

The Spirit in the Desert

*Four studies based on a series of online talks
by Rowan Williams*

Illuminating Faith

About *Illuminating Faith*

Illuminating Faith is a Christian educational ministry auspiced by the Congregation of Mark the Evangelist, North Melbourne, Australia. Reflecting the Congregation's own interest in thinking deeply about Christian faith, these studies offer a range of different reflections on Christian confession intended both to illuminate that faith, and to show how Christian faith can itself be illuminating. The study materials derive from a range of different sources and will appear in an increasing range of styles. The congregation as a whole contributes through study groups in which the material is tested, in proof-reading, by composing questions small groups might consider when using the studies, and in giving its minister time to oversee the project. For more information, further studies, to provide feedback or to discover ways of supporting this ministry see:

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About these Studies

These studies are based on a series of talks by Rowan Williams – ‘The Spirit in the Desert’ – available on the online streaming service YouTube. The talks were the basis of a book Dr Williams subsequently published as ‘Silence and honey cakes: the wisdom of the desert’.

There are four studies in this series, making it a possible resource for a local Lenten study, although it could be used at any time. As the study is based on the audio and this is to be heard in the study session, members of the study groups need not do much preparation before attending. Nevertheless, Dr Williams’ book from these lectures would prove a very useful companion to the studies, and is highly recommended. It would also be very useful to have a collection of the sayings of the desert monks on hand. Dr Williams recommends that of Benedicta Ward (‘The desert fathers: sayings of the early Christian monks’; ‘Look Inside’ at Amazon [here](#)). Helen Waddell’s ‘The desert fathers’ is another classic collection (‘Look Inside’ at Amazon [here](#))

The studies provide an introduction to an important part of the Christian contemplative tradition, about which many modern Christians know very little. More important than such historical information, however, is the spirituality and discipleship which the desert teachings convey – the monk’s sense for our humanity before God – and the possibilities these might have for renewing us today and the faith communities of which we are a part

There are six talks by Dr Williams in the YouTube series. The study numbering below correspond to the chapters of the book (‘Silence and honey cakes’), with the first two chapters/studies incorporating two of the online audio tracks. The YouTube link for the audio is embedded in the electronic version of this text at the appropriate points below; searching YouTube with something like ‘the spirit in the desert Williams’ will also turn up the links.

Study group facilitators should listen to the talks in preparation for their group meetings and read the questions for reflection suggested in each study. The ‘Stop at’ instructions indicate where in the YouTube audio might be a good place to pause if the group would like to consider the suggested reflection. These are only suggestions to draw attention to some of Dr Williams’ key points; group facilitators might consider other questions more appropriate for their location context. Facilitators should also experiment with the best way of hearing the audio in the study session; the audio is of a reasonable quality and would be easily heard via a Bluetooth speaker connection to a smart phone or computer, or with an internet-connected television.

Each study concludes with a suggested psalm to be read, and free prayer from a member of the group.

The approximate length of each YouTube segment is given in the studies; in fact they are a little shorter than this, each concluding with a musical postlude. The audio runs at no more than 30 mins for each session and usually rather shorter, meaning that – with pauses for conversation and prayer – a session could be concluded within an hour or so, although allowing for more is probably a good idea!

‘What is to be learned in the desert is clearly not some individual technique for communing with the divine, but the business of becoming a means of reconciliation and healing for the neighbour’

Silence and honey cakes, p.38

CONTENTS

Study 1: ‘Life, death and neighbours’	5
Study 2: ‘Silence and honey cakes’	8
Study 3: ‘Leaving’	10
Study 4: ‘Staying’	12

STUDY 1: ‘LIFE, DEATH AND NEIGHBOURS’

Before you begin, consider the following questions:

- What do you understand Christian meditation to be?
- Why might one meditate?
- What has Christian meditation to do with ‘real life’?

The audio for the this study is in two parts; the first audio segment is available [here](#) (‘Life, death and neighbours’; ~17 mins)

Questions for reflection on the session audio

Stop at 4.25

St Antony remarks, ‘Our life and our death is with our neighbour. If we gain our brother, we have gained God.’ In what kinds of other things do we often locate our life and our death? More concretely, what particular things are life-giving for you, or death-dealing? How do these things compare with Antony’s proposal?

Stop at 5.12

What do you make of the notion of ‘dying to your neighbour’? How does this notion appeal? Why might it be put this way (with the strong language of ‘dying’)?

Stop at 7.20

In what kinds of ways might we get in the way of people getting in touch with God? In what ways might the church (‘our’ church – the one we attend each week) get between other people and God rather than connect them?

Stop at 12.30

What do you make of the call to ‘identification’? How does this help the one with whom we identify as a fellow sinner? How does it help us? What does such identification with sinners do for community?

Stop at 14.26

Is it good news that we might have sin enough in our house, not to have to go looking for it elsewhere?

Stop at 16.00

Failure is only healed by humility and solidarity, and not by condemnation. What might this look like in your personal life, and the life of your faith community?

The second audio segment for this study is available [here](#) ('Winning our neighbour for God'; ~12 mins)

Stop at 2.06

Williams proposes a valuation of a life as its capacity to connect others in reconciliation to God, not by ordering their lives but by our own knowledge of our weaknesses and dependence upon God's mercy. In what ways is this often *not* the case? What would such a life together look like, and what might be necessary for its achievement?

Stop at 3.17

Where is winning/losing operative in your life or faith community? Where does this come from and what does it cost us?

Stop at 9.26

What do you make of Williams' account of why we might find ourselves in heaven – that we have served another in her path to reconciliation?

Is it too great a burden to be such a means to another's reconciliation with God? How so (or not)?

For general reflection

The monks were greatly interested in prayer, but also in community. What does this say about churches which are greatly interested in community but not in prayer?

In what sense is your discipleship, and the life of your faith community, oriented towards connecting others (each other) to the wellsprings of reconciliation with God? What specific steps might be taken to improve on this aspect of our calling as followers of Jesus?

For personal reflection: what in you might stand between your neighbour and God?

For personal reflection

What specific action or change in your life is suggested by this study?

Finishing up

Read Psalm 51 together, then have a group member close in prayer.

STUDY 2: ‘SILENCE AND HONEY CAKES’

Before you begin, consider the following questions:

- Is God more likely to be found in the company of others, or in solitude?
- How important is ‘choice’ for your sense of who you are and how you relate to what happens in the world around you?

The audio for the second study is in two parts; the first part is available [here](#). [‘Silence and honey cakes’; ~7.29 mins]

Questions for reflection on the session audio

Stop at 2.59

Are silence and honey cakes *always* equally acceptable? In what ways so, or not?

Stop at 3.58

Is it a liberating thing to hear, that holiness cannot be ‘standardised’? How might this not be liberating, or at least not *experienced* as liberating?

Stop at 6.00

What does it look like in a community to ‘stand back before the mystery of the other’, to give another ‘room’ to grow as God wills? When might this be rather challenging?

The audio for the second part of this study is available [here](#) [‘Self Discovery’; ~11 mins]

Stop at 1.58

How does the mystery of God tell me who I am?

Stop at 3.08

How can following one’s own heart be the most terrible of suggestions?

Stop at 7.34

Does it interest you that spiritual maturity might reduce choice, or the need for choice? In what way so, or not?

Stop at 7.54

What might it take for truthful living to become a habit?

Stop at 9.16

What *is* the truth for which we might develop an instinctive response and taste?

For general reflection

In what ways do the practices (worship, service) of your faith community reflect a desire for the truth of who we are, before God? What is valuable in this connection, and what less so?

For personal reflection

What specific action or change in your life is suggested by this study?

Finishing up

Read Psalm 8 together, then have a group member close in prayer.

STUDY 3: 'LEAVING'

Before you begin, consider the following questions:

- From what kinds of things would you like to 'flee'?
- How might fleeing such things lead to salvation?

The audio for the third study is available [here](#) ['Leaving' ~13.45mins]

Questions for reflection on the session audio

Stop at 2.33

What kinds of expectations and projections do we load on each other?

Stop at 4.27

What kinds of things cheapen, extinguish and weaken what is given to us? What does 'fleeing' look like for these particular things?

Stop at 4.55

In what ways might we 'make a tool' of what we have received from God?

Stop at 6.30

In what ways does projection of ourselves control us?

Stop at 9.27

When/where have you experienced the 'harmonics' of God's creative word?

For general reflection

What systems/habits from which we need to flee, in order that people might flourish?

Where in your own life or in that of your faith community, does 'projection' (of self, or onto ourselves) operate to diminish our – and others' – experience of the gospel?

Do we flee from reality, or into it?

When is leaving or fleeing inappropriate?

For personal reflection

What specific action or change in your life is suggested by this study?

Finishing up

Read Psalm 63 together, then have a group member close in prayer.

STUDY 4: 'STAYING'

Before you begin, consider the following questions:

- Why does the grass so often seem greener 'over there'? Why is it usually not, when we get there?

The audio for the fourth study is available [here](#) [~14 mins]

Questions for reflection on the session audio

Stop at 5.24

What is 'the next thing you have got to do'?

Stop at 6.32

What do you make of 'the extraordinary prosaic nature of holiness'? What does this look like in your life?

Stop at 9.26

How easy (or not) is it to be 'with these people in this place'

Stop at 10.30

What is your vision of 'the real church'? How is the community of which you are a part not this church? Is this OK?

For general reflection

In what other place would you, or your faith community, like to be? Why?

Do you agree that 'warfare is everywhere'? If so, in what ways?

‘Only in the body is the soul saved’. What does this mean for life in the church? What does it mean to pledge our body, in the way that Dr Williams describes?

For personal reflection

What specific action or change in your life is suggested by this study?

Finishing up

Read Psalm 138 together, then have a group member close in prayer

Also available

Rob Gotch

The covenanting God draws near

Howard Wallace

Is God among us or not?

God's presence to people on the way

Craig Thompson

Reading the Creed Backwards:

the Shape and Direction of Christian Faith

Bruce Barber

The Lord's Prayer: Prayer for those who can no longer pray

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