

Living on the Murray

Living in a rural township on the Murray River, which widens out in to Lake Mulwala, draws me to a contemplative approach to being an intentional Mercy presence in this place, and challenges me to keep this in balance with apostolic ministry.

R S Thomas wrote 'When the raft of prayer leaves the noisy streams of words and thoughts, it enters the still lake of silence. But the silence in the mind is when we live best, within listening distance of the silence we call God.'

This calls me to begin each day in silence, resisting listening to the morning radio or music. It supports me in entering an attentive quietness that carries me through the busyness of the day, and invites me to actively engage with the beautiful, ever changing environment in which I live, beginning with observing the visitors to my small back garden, the beautiful blue wren and his plain little wife, a mob of sparrows and occasional honeyeater.

This has led me to observe the passing seasons and changing landscape. I arrived in the very hot Summer months last year when the river and its environs were busy with tourists, fishing, skiing, boating, swimming. These were followed by a long period when there were warning signs on all the major roads in to Yarrowonga that it was unsafe to swim in the river or lake, because of blue green algae on the surface of the water. Later in the year when the river was in flood its usual meandering pace changed to roaring, frothing expanses as it passed beyond the weir, spreading out past its banks, and travelling ever onwards like arteries over the land to its mouth in South Australia.

There is a time in the late afternoon, when the sun is getting low on the horizon, when the light is golden, and trees and grasses reflect this sheer beauty. This is also when birds become very vocal and active, almost like naughty children who know bedtime is nearing, and they are going to draw out this last time to play before settling for the night.

The end of the day can also be a time of beautiful silence quite unlike any other as one observes the complexity of the night sky, (the heavens!) revealed as it can never be seen where there is so much light in larger towns or the city. I find myself saying with the psalmist, 'The depths of Earth belong to Love. The height of the mountains as well. The sea and all that is in it, the dry land and air above were created by Love.'¹

The colours and shapes of sunsets over the lake are another source of great beauty, and praise arises readily. The lake has a large surface where its mood is reflected, sometimes like a mirror, and sometimes quite rough when it's windy. It is not always a peaceful place to be either as motor boats and jet skis roar past, but I love its changing moods, a literal reflection of life, and the way the seasons are reflected in the bird life that live in and on and around it.

The seasonal growing and harvesting of crops has also marked the time of year as the landscape has changed in response to its cycle. When I first came I was delighted by the huge paddocks of green and gold of the canola, so that I commented one day about its beauty, and was roundly told that it doesn't smell very nice when it's being harvested, and that it's a problem for people with asthma and hay fever!

¹ Merrill, N. 'Praying the Psalms', Psalm 95, pages 188,189

The rolling paddocks of wheat are a beautiful golden sight. I'm especially curious about the juxtaposition of the red hull of a boat which is for sale, standing at the edge of a wheat paddock, no water in sight to sail on. Once when I drove past, the boat was standing on a trailer in its usual spot close to the fence-in the background the harvester was waiting to get to work on the wheat crop that stretched to the horizon! I wonder about these seeming 'mismatches' in life, too, where things, people, don't readily integrate, yet can also be gift.

Winter seems a time of dormancy, 'season to cherish the heart'², and yet there's not much distance between the burning of the stubble, the ploughing in visible patterns in the earth, the planting of seeds and the appearance of the first green shoots. Something is always happening as the seasons pass. I wonder about these times in life too.

I'm often pre-occupied by the minutiae of beauty in this land, however I am also conscious of the precarious nature of the farmer's life, of the constancy of the work, of the effect that lack of rain, or too much, can have on a year's livelihood, of not getting a fair price for your crop or your milk, of losing your job, of the devastating effect of the drug culture on rural communities, of the challenges posed when one gets a cancer diagnosis, (such a common experience), of homelessness and mental illness, and all these complicated by distance and lack of adequate services.

And yet here is the pulsing life of the Creator, 'the Breathing Life of all'³, running like a river, an artery across this land, through it all. May my eyes always be open to these sacred places and moments where I live.

How are you living a contemplative life in your place? What have you noticed about Creation around you as you have entered a contemplative space? What prayer arises in you?

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² Leunig, M. 'When I talk to you, a cartoonist talks to God'

³ Merrill, N. 'Praying the Psalms', Psalm 95, pages 188,189