

Herding your thoughts

'It's like herding cats'. We've all said it from time to time when trying to encourage order to emerge from chaos – a roomful of excited children perhaps. We often experience something rather similar when we are praying. Of course we pray for 'all sorts and conditions of men(sic)' as the Book of Common Prayer taught us. But there is another vital aspect of prayer which is in a sense simpler and yet more complicated: worshipping God, giving God due place in the life of our minds and bodies. An important part of this is a time of quietening the frantic activity of our ever-busy minds, so that we can be present with God and attentive to God. It's here that 'herding our thoughts' becomes important.

They (our thoughts) have a life of their own -- thousands of them all competing for our attention. They range very widely. Here are a few examples.

- Regrets at missed opportunities in the past.
- Sadness at friends or companions we love but see no longer.
- Hopes and ambitions for the future.
- Anxiety about a meeting or hospital appointment in the next few days.
- Concern about a friend or relative.
- Shame at something you wish you had never done.

These thoughts are swirling around, ceaselessly, baulking us in that vital preparatory task, some people refer to this as 'centring' or 'stilling'. Some use the word 'mindfulness'. Those thoughts need to be controlled if we are to be present for God.

Or do they need to be controlled? Is 'controlled' an appropriate word to use here? After all, those thoughts, regrets, sorrows, anxieties – they are all part of your story, part of you.

We sometimes use the term 'sanctification' to suggest growing into Christ, a process or journey by which we, in our inmost selves, are ordered as God desires. True, but sanctification is not the same as sanitisation. In Shakespeare's 'Scottish Play', Lady Macbeth discovered that she could not wash her hands of guilt no matter how hard she scrubbed. Don't think you're going to hide anything from God. God already knows.

I think part of what we might do with those pressing, urgent and restless currents of thought is to listen to them, acknowledge them as part of us, negotiate with them so they can, in due course, help us in our prayers.

Could this be part of what we mean by the word *confession*? God wants to heal and renew; if we try to hide from him – even part of ourselves – we're getting in the way. Certainly a part of being able to receive forgiveness is to be able to

forgive yourself. Isn't that exactly what we mean by bringing the whole of ourselves, not just the Sunday best bits, to God?

Of course it is possible to act as though God's forgiveness removes our obligation – insofar as we are able – to put matters right in terms of the human relationships we have spoiled. It doesn't, but sometimes that goal is beyond our reach. Our penitence before God is then an appropriate position to take.