yellow and blue to create green and the complimentary colours, the ones opposite to each other on the wheel, vie for attention and are often said to 'clash'. Because of this very discord, artists and designers can use these colours to great effect.

The Feast of the Transfiguration fell during our retreat and provided the focus for our exploration of paradox. For example, we looked at the contrast between the divinity and humanity of Jesus and the awesome terror felt by Peter over and against his need to bring some control into the situation by suggesting they put up some tents! Andrew's book *Transfiguring Life: Unleashing the Power of Paradox* (2025) was written to accompany us on this retreat and explores many other Biblical passages. (I can heartily recommend it, as being very rich and accessible and which includes questions for reflection and prayer exercises at the end of each chapter.) He quotes from many authors on the subject, but I will share an extract from two of these:

In *Living with Contradiction*, Esther de Waal writes;

Living with paradox may well not be easy or comfortable...For as we learn to live with paradox we have to admit that two realities may be equally true; we may be asked to hold together contrasting forces. The closer we come to saying something worthwhile, the more likely it is that paradox will be the only way to express it.

In *Glory to God*, Michael Ramsey speaks of the Transfiguration as *holding together things that are too often held apart.*

In this rich autumnal season when we reflect on fruits being harvested, leaves falling to nourish the earth, stems pruned hard back to stimulate new growth, the beautifully poetic and much-loved passage from Ecclesiastes springs to mind, as being a paradoxical heaven!

A Celtic adaptation of the words from Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 For everything there is a season:

*Loving God, you have loved me through every season,
from the time of my birth, until my time to die.
Walk with me in my season this day, for you know there is
a time for wounding and a time to heal,
a time to mourn and a time to celebrate,
a time to be creative and a time to survive
a time to surrender and a time to rebel
a time to embrace and a time to be self-contained,
a time to speak and a time to keep silence,
a time to be there and a time to stay away,
a time to take charge and a time to let be,
a time to reach beyond and a time to consolidate
a time to be moderate and a time to be outrageous,
a time to be anxious and a time to be at peace
a time to stay and a time to move on,
a time to care and a time to be cared for,
a time to generate and a time to lose,
a time to love and a time to let go.*

By Tess Ward from *the Celtic wheel of the year: Celtic and Christian seasonal prayers* (2007)

George Herbert's poem *Bitter-sweet* also expands our thinking on this topic:

*Ah my deare angrie
Lord.
Since thou dost love, yet strike;
Cast down, yet help afford;
Sure I will do the like.

I will complain, yet
praise;
I will bewail, approve:
And all my sowre-sweet
days
I will lament, and love.*

Mark Oakley in his comments on this poem in his book *My Sour-Sweet Days: George Herbert and the journey of the soul*. SPCK 2019, writes:

The title...reminds us that love itself has sweetness mingled with hurts; grief is often the price we pay for loving...The last two lines are telling. They reveal how Herbert's understanding of his relationship grew. In lines 2,3 and 5 he talks of seeming

opposites in terms of yet. In the last line, however, the yet becomes and: I will lament, and love. Instead of what appear to be contrary energies somehow battling it out, Herbert now accepts that they will live together. It cannot be any other way.

Richard Sibbes (1862), in even stronger language, is quoted by Oakley as saying:

...remember that God works by contraries. God will bring us to heaven, but it must be by hell. God will bring us to comfort, but it must be by sense of our own unworthiness. He will forgive our sins, but it must be by sight and sense of our sins, He will bring us to life, but it must be by death. He will bring us to glory, but it must be by shame.

Nicholas Worssam in his book *'In the Stillness, Waiting* (2024) writes:

Perhaps this is the paradox of the religious life – every ounce of energy must be spent, so that one finally realizes that nothing is achieved by one's own efforts. All is grace and peace, the work is just in clearing away whatever obscures that grace, to reveal that which has always been present – the radiant goodness of the Lord.

This **Celtic Morning Invocation** by Tess Ward (from the Celtic Wheel of the Year) also highlights the need to embrace paradox, especially in this time of autumn:

*Embracer of all, who held out your arms and joined up the circle of life,
embolden me to believe that my lessening will bring new growth this day
Embolden me as I cut back the branches and trust the bud will come.
Embolden me as I sweep the leaves and make a pathway through.
Embolden me as I clear a space and allow my autumn work to unfold.
Embolden me as I sit in the silence and let you be the all in all.
For in the pounding of the grain is the sharing of the bread.
In the crushing of the grape is the pouring of the wine.
In the falling of the leaves is the feeding of the roots.
In the disappearing of the creatures is the survival of their kind.
In the cutting of the corn is the new seed that will rise again.
In the dying time and darkness is your promise of hope renewed.
For you have lain in the deathly grip and felt the power of love's release.
Release in me the power of love as I set out this day.
Release in me your love.*

Points to ponder:

- Are you so heavenly minded that you are no earthly good? Or, too earthly minded that you are no heavenly good? How do you hold the physical and spiritual aspects of your life in balance? How can they be integrated?
- If you have experienced a moment of joy in God's presence in an unlikely, unexpected place, or at an unexpected time, reflect on that experience and what it meant to you then and now.
- Are there any pairings of contrary elements in the above material that have particularly caught your attention? Stay with them and listen to what God is saying to you. It may be a word of love, encouragement, challenge, or a way to expand your self-knowledge.

- You might want to recite the passage from *Ecclesiastes* or the *Autumn invocation* as you walk the labyrinth. Take your time; perhaps matching contrary pairs of words with the rhythm of your steps. How can you let go of control and be vulnerable before God?